

Woodstock, New York, takes on global warming

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- Woodstock, New York, has plan to erase the town's "carbon footprint" by 2017
- Residents can keep cars if they produce enough clean power to offset emissions
- Woodstock is best known for the 1969 rock concert that borrowed its name

WOODSTOCK, New York (AP) -- Michael Esposito rides his bike all the time -- from cold nights when leaving his old job at a natural food store to warm days while passing shops selling yoga clothes and soy drinks.

So the 67-year-old is excited about a new plan to reduce this countercultural haven's net carbon dioxide emissions to zero within a decade, an ambitious attempt to erase the town's "carbon footprint."

"It's more than important," Esposito said. "It's a necessity."

The goal might sound as unlikely as stuffing smoke back into a smokestack. Even sympathetic experts call it challenging. It likely would require many of the town's roughly 6,200 people to install solar panels and geothermal hookups. But it's tough to find a resident who doesn't support the project.

"So why not declare that within 10 years we're going to set a visionary goal?" asked Randolph Horner, a renewable energy project developer who is a driving force behind the initiative.

Woodstock is best known for the 1969 rock concert that borrowed its name and was held some 50 miles away in Bethel. But the old artists' colony is plugging firmly into the zeitgeist of 2007, a time when hybrid cars are hot and Al Gore's climate-change documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth," won two Oscars.

As debate over the scope of global warming continues, local officials across the country have crafted their own policies. Austin, Texas, has a "Climate Protection Plan" that aims to make city buildings reliant on renewable energy by 2012. Portland, Oregon, has an Office of Sustainable Development to coordinate and encourage the use of everything from green building to biofuels.

Last month, the Woodstock town board approved a nonbinding resolution that called for "implementing policies resulting in no net emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases" by 2017.

"Net" means residents can keep their cars as long as they produce enough clean power to offset their emissions.

The resolution lists ways to reach the zero carbon goal, including green building, bike paths, tree planting and biodiesel municipal fleets.

It's the sort of bit-by-bit approach advocated by environmentalists. For instance, one person driving 2,000 fewer miles prevents about a ton of carbon dioxide from being released into the atmosphere. And a compact fluorescent bulb will keep half a ton of carbon dioxide out of the air over its lifetime, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The savings are a wisp compared with the billions of tons of greenhouse gases released annually, but the idea is to reach meaningful reductions through collective action.

Horner said consumer efficiencies should be coupled with onsite generation like solar power. Geothermal heating and cooling systems would take a bite out the town's appetite for fossil fuel, he said.

Renewable energy experts say the goal is technically possible but difficult. Michael Armstrong, a policy analyst with Portland's Office of Sustainability, called net zero a "monstrous challenge."

But Horner insists that as fossil fuel prices spike over the next decade, alternative energy will become more attractive to both producers and residential consumers. Solar panels and geothermal systems will make more sense economically, he said.

Woodstock has some advantages big cities like Portland or Austin don't. It's a rural town with no heavy industry, and residents generally tend to be more sympathetic to save-the-planet ideas.

Those asked about the plan were all supportive of the general idea.

"Climate change is serious. We can't stick our heads in the ground," Norm Wennet said.

"What's not to like? How could anybody be against it?" Robin Kramer asked. "I'm just skeptical that it will work."

Kramer said he supports the effort, but doubts people will cut down on driving and make other sacrifices necessary to reach the goal.

Jim Decker, a member of the group charged with coming up with more concrete plans, says one potential problem could be enlisting the many people from New York City who keep weekend homes in Woodstock.

And even residents who support the plan are foggy about how to wipe out their carbon footprint.

Alan Carey said he switched to compact fluorescent bulbs, burns more wood and tries to drive less.

"I don't know if we can do it," Carey said, "but we're going to try."



Michael Esposito rides his bike in Woodstock, New York, Thursday. The 67-year-old wants to reduce Woodstock's net carbon dioxide emissions to zero.

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