

Soapbox: Climate Plan Could Make City a Leader

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Last June, I was asked by my employer (CSU) to serve on a Citizen's Advisory Committee (CAC) working with city staff to develop a revised Climate Action Plan. Under the old plan, the city targeted emissions reduction of 20 percent by 2020 and 80 percent by 2050. Last April, Fort Collins Council instructed staff to consider what it would take to reduce emissions 80 percent by 2030. The city then invited 23 representatives, from a range of major stakeholders, to participate in the process of developing a revised plan

Stakeholders included the biggest employers in the city — CSU, Poudre School District, Avago — business leadership — Downtown Business, Healthier Communities and North Fort Collins Business Association —, and the Fort Collins Board of Realtors. Together, we attended nine, 3.5-hour evening meetings since June to participate in the development of a feasibility plan for accelerated emissions reduction.

Climate change is simple, serious and solvable. Burning coal, oil and gas releases carbon dioxide, which accumulates in the atmosphere, absorbing outgoing heat radiation and gradually warming the planet just like turning up the sun would. Our region is especially vulnerable to warming because we depend on scarce water supplies that evaporate much faster as climate warms. Only 17 percent of our water is currently used by cities and towns (the rest is owned by farmers and ranchers), but Colorado's is population projected to grow to 8 million by 2050.

A warmer climate will dramatically increase evaporative demand for farmers, ranchers and natural ecosystems at the same time that increased diversion to urban users will put huge pressures on agriculture. Increased drought and wildfire, along with the struggle to provide water for farms and cities, will be the biggest challenges to our regional economy in the decades ahead. An abundant future for our children and our communities is in reach but requires we embrace the opportunities the future offers rather than clinging to 19th Century energy supplies our ancestors dug from the ground. Just as our ancestors abandoned outhouses, whale oil and buggies to embrace more expensive and new-fangled technologies 100 years ago, our children will embrace a carbon-free energy supply in the future.

I admit I was skeptical when I heard our city was contemplating an 80 percent reduction in carbon dioxide emissions (from 2005 levels) by 2030. I suspected achieving such a target in just 15 years time would be technically feasible but too expensive. I was wrong.

The CAC worked closely through a total of about 32 hours of public meetings with city staff and their professional energy consultants, Rocky Mountain Institute and the Brendle Group. Together, we developed a suite of 17 strategies for energy conservation, efficiency and renewable energy production that meets the accelerated goals specified by City Council. Extremely detailed calculations were painstakingly cranked out for each strategy, year by year. Upfront costs of the overall draft plan are completely recovered by 2032, and overwhelmed by enormous savings (billions of dollars!) by 2050. Further planning will involve financing options to bring those huge savings forward, offsetting the costs.

The revised plan provides an incredible opportunity to establish Fort Collins as a world leader, embracing the future. Besides saving residents billions of dollars, the plan will encourage thousands of new jobs in Fort Collins.

City Council will vote on the revised plan March 3.

Scott Denning is Montfort professor of Atmospheric Science at Colorado State University.