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Thurston County can help the climate now

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The state's inability to agree on a climate change action plan shouldn't stop Thurston County from doing what it can to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

While Gov. Jay Inslee continues his search for a few good Republicans in the Legislature to respond to his call for statewide action, government and citizen groups in Thurston County are moving along with actions of their own.

A couple of examples come to mind: The Thurston County Climate Action Team, a nonprofit coalition of elected officials, citizens activists and educators just completed a tally of the annual greenhouse gas emissions in Thurston County, using 2010 as a baseline. The logic for the report goes like this: It's hard to set a goal and know if you're achieving it, if you don't know where you started.

Let the record show that countywide greenhouse gas emissions in 2010 totalled roughly 2.76 million tons, or about 10.95 tons per person. That's about 50 percent of the national, per capita average, and less than the statewide average of 14 tons per person. But the county per capita average is higher than places such as Eugene, Ore., and King County — both at 8.6 tons per person per year.

Just as the climate action team was completing its report, the Sustainable Thurston plan coordinated by the Thurston Regional Planning Council set a goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to about 1.4 million tons by 2035, which is a target embraced by the climate action team folks, too, and in line with the state's stated goals and the recommendation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. It will take a variety of strategies to bring the gas emissions down.

They include increased energy-efficiency measures in commercial and residential buildings, including apartments and rental homes where tenants need landlords willing to invest in energy conservation.

"In 2035, about 60 percent of today's housing stock will still be around," noted former Lacey Mayor Graeme Sackrisson, a founding member of the climate action team. "So there's a lot of opportunity to save energy by retrofitting those apartments and homes."

The built environment accounts for about 52 percent of the emissions in the county. Vehicles come in at 45 percent, a finding that surprised some of the climate action team folks.

"The built environment versus vehicles — I thought it might be the other way around," observed climate action team treasurer Tom Crawford.

Much of the greenhouse gas emissions associated with buildings are traced to natural gas and coal that Puget Sound Energy burns to generate electricity. The investor-owned utility supplying Thurston County with all its juice has a fuel load that is 30 percent coal and 16 percent natural gas.

I've heard top-ranking PSE officials say their goal is to curb the utility's appetite for coal, but it's not something that's happening any too fast.

A lot of the difficult work to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is in the field of land use. Higher urban densities suppress vehicle miles traveled and breathe life into public transportation. Sustainable Thurston calls for a future in which 95 percent of the growth occurs in urban areas and 72 percent of urban

households live within biking and walking distance of daily goods and services. We've got a long way to go to reach those goals.

The climate action team report assumes that many of the solutions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions will be tailored to individual cities. The data from the gas inventory shows that the rural communities of Rainier (4.87 tons per capita), Tenino (7.58 tons) and Yelm (7.25 tons) are well below their north county neighbors Lacey (9.25 tons), Olympia (12.15 tons) and Tumwater (16.61).

You might ask: Why are Tumwater's per capita greenhouse gas emissions so high? The number was enough to cause Tumwater Mayor Pete Kmet to do a double-take when he saw it.

The answer may be fairly simple, Crawford suggested. Tumwater has a disproportionate amount of commercial building square footage and a smaller population than its neighboring cities, which would both tend to skew the per capita emissions.

While the numbers in the greenhouse gas emission inventory are interesting, the real story is what happens, or doesn't happen, to them over time. Waiting for the state or the federal government to lead the way on climate change policy is tantamount to inaction. The stage is truly set for a "think global-act local" approach to a less gassy future.

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