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BOB DOPPELT: We can use climate change as an opportunity to create

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My friend Mickey is a building contractor. Remodeling is his least favorite activity. Not because he doesn't appreciate the work. It's because he knows that once he digs into a project, a Pandora's box of additional problems will inevitably emerge. He gets more excited when he can envision and build beautiful things from scratch.

Mickey's perspective seems pertinent to how we approach global warming. We've mostly used a problem-solving approach intended to make bad things, such as carbon dioxide emissions, go away.

Problem solving keeps us focused on what we don't want. Eliminating nuisances such as greenhouse gases, however, doesn't mean we will get what we do want. As my friend knows, fixing one problem often triggers unintended consequences that are as bad or worse than the original dilemma. No wonder many people are fearful of what it means to address global warming.

An alternative is to create. This involves envisioning and bringing something new and beneficial into existence. Creating, for instance, can focus our thinking on how we want a low-carbon economy and community to look and function in the future. People would imagine new possibilities and turn obstacles into opportunities.

Some arts organizations seem to understand the profound difference between problem-solving and creating. The New York Museum of Modern Art, in collaboration with its affiliate P.S.1, an art exhibition house, recently asked five architectural teams to come up with visions of how the city's coastlines could look and function if sea levels rise by 2 feet or more, as many climate scientists predict.

While it is commonly believed that sea level rise will wreak havoc on New York City by permanently flooding valuable real estate and triggering mass evacuations during big storm surges, the architects designed a much more optimistic vision.

To buffer the city from storm waves, they pictured a city surrounded by marshes, permeable coastlines and oyster farms, which once thrived in that area. Certain streets in low-lying

areas would be rebuilt to allow high tides to inundate them and then dissipate. Battery Park would become a wetland. These changes would link the urban area with aquatic green space while also providing a local source of food.

The architects were not asked to turn sea level rise into a positive event. Instead, they were challenged to propose ways to make the city more resilient to climate change. They created a vision of how the city could look and function in a resilient, adaptive state. The mayor's office and other officials have apparently become intrigued.

Could this approach succeed in Lane County? Rather than focusing on trying to eliminate things we dislike, what if households, businesses and governments became engaged in designing the low-carbon, climate-resilient communities and economy we want in the future?

Indulge me for a moment. The Eugene City Council has adopted a goal of becoming 50 percent fossil fuel free by 2030. Rather than centering our attention on eliminating fossil fuels, what if the entire community searched for every possible way to increase energy efficiency and produce renewable energy from local sources?

The island of Samsø in Denmark used this type of whole-community approach. Once an importer of fossil fuel-based energy, it has made a dramatic shift to being a net exporter of renewable energy generated by windmills and other sources. Cooperatives among families were organized that own the windmills, providing them with a steady stream of energy and revenue.

Wind power is not a great option here. New policies might be needed to form energy cooperatives. But other energy sources exist, and if we think big new laws can become reality.

A few years back a former student of mine estimated that solar photovoltaic arrays installed on the rooftops of large commercial and government buildings in Eugene could produce 68 megawatts of electricity annually. If small commercial buildings, homes and parking lots were added, and if Springfield and other communities joined in, who knows — local solar capacity might quadruple.

And that's just one source. Small-scale biomass energy produced from agricultural waste through anaerobic digestion and other options are possible.

As the New York example suggests, envisioning new ways to design our communities to prepare for global warming could open the door to still other opportunities.

For instance, global warming is likely to reduce summer and fall streamflows to levels that imperil salmon and constrict municipal and agricultural water supplies.

Could we imagine ways in which we become the most water-efficient county in the nation? Not only would people save money, we would protect ourselves against future risk. Many other opportunities certainly exist.

We can fear change, or we can capitalize on it. By shifting our focus from eliminating bad things to creating the communities we want in the future, we might all end up better off.

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