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Eugene must work harder to meet greenhouse gas goals

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In 2016, the Eugene City Council updated its 2014 Climate Recovery Ordinance. The revised CRO calls for a 7.6 percent annual reduction in greenhouse gas emissions generated communitywide and for Eugene to cut its fossil fuel use by 50 percent by 2030.

With the federal and state governments unwilling to act, local communities must lead the way — and some innovative work is being done locally. But the annual emissions reduction goals are not being met, and it remains unclear whether the fossil fuel goal will be achieved.

The most recent inventory indicates that in 2015, Eugene generated 3.45 million metric tons of emissions. The total includes “sector-based” emissions — those generated from energy use by local homes, businesses, vehicles, landfills and wastewater treatment facilities — as well as “consumption-based” emissions, which are generated during the production and delivery of goods, foods and services from elsewhere that are consumed locally.

Let’s focus on sector-based emissions.

A city government can reduce sector-based emissions by changing its land use policies and transportation infrastructure, providing incentives for the shift to low-emission vehicles, lobbying for new state and federal policies, and public education. Eugene is using some of these tools, but not all of them.

Eugene leads the nation in reusing asphalt and employing low-emission concrete in street paving and repair projects. In addition, the new Transportation System Plan calls for a tripling of trips made by public transit, walking and bikes by 2035.

Along with the Lane Transit District, the city launched its MovingAhead project to examine ways to achieve that ambitious goal by improving bus, bike and walking in major corridors. And with PeaceHealth, the city recently launched a bike sharing program. Numerous other important projects are in the pipeline.

The time frame for implementation of many of these projects, however, is too long to meet the CRO goals. Strong leadership and more funding are required to complete them more rapidly. New funds from outside sources are important. But clear direction to reprogram how existing funds are spent is likely even more vital.

For example, one person I interviewed asked whether it makes sense to spend \$250 million expanding the Randy Papé Beltline bridge over the Willamette River rather than using the funds to expand rapid, convenient bus service. Could congestion pricing or other more cost-effective strategies be used to reduce overcrowding on roads and highways? A careful examination of transportation budgets might reveal ways to reprogram funds to reduce emissions.

Rapidly increasing the use of electric vehicles will also be essential to reduce transportation emissions. Numerous people told me the city could help promote electric vehicle use by greening its own fleet, and by exploring the option of making it easier and cheaper for people to use electric- instead of gas-powered vehicles. These and other ideas are being examined, but no decisions have been made.

In addition, the city could provide more incentives for the construction of multifamily residential housing near walking and bike paths, public transportation and other essential services, and encouraging the use of electricity rather than natural gas to power buildings.

Last year, Gov. Kate Brown signed an executive order accelerating the adoption of state building codes requiring net zero energy buildings statewide. But the due date is five years off, and in the meantime the city could aggressively promote energy efficiency in new and remodeled buildings.

Equally important, the city can engage all citizens in emission reduction strategies. Discussions have begun with many organizations. However, some of the larger energy users, such as the University of Oregon and Lane Community College, have had minimal or no contact with the city, and their emission reduction initiatives are not in sync with the CRO's goals or time frames.

This addresses one concern that constantly surfaced during my interviews: Who will do all the work required to cut sector-based emissions? Existing staffing patterns are clearly insufficient. Almost everyone said appreciably more funding is needed, though big chunks can probably be found by reprioritizing existing budgets. The need for greater outreach was another theme.

Two other common refrains were the need for stronger leadership and a much greater sense of urgency.

City government is pursuing some state-of-the-art work to slash sector-based emissions. To meet the goals of the CRO, however, and do its part to prevent calamitous climate disruption, the city needs to rapidly scale up its efforts.

The City Council and city manager must make this happen. They will respond only if they hear from local residents.

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