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Small Oregon towns think globally, act locally

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While scanning the list of the 50-plus mayors from around the world who signed the new Chicago Climate Charter, I was surprised to see the names of the mayors of Mosier and Tualatin. Why, I wondered, would the mayors of these small Oregon towns join their counterparts in such cities as Paris, Montreal, Mexico City and Chicago on the charter?

Their reasons offer insights for mayors of small towns in Lane County and elsewhere.

Mosier is a town of 450 just east of Hood River. Arlene Burns was elected mayor in 2014. After working as a river guide in exotic places such as Nepal and as an outdoor industry consultant, she organized educational film festivals. In that role she viewed 600 films and learned how burning fossil fuels is harming the planet.

But it was not until June 2016, when a Union Pacific oil train derailed and its oil ignited in Mosier, that Burns realized the direct dangers of fossil fuels. Many residents and the students at the Mosier Community School had to be evacuated. Oil spilled into the Columbia River. Sewer and water service were shut down for days. Mosier's groundwater remains contaminated.

Luckily, no one died. But the disaster led Burns to join other elected officials, tribal leaders and community members to call for an end to oil trains in the Columbia River Gorge. It also motivated her to focus on reducing Mosier's use of fossil fuels. This work led her to sign the Chicago Climate Charter.

The charter calls for mayors to cut emissions in their cities by a percentage that is equal to or greater than what is outlined in the Paris Climate Accord. It also calls on them to engage with others to find innovative ways to cut emissions.

I asked Burns how she intended to meet those goals. She said she wants Mosier to become a model, showing other small rural communities how to cut emissions. “If Chicago, New York, and Portland can do it, why can’t we?” she asked.

One of her first tasks will be measuring local emissions from “all of our street lights, buildings and transportation.” Using a bottom-up approach involving local residents, organizations and the city, Mosier will install LED streetlights, retrofit buildings and increase walkability. The town also plans to construct a net zero energy building to house its fire station and City Hall.

Burns also said “small cities can have some clout” with larger outside entities. The day before we talked, she signed a letter to Pacific Power, the local utility, saying the city wants all of the electrical energy delivered to Mosier to be produced by clean renewable sources.

The mayor went on to describe how she and others used the oil spill as a catalyst: “We certainly did not want the train crash. It caused many problems ... including the resignation of our fire chief. But the near catastrophe also opened the door to new ways of seeing things.”

The risks of fossil fuels became crystal clear to her after the oil spill. “The mayor’s job became full time for me ... I now realize we all must put our life force into fighting climate change.”

Lou Ogden is mayor of Tualatin, a Portland suburb with 30,000 residents. He became concerned about climate change after attending a recent meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. He realized “the risks posed by carbon emissions are real,” and by signing the charter he hopes to “make Tualatin residents more aware of the need to reduce them.”

Ogden declared that “small cities should not underestimate what they can do.” For example, “Some things are easier for us to do than large cities, such as backyard composting, which is more viable in small towns that have larger lots than big cities with lots of apartments.”

He also urged small town officials to get involved with mayoral organizations that offer helpful resources. “Even if you can’t attend their meetings, you can learn a lot” by participating in conference calls, calling other mayors for advice, and obtaining information electronically.

Their perspectives made me wonder whether mayors from any small community in Lane County had engaged in climate solutions. So I queried 10 local mayors. Three responded. None had addressed the issue.

Mayors of small towns in our region may have, so far, avoided the threats posed by fossil fuels such as Mosier experienced. However, whether it be more extreme wildfires, floods, new illnesses and diseases, or other adversities, they all will be affected by rising temperatures eventually. Mayors Burns and Ogden make it clear that small town mayors can make a difference.

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