How Green Is Your April?

Written by Jim W. Harper - BT Contributor
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Earth Month is a good time to take stock -- personally and publically

Earth Day arrives April 22, and Earth Month is already here, so now is the time to make your environmental resolutions. What is your wish? Do you want to feel more connected to nature? Learn how to conserve water? Shame your neighbors for failing to recycle?

The plans you make and the goals you set today clarify your intentions to act tomorrow. Such individual actions are paramount in the mandate "Think globally, act locally."

But in between the global movements and personal actions are the city, county, and regional entities that guide our future. You may be surprised to discover that many local governments and associations have moved beyond merely thinking about, to actually creating, committees and publishing documents that embody their plans for sustainability. Our communal plans are in order.

Good news! Studies of local greenhouse gas emissions and water consumption show that rates have been on the decline for years. The simple explanation -- also evident on a national level -- is the economy, stupid. People drive less when they can't afford gas, and they use less electricity when they can't pay their utility bill. In short, the recession has reduced waste.

This decline also demonstrates that small, household actions, like shutting off the lights and the

water faucet when those things are not being used, really do add up. But will we automatically return to being more wasteful as we become more prosperous?

There's a plan for that, too. According to the Southeast Florida Regional Climate Change Compact, which pools data from Broward, Miami-Dade, Monroe, and Palm Beach counties, greenhouse gas emissions peaked in 2006 at more than 70 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalents (a standardized measurement) and by 2009 had fallen to less than 65 million tons. Although very high when compared to international standards, these levels rank lower than national and even state averages, most likely because the mild climate here does not require home heating.

Currently this committee is polishing their 2012 report. Titled "A Region Responds to a Changing Climate," also called "Climate Change Action Plan," the report states: "The overall objective was and remains to integrate climate adaptation and mitigation into existing systems and to develop a plan that can be implemented through existing local and regional organizations. It is in that spirit that this plan provides the common integrated framework for a stronger and more resilient Southeast Florida starting today and for tomorrow."

Clearly Southeast Florida needs coordination, as its population of 5.6 million (2010 census) makes it larger than most states.

A document called GreenPrint articulates a plan (through 2015) for Miami-Dade and its 2.5 million residents to meet the larger, primary goal of achieving an 80-percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 (based on 2008 levels). Yes, 80 percent! That target comes from a national program called Cool Counties. That's really, really cool.

The 200-page GreenPrint calls for annual reports based on its scorecard, and its first annual scores are expected soon. With seven focus areas in the scorecard and 137 sustainability initiatives across the document, this plan leaves little room for waffling. By 2015, GreenPrint expects the county to have reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 1.5 million metric tons.

Someone else is watching and waiting for the results. The international organization Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI) in 2009 selected Miami-Dade as one of only three communities in the U.S. to pilot its sustainability planning tool-kit program. The ICLEI member

municipalities within Miami-Dade are Miami, North Miami, Miami Gardens, Cutler Bay, Pinecrest, and South Miami.

While many local cities have launched their own green initiatives, the question remains: Are these plans just gathering toxic dust? Let's take a peek.

The City of Miami's formal sustainability document, MiPlan, produced in 2008, focuses on climate change mitigation. City government operations plan to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions 25 percent below 2007 levels (82,414 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalents) by 2015. For the entire city, the goal is also 25 percent reductions, from a 2006 level of 4.8 million metric tons to the improved level of 3.6 million metric tons by 2020.

Without reductions, the city predicts that it will reach a level of 5.7 million metric tons by 2020. The city runs the Miami Office of Sustainable Initiatives and has an extensive Website.

(Other municipalities within our area appear to have little more than "billboard" Websites that link to other environmental Websites, but they are welcome to write a letter to the editor and point out otherwise.)

What are *your* plans for making this month greener? Here are some local options:
Baynanza: Events all month, including the 30th annual Biscayne Bay Cleanup Day on April 21.
Dream in Green: April 13 fundraiser.
Sustainatopia: April 19-25 conference.
Ecomb: April 20 Green-raiser.
National Arbor Day: April 27.

Remember: Don't just *think* environmentally. Act.

Send your tips and clever ideas to: goinggreen@biscaynetimes.com.

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Feedback: *letters@biscaynetimes.com*
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