

City commits to big cut in greenhouse gas emissions

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Tolls on the Lake Washington bridges, more expensive parking, additional bicycle lanes and improved energy conservation are among the ideas being released today by the mayor's Green Ribbon Commission for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in Seattle.

Some details of the plan are fuzzy and there is no price tag, but the effort is being hailed as a model for cities nationally and a good step toward restoring American credibility in the global warming arena.

"Seattle is a very good example of a success story," said Abby Young, director of strategic planning for the U.S. division of the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, an association of governments. "The city of Seattle has really been a leader on this."

But even champions of the effort caution that implementation of the strategies will be painful in places -- and that it is just the first step toward making the city a good climate-change citizen.

These recommendations are an "important, but relatively small step in the right direction," said Denis Hayes, co-chairman of the commission and head of the Bullitt Foundation. "It will warm people up."

Mayor Greg Nickels appointed the 18-member commission a year ago and charged the group with devising a strategy that would allow the city to reduce its production of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane to levels 7 percent below its 1990 emissions by 2012.

The goal matches what would have been required of the United States had the government signed the Kyoto treaty on global warming, which President Bush has said he opposes. Most of the world's nations have signed the treaty, which commits them to meeting emissions targets by 2012.

The commissioners will officially present their plan today at a public event attended by former Vice President Al Gore, who has sounded the alarm on global warming.

"I'm very pleased and very grateful to the members of the Green Ribbon Commission," Nickels said Thursday. "I gave them a pretty tall order."

Achieving the Kyoto goals "won't be easy, but it's not impossible," he said.

Some residents question whether it's worth it.

Seattle produces about 7 million tons of greenhouse gases annually, while the nation pumped out 7.8 billion tons in 2004.

If the commission's plan is successful, the city's releases will be cut by more than 750,000 tons. That's the equivalent of the emissions from nearly 150,000 cars -- a blip on the global scale.

MAYOR'S ACTION PLAN: 2012

Mayor Greg Nickels' Green Ribbon Commission on Climate Protection has a variety of recommendations that will allow Seattle to meet or beat the targets of the Kyoto accord. The goal is to achieve a 7 percent reduction in global warming pollution by 2012, compared with 1990 levels.

	Greenhouse gas reduction
Reduce city's dependence on cars Significantly increase supply of public transportation. Expand bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure. Develop and implement road tolls. Implement new commercial parking tax. Create more compact, walkable urban neighborhoods.	187,000 tons*
Increase fuel efficiency and use of biofuels Improve fuel efficiency of city's cars, trucks. Increase use of biofuels. Reduce emissions from diesel trucks, trains, ships.	221,000 tons
More efficient, cleaner energy Keep City Light at zero net greenhouse gas emissions. Increase natural gas conservation. Strengthen state energy code. Reduce Seattle Steam's use of natural gas.	348,000 tons

*Volume represented in short tons (2,000 lbs). Most agencies track emissions in metric tons.

Source: Green Ribbon Commission Report and Recommendations

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Even Young, of the international association, said Kyoto doesn't amount to a lot.

"Most cities have gone beyond the Kyoto target," she said. Many are aiming to cut their pollution by 20 percent or more.

But even achieving the commission's goal in six years poses serious challenges.

One idea being considered is tolls for single-occupancy vehicles during heavy traffic or on certain roads -- possibly the bridges across Lake Washington. Research indicates that tolls could increase carpooling and the use of mass transit, although not everyone thinks the idea makes sense.

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"If you force people to divert around the shortcut that you put a toll on, you cause people to spend more time in more congestion, thus contributing to global warming," said Randy Boss, leader of Citizens Against Tolls, a group that has fought toll collection on the new Tacoma Narrows Bridge.

Another potentially controversial proposal is boosting taxes on downtown parking lots, again to encourage people to carpool and use buses.

Anita Woo, spokeswoman for the Downtown Seattle Association, a business group, said that it didn't have a comment on the parking proposal and that "we look forward to working with (the city) on this."

And some residents say they want government and industries -- smoke-belching cargo ships and trains to name just two -- to do more to cut their emissions. They look at the fossil fuel consumption of the wealthy, driving oversized cars and powering large yachts, and wonder why they shouldn't do more before average folks make sacrifices.

"Everybody's got to take responsibility for their own emissions," responds K.C. Golden, a member of the commission and policy director for Climate Solutions, an environmental group.

Besides, supporters say, many of the actions won't cause severe economic pains and will ultimately make Seattle a better place.

One recommendation is to double the number of bike lanes in the city, accelerate sidewalk construction to get more people walking and adopt zoning regulations leading to more bike parking. Another proposes zoning that would create mixed-use communities where work, home and amenities are in shorter distances apart -- creating optimistically named "urban villages."

Some of the commission's ideas could save people money in the long-run, including efforts to make buildings and homes more energy efficient.

"It's not like it's a bitter pill," said Doug Walker, board chairman of REI Inc. and one of the commissioners.

And that's one of the messages the city and the commissioners hope to spread. Part of the plan is a \$1.5 million campaign to educate and inspire the public. There will be meetings in coming months to explain the proposal and get public response.

There are plans to create the Seattle Climate Partnership, a coalition of 50 of the city's largest businesses pledging to cut their emissions and support the larger reduction goals. REI, Starbucks Coffee Co., the University of Washington, the Port of Seattle, cement-maker Lafarge North America Inc. and development company Urban Visions have all joined, commission members said.

A final plan from Nickels is due in September and will include information on costs and funding sources.

In part because of the Nickels' role as a national leader -- his effort to enlist other cities in striving for the Kyoto goals has signed on 218 participants -- commissioners and others emphasized the importance of Seattle succeeding in this effort.

The city, they say, needs to continue in its role as leader and source of inspiration.

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"If we can't do it," Hayes said, "there really isn't much hope."

http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/local/264194_warm24.html

