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Climate talk's fine, but action's urgent

Significant change can't happen without a lot of talking, educating and persuading. But community activists and leaders understand that, if their cause never gets beyond that stage, their efforts will have been for naught.

It's premature to know whether tonight's "conversation" on climate change at the Leon County Public Library will be a cornerstone in our community's response to alarming environmental changes around the world that threaten our future, or just another forgotten footnote in local history.

It's important, however, that local citizens and policymakers understand that many of the most meaningful responses must be accomplished in our backyard.

Certainly, it is crucial that more effective international and national policies be forged in the near future to reduce carbon emissions and, it is hoped, slow the gradual warming of Earth's temperatures. But absent awareness on the local level that we all have a responsibility to act, the effort will be hampered, if not useless.

Leadership with a capital L must come not only from elected officials, but also average citizens who care about the future: neighbors, those in faith communities, teachers, business people, etc.

Everyone has a stake in this struggle, and, while the challenge is daunting, there are numerous ways to convert alarm into action - and ennui to interest.

For example, Leon County government, which is hosting tonight's conversation, is not required by federal law to have a landfill gas-collection and treatment system in place. But five months ago, the county installed one at the Apalachee Parkway facility at a cost of \$625,000.

Norman Thomas, Leon County's solid-waste director, says more gas could be collected if more wells were added to the 27 that were installed. Meanwhile, the county is involved in informal discussions with a private firm to increase landfill gas production and convert it to energy.

But, as Leon County Commissioner Bob Rackleff noted in an interview with *Democrat* Staff Writer Bruce Ritchie, government could and should be doing a lot more.

Land-use policies, in which local decision makers have a direct hand, affect local climates, as decades of filling in Florida's wetlands has proved. And policies that promote sprawl and discourage alternative transportation options result in increased carbon emissions.

University of Florida botanist Stephen Mulkey, former science adviser to the Century Commission for a Sustainable Florida, said in his final report that with Florida's population expected to grow by 50 percent over the next 25 years, "Urban development, suburban sprawl, transportation pressures, coastal human population densities, habitat fragmentation, and reduced agricultural and forest lands will be the inevitable result of this population increase unless growth is managed wisely with attention to enhancing sustainability."

Citizens have an important role to play - for instance, by considering other ways to get around besides driving alone, insisting on more responsible land-use legislation, and recycling more at home and in the workplace.

Ron Sachs, the new chairman of the Greater Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce, is promoting close public-private cooperation to substantially improve recycling efforts among local businesses, a worthy plan that should be pursued aggressively.

Finally, it's important to recognize that we're one community, especially in an environmental sense. Our air and our water and our climate don't respect political boundaries. Though politics is the vehicle for enacting public policy, it is only a means to an end - and our environment, despite all of our other differences, is the one thing we have in common.

As long as we consider its protection someone else's responsibility, we only hasten its deterioration. IF YOU GO

What: National Conversation on Climate Change

When: Today, 6:30 to 9 p.m.

Where: Leon County Public Library, 200 W. Park Ave.