

Apr. 20, 2007

WHATCOM VIEW

Bellingham is greenest city in the land

DEREK LONG / FOR THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Bellingham is the No. 1 Environmental Protection Agency-designated “Green Power Community” in the nation.

Currently, 11 percent of the electricity consumed here comes from clean, renewable sources in the Pacific Northwest such as wind, solar and biomass. Growth in participation here was four times greater than our original goal. This accomplishment resulted from a strong partnership among Puget Sound Energy, the city of Bellingham and Sustainable Connections, along with resounding support from the community we all serve.

Just over a year ago, while reviewing Puget Sound Energy’s Green Power Report, we noticed that the good people of Olympia had higher participation rates than the good people of Bellingham. This prompted us to contact PSE to discuss ways to turn that around.

We soon discovered the EPA’s new Green Power Community program and set to developing a campaign to generate more participation here. By September the campaign was ready to launch, and to show momentum and help spread the word we had already signed up more than 50 new businesses.

To promote residential participation, we relied heavily on the city of Bellingham, along with the exposure our businesses could provide. With their leadership, we developed a Neighborhood Challenge to reward the neighborhood with the highest increase in participation with \$1,000 toward any climate change mitigating investment they choose to make.

Volunteers from neighborhood associations dedicated hours to distributing door hangers, promoting the challenge in newsletters, e-mail and a multitude of other creative ways to get the word out.

In late 2006, Bellingham’s mayor and City Council, along with the Whatcom County executive and County Council supported a resolution to green 100 percent of the electricity used in municipal operations for both local governments starting in January of 2007. When added to Western Washington University’s 100 percent purchase pledge, we really had something going. Western started its program in late 2005, when students voted with an 85 percent yes vote to make the switch.

At last reading, Bellingham had close to 2,000 household participants and 110 business participants to add to the institutional support described above.

The benefits of this campaign to Bellingham and Whatcom County include a terrific award from the EPA, three \$1,000 prizes to the neighborhood winners, a solar electric installation on Bellingham’s Environmental Learning Center at Maritime Heritage Park, and the satisfaction of knowing we are investing heavily in the clean, green, renewable energy sources we need to power our homes and economy into the future.

Now, thanks to the large local purchases of “green power” that our community has made, PSE has been able to negotiate bulk purchase rate discounts that significantly reduced the rate we all pay for green power. In addition, we’re likely to see new infrastructure investments of 2-3 additional methane digesters (cow power) in Whatcom County in the next year.

Becoming the largest Green Power Community in the nation is a remarkable accomplishment, but it turns out that this is just one more indicator of the quality of this community we call home.

Recent research by the city of Bellingham has shown that we also have one of the highest per capita hybrid car ownership rates in the nation, three times that of Seattle. As of February, we had the highest per capita purchase rates of long lasting, energy efficient, compact fluorescent light bulbs in the nation: That's another No. 1.

In addition, the local adoption rate of green building practices has no parallel in similar small communities in the nation that we have found. Our community invests volunteer time and financial resources in parks, nonprofits, community development planning and so many other treasured things that make this community so desirable.

This long-term view balances economic prosperity with social and environmental good and is fast becoming our identity as a community. Let's own up to it even more and continue to apply ourselves to finding practical solutions to the challenges and opportunities before us, as we become a model community for the rest of the nation and the world.

Please join us at noon on Saturday at Depot Market Square to celebrate the Green Power Community Challenge.

Derek M. Long is program and development director for Sustainable Connections in Bellingham.