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Energy Success Stories

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Dick Cheney is such a jaw-jutting example to us all. First he leads the charge on a national energy policy that profits only oil companies and producers of nuclear waste (among the most colossal contributors to the Bush campaign), while further destroying the environment and committing us to a less secure and more expensive energy future. Then he gets Congress to give him a boatload of new "defense" money to protect that future, including billions for his past employer, thereby paying back a thousand-fold his multimillion-dollar severance package from them. And now he's getting the Navy, a prime recipient of that largesse, to pay his electric bill, which runs 2,600 times that of the average D.C. resident. Talk about "running government like a business" and "getting value for your tax dollar"! This guy really keeps his campaign promises!

Sometimes I wish I were Dick Cheney. Life would be so much easier and rewarding. But then, I'd rather not rot in hell.

No, I'd rather just have a quiet life (and afterlife) here in Wisconsin - raising my kids as tall as corn, able to distinguish right from wrong and shameless greed from public duty, with - to get back to our current topic in Sustaining Wisconsin - a safe and clean energy future that won't need a nuclear Navy to defend it. Last week I promised more examples of how that future was being built right here in the Midwest. Here they come, from various neighbors:

Minneapolis: The Minneapolis housing authority (MPHA) manages 40 high-rise apartment buildings scattered throughout the city. All were built 30 or more years ago, before energy efficiency principles were widely incorporated in building design. After numerous heating, cooling and electrical failures in the buildings, MPHA recently moved to retrofit them with something closer to state-of-the-art heating and cooling equipment. The cost of retrofit: \$5 million. The savings net of these costs: \$9 million and counting. MPHA is now expanding the program to a second generation of energy efficient roof-top fans, super-efficient refrigerators, other things to realize more savings. Building residents are delighted with the program, reporting improved comfort; and MPHA administration is finding that the new systems also permit it to respond much faster and effectively to resident problems.

Cincinnati: Another story of energy efficiency retrofitting, this one about the Fifth Third Center (office) Tower in downtown Cincinnati. A few years ago its owners decided to install an energy management system, entailing an upgrade in the heating and air conditioning system, installation of CO2 sensors on air quality, energy efficient lighting, and the like. Again, the investment has more than paid for itself. Building energy costs have fallen by \$400,000. The building also provides numerous examples of collateral savings, which are as common in energy-efficient design as collateral losses are in energy-inefficient ones. Fix one part of a system, and you need to spend less on another. For example, more efficient lights are also cooler, which reduces air conditioning costs: The energy savings on efficiency thus multiply.

Sacred Heart Monastery, N.D.: A nice example of a really small-scale project, Sacred Heart installed two wind turbines several years ago, and continues to recoup the benefits, year in and year out, at the rate of better than \$12,000 in savings a year. The only complaint? When they generate excess electricity, which they do regularly, the area utility won't credit them at anywhere near its retail rate. They are calling for it to do so, a practice known as "net metering." Were that mandated, there is little doubt that many area residences and farms would also throw their energy fortunes to the winds.

Chariton Valley, Iowa: Spurred on by local citizens, Alliant Energy is taking a step toward cleaner and more renewable power by testing the co-firing of its turbines with a mixture of coal and switchgrass - a deep-rooted perennial grass once native to southern Iowa, and still used by farmers in fields left fallow for its soil-conserving strength. If the experiment proves successful, as everyone expects, this will be a step toward opening up a more substantial biomass market in the region, which is well-prepared to meet it locally.

Chicago: Expanding the use of photovoltaic cells to on-the-grid users is a main goal of several alternative energy projects. In Chicago, a citywide project called "Brownfields to Bright Fields" involves the city purchasing PV systems for area industry sites, in exchange for their residents developing PV manufacturing capability - a nearly classic example of public power promoting the development of a market, and private capacity to meet it. Toledo, Ohio, is another municipality looking to retrofit both public (e.g., schools) and private commercial buildings with advanced PV systems.

And so on and so on. The road to a clean energy future is clear enough to see, and the thousand little steps along the way, as these examples suggest, are easy enough to take, and can more than pay for themselves. But this really just raises another question, since it's also clear that not enough of these steps are being taken, and that the cumulative weight of such "alternative" energy use is as nothing compared to our continued reliance on fossil fuels. If clean energy makes such good economic as well as social sense, why aren't we seeing more of it? Why aren't more people or governments acting like the monastery in North Dakota, or (Lord help us!) the city of Chicago?

One good answer is power - of a different sort than energy. But there are also market reasons, which might be more gently cured. Let's look at problems a little more next week.

Joel Rogers teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), which

administers the Sustaining Wisconsin campaign. This is another in a weekly series of Capital Times columns he's writing on issues in the campaign. For more information, see www.cows.org and www.sustainingwisconsin.org.

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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