

Arlington Takes On Global Warming

By Annie Gowen, Washington Post Staff Writer
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Arlington County will buy more wind-generated electricity, give tax breaks for hybrid cars, require new public buildings to be green-certified and hand out energy-efficient light bulbs to residents as part of a major push toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions, county officials said yesterday.

The county has reduced carbon dioxide and other emissions -- making its buildings more energy-efficient and adding hybrid vehicles to its fleets -- by a total of 2.6 percent since 2000, but must now sharply increase its efforts in order to reach its goal of a 10 percent reduction in the next five years, Arlington County Board Chairman Paul Ferguson (D) said yesterday.

Ferguson, who has served on the board since 1996, was elected chairman yesterday during the county's traditional New Year's Day meeting, which tends to be a largely ceremonial event and holiday gathering for local politicians. Board member Walter Tejada (D) was elected the board's vice chairman.

The county's move won quick praise from local environmentalists.

Mike Tidwell, director of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, said that such a comprehensive push to reduce emissions was unusual for the region and a first in Northern Virginia. Tidwell noted, however, that other jurisdictions are also making strides; Montgomery County already buys far more wind power than Arlington.

"It's a fantastic initiative that leads through example," said Tidwell, whose nonprofit organization tracks such efforts across the region. "It's a good start and a positive start. They're doing a lot of the right things."

Ferguson, who previously served as chairman in 1999 and 2003, said he was inspired to launch the environmental initiative after seeing Al Gore's recent documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth."

"Our climate is changing, and that change is causing harm," Ferguson said. "The question is, what can each of us do to slow the trend and eventually reverse it?"

The board's plan calls for the county to increase the amount of wind power it buys from 3 percent to 5 percent and to give residents who buy hybrid cars a break on their personal property taxes, an unusual perk for a Virginia locality.

The county will refit one or two county buildings with solar technology and require all new major public buildings to be green-certified. Officials said the county will plant 1,200 trees this year and hand out 2,000 fluorescent light bulbs at local fairs and other events. They'll pay for 20 Arlingtonians to get energy-efficiency audits of their houses.

What this will cost is unknown. Ferguson has launched his plan in a year when Arlington will be stretched financially. Like other jurisdictions in Northern Virginia, the county is expecting a budget shortfall next fiscal year because of a decline in revenue growth caused by the downturn in housing values.

Arlington's revenue gap is about \$20 million.

"We are going to face a difficult budget," Ferguson said of the coming year. "We have had a flattening in the real estate market . . . we will not be able to do everything."

But he said the environmental initiative would not be costly. He estimated it would entail about \$5 million in upgrades to municipal buildings, which he said will be recouped in lower utility costs. Other costs -- such as for the energy audits and light bulbs -- will be less than \$100,000, he predicted.

The county of about 200,000 has long considered itself eco-friendly, from the macro perspective (a "smart growth" strategy that clusters development around Metro stations, encouraging use of public transit) to the micro (an obsession with the county's "tree canopy").

As newly elected board vice chairman, Tejada, one of the few elected Latino officials in the state, said that in the coming year he would spearhead new efforts to reach out to immigrant communities. Those include more voter registration drives and a series of citizenship workshops aimed at legal permanent residents who might want to become citizens but who feel intimidated by the process, Tejada said.

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