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Climate Change: State, Local Governments Will Help Save Planet

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When the nations of the world gather this December in Copenhagen to develop long-term climate agreements for a post-Kyoto world, it will be impossible to overlook the role of local, regional, and state authorities -- particularly in the United States and Europe. Two reasons make this clear.

First, in the U.S. and Europe, emissions from cars and trucks as well as the heating, cooling, and powering of buildings and homes account for approximately 70 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions. Moreover, urban energy and environmental policies are invariably tied to land use and therefore are greatly subjected to the oversight of local and state authorities.

Second, the rise of the global economy has inextricably linked sub-national governments, particularly between U.S. and European metropolitan regions. Each year, over \$4 billion in trade and investment is exchanged between Virginia and Europe, creating more than 40,000 jobs in the commonwealth. In Virginia, these ties with Europe have started a reciprocal cycle of policy discussions among state and local officials that have and will continue to transform climate and energy policies on both sides of the Atlantic.

Like many states, Virginia confronts its share of challenges with energy and climate. Under current business-as-usual emissions projections, Virginia's greenhouse gas emissions are projected to rise about 1 percent per year by 2025. Moreover, Virginia imports approximately 20 percent of its energy, and as the state's population grows -- over the next 10 years, 500,000 people are expected to move into Northern Virginia alone -- Virginia will be severely challenged to stabilize, much less curb, greenhouse gas emissions.

IN RESPONSE, Virginia is working with local and regional partners to promote a variety of climate mitigation and sustainable energy policies. Gov. Tim Kaine's year-long climate change commission has called for a range of energy efficiency, transportation, renewable energy, and land-use planning strategies, such as the "Cool Counties" initiative in New Kent, James City, Albemarle, Fairfax, and

Arlington counties.

"Cool Counties" is a national initiative, started in Fairfax County in 2006, that calls for 80 percent reductions in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. In that context, Arlington County, for example, will focus on transforming the Rosslyn-Ballston Metrorail corridor into a model planning effort with high development densities and walkable, attractive neighborhoods along the metro line. Fairfax County will work to convert Tysons Corner within similar contexts.

There also is a national "Cool Cities" program, supported by the U.S. Conference of Mayors. In Virginia, there are a half-dozen or so participating cities, including Richmond, Williamsburg, and Charlottesville, which have joined hundreds of other across the country.

However pioneering these efforts are, the climate and energy challenges ahead for Virginia's localities are still enormous. There is a significant gap between local governments' aspirational greenhouse gas reduction goals and meaningful action. Too few local authorities have moved from general climate declarations or isolated pilot projects toward development and application of long-term, large-scale, integrated climate and energy plans. We need now, more than ever, long-term "community energy planning" that links energy efficiency, building retrofits, renewable energy policies, and transit-oriented development that is guided by quantifiable metrics.

HERE IS WHERE cooperation with European regions and cities will be vital. European energy and climate pioneers such as Germany have developed an array of policies that have greatly advanced community energy planning. Germany currently generates more than 10 percent of its total power supply from renewable sources (its goal is 20 percent) and has pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 21 percent of 1990 levels by 2012. For the most part, these national goals are being implemented by local governments through ambitious transportation strategies, energy efficiency codes, and renewable energy targets for buildings.

Cooperation on community energy planning in Virginia must evolve into a serious, practical focus with environmental and economical benefits. Past collaborations between policymakers and technical experts in the Washington, D.C., area and Europe have already produced environmental results: car-sharing, green roofs, drinking water treatment practices, and real-time signage in D.C.-area Metro stations have become permanent features of the region's landscape. Economically, we must remember that Europe is Virginia's largest trading partner -- again, exchanging over \$4 billion in goods and services every year and creating more than 40,000 jobs.

There is enormous potential to apply these commercial activities in energy and climate planning. Virginia's recently released Energy Plan suggests that the commonwealth has the potential to produce over 11,000 megawatts of electricity through roof-integrated solar photovoltaic panels. Virginia's coastal areas are some of the most fertile in the U.S. for harvesting wind energy. Direct investment in this sector could potentially reach billions of dollars and tens of thousands of jobs over the next decade. Clearly, it is in the state's interest to learn from and apply the renewable and climate strategies from pioneering countries that have also invested in us economically.

Much is riding on the meeting in Copenhagen. Nations will gather to chart a revised course to meet the planet's warming challenges. Successfully reducing greenhouse gas emissions, however, will greatly depend on what is done by regional, state, and local governments around the world. Those gathering in Denmark should keep that in mind.

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