

Guest Commentary : The fiscal sanity of saving Planet Earth

BY DAN COODY AND MICHELLE WYMAN

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Last weekend in major cities on all seven continents, top music performers drew crowds and television audiences in the millions as part of Live Earth, billed as “concerts for a climate crisis.” The event raised awareness and set the stage for action. This week here in Fayetteville, more than 140 local government leaders from 19 different states — hailing from as far as Alaska — gathered together to discuss the actions they have taken and will continue to take. These mayors, city planners, members of town and city councils and county boards, and sustainability coordinators all share at least two things in common: a dedication to solving the problem, and the means to designing and implementing those solutions. They might not be able to carry a tune like John Mayer or have the star power of Madonna, but their importance in our collective quest to combat global climate change cannot be overstated.

In the absence of federal climate action, it is local governments that have pioneered solutions and stepped up to the plate with future generations, and the bottom line, in mind. It is that courage and leadership that the workshop, “Saving Energy and Money: The Economic Benefits of Local Climate Action,” aimed to honor and bolster. Participants asked tough questions of one another, shared examples of what’s working, and charted strategies for overcoming challenges together. Oliver Thomas, of the New Orleans City Council, gave poignant remarks and, based on his experience, cautioned us not to wait for the national government but to take the fate of our communities into our own hands. Ed Mazria, a renowned architect from New Mexico, implored attendees to consider the significant energy, emissions and cost savings available from simple changes in the building sector and to fight coal-fired power which can erase the investments cities make on emissions reductions. And Andy Ruben, Vice President of Sustainability at Wal-Mart, outlined the innovative and far-reaching “green” measures that have become the company’s calling card.

Elected officials in attendance met to discuss the specific obstacles and opportunities for those in elected office. Ann Arbor, Mich., was honored as the winner of the inaugural Climate Innovative Invitational for their ground-breaking research and installation of energy-efficient LED street lights.

The carbon footprint of the conference was reduced by providing memory sticks to each participant rather than heaps of paper, serving locally grown and organic food, floral displays with native plants, biodiesel transportation and ICLEI will purchase carbon offsets for air travel and the event itself. To honor the City of Fayetteville for their hospitality this week and dedication to sustainability, ICLEI purchased renewable power credits from Native Energy to offset the energy use of every City Council meeting in 2007. Some of the event receptions were held at Fayetteville’s shining examples of sustainability: The LEED silver-certified Public Library and the Botanical Garden of the Ozarks.

Fayetteville might not have made the short list of cities to host a Live Earth concert, but the city further established a prominent role on the climate and sustainability front this week. To watch the community take such giant leaps forward should be music to our ears.

Fayetteville Mayor Dan Coody was recently honored by the US Conference of Mayors for sustainability work. Michelle Wyman is Executive Director of ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability, a membership association of local governments advancing climate protection and sustainability goals. Fayetteville and ICLEI co-hosted the workshop.

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