

PER CAPITA DAVIS

MORE ON THE LOW CARBON DIET

By John Mott-Smith

Published by Davis Enterprise – November 6, 2008

In 2006 the City of Davis committed itself and its citizens to reducing greenhouse gas emissions to at least 7% below what they were in 1990, and in 2007 adopted a process to achieve that goal. A key step in this process was to determine what our GHG emissions were in 1990, and in a report early this year staff indicated that we, as a community, produced about 225,000 tons of CO₂e (see footnote below). The same report indicated that city government operations is only responsible for about 3% of that --- the rest coming from us, the people who live in Davis. There are many ways to reduce emissions when we build new homes, but how do we reduce emissions in homes already built? The City is in the middle of its pilot project to determine if the “Low Carbon Diet” program will be effective in encouraging residents to drive less and live more energy efficiently.

While we await the results of the City program, this is the story of three people --- Judy, Lynne and Lisa -- and their families, who went on the Low Carbon Diet earlier this year, and what they learned. The Low Carbon Diet is a 30-day program that encourages changes in lifestyle and improvements in home and transportation efficiency to “lose” 5,000 pounds of CO₂ over the period of a year. Judy, Lynne, and Lisa were part of a group of members of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Davis who collectively committed themselves to “losing” 125,000 pounds of CO₂.

Lynne had a head start --- she lives in a “Sun Catcher” home designed specifically to enhance solar heating and cooling. But this also meant that her emissions were lower to start with and, a problem for many in Davis who have already done a lot to reduce their carbon footprint, it might be more difficult to find additional ways to reduce emissions. Notwithstanding, her household found that it was possible to take many small actions (such as running fewer loads of laundry, taking shorter showers, turning off power strips and computers when not in use, cleaning refrigerator coils, and eating less meat) that added up to considerable savings.

While participants had the opportunity to meet three times over the course of the 30 days, and most found it valuable and learned a lot by comparing notes, others had schedules and constraints that meant they did most of the program on their own. Lisa and her family found that installing Energy Star appliances reduced their emissions the most and that going through the children’s workbook was an effective way to involve her son in the project. As with the others, the “Low Carbon Diet” was not a one-time event for Lisa and she continued after the 30 days to make changes to reduce her emissions through such actions as buying a solar oven and a solar powered messenger bag that charges her cell phone, ipod, and lap top. She also drives a Prius, takes public transportation when visiting San Francisco, and is planning to involve the employees in her office in the Low Carbon Diet program.

Judy also had a head start in that she lives in a “recycled” home; it was moved from its original location in 1975 as a part of the process of building Highway 113 so they saved on all the emissions required to build a new house. She and her husband are also “early adopters” and eat vegetarian meals, changed all

their light bulbs, use a drip system in their yard, bike more and drive very little, keep their furnace ducts checked and sealed, put solar panels on the roof-top, installed a whole house fan, use low-flow showerheads, and a long list of other things. They were also able to identify new actions to take, including reducing freeway driving speed to 55 to 60 mph and replacing leaky windows.

This issue of “what can you do if you have already done a lot” found a voice in the survey done of the UUC congregation asking what lifestyle and household system changes people had undertaken before 2008 and post February 2008. High numbers of people had already begun recycling, installed low flow showerheads, changed their thermostat settings, set their water heaters at 120 degrees, and keep their cars serviced and tires inflated. Actions taken more frequently after the Low Carbon Diet included taking cloth bags to the grocery store, reducing shower times, driving less and lowering freeway speeds, and eating less meat.

The Low Carbon Diet specifies 35 actions that participants can take to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, but the survey found that the list does not include many things people could or should be doing, such as installing a whole house fan, using a “solar dryer” (clothes line), or participating in “Community Supported Agriculture.” Neither does the Diet address energy used or efficiencies in home spas and swimming pools.

Stay tuned: the City of Davis “First 100 Households 30-Day Carbon Diet Challenge” is scheduled to end on November 12th and we may all have a chance to participate when the program is expanded.

Footnote: There are several greenhouse gases, such as methane, that are more potent than carbon dioxide, so emissions and reduction targets are referred to as “CO2 equivalents,” or “CO2e).

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Pcd/lowcarbondiet2b-118