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Galef hosts forum to address global warming

By Abby Luby

Jazz Munitz, a fifth grader at Buchanan Verplank elementary school, asked a question that roused audience applause at the first local Global Warming Forum at Cortlandt town hall on Wednesday, November 28.

“I’m doing a project for my school on global warming,” said Jazz. “I’m trying to raise the awareness for children. I think that people buy energy efficient light bulbs and use it a lot more than regular light bulbs. But if you do that, it turns out not to be so energy efficient. Is there any way you can monitor people over-using energy efficient appliances?”

“That’s why we want to put meters in your house,” Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Commissioner Peter Grannis told the 10 year old.

“Home meters will tell you the price of the power you are using depending on the time of day, how much you are using and how much it costs.”

Called “smart metering,” the new technology was discussed in depth at the forum, chaired by Assemblywoman Sandra Galef (D-Ossining), who was joined by Robert Moore, Executive Director of Environmental Advocates of New York, Nathaniel Greene, Senior Resource Specialist at the National Resources Defense Council, and Grannis.

More than 200 interested and eager people packed the hall with standing room only, wanting information about energy efficiency, climate change and global warming. Among the attendees was Sam Davis, Supervisor of Putnam Valley and Paul Gallay, Executive Director of the Westchester Land Trust.

“I realized that the impact of global warming was right here when a small tornado came through Ossining last year and uprooted my 72 year old Beech tree,” said Galef in her opening statement. “We have never had a tornado in Ossining.”

New York getting warmer

With warmer winters and the reservoirs in desperate shape, Galef said she wanted to look at the issues in the county and state and find out how communities could make a difference. To put New York State in perspective with global warming, Moore explained about the build up of carbon dioxide and said that there had been a 30 percent increase of carbon dioxide over the last 150 years.

According to Moore, there has also been a change in the global average temperature: it has raised about one degree Fahrenheit in the last 100 years.

“You can see it because the winters are not as severe, there is less snow and fewer snow melts impact the water supply, which in turn impacts fish and wildlife,” said Moore. “Our climate here in New York is like South Dakota or Georgia was 100 years ago.”

Regional Effort

Getting industries to reduce carbon emissions was the real challenge but not impossible, said Grannis. The DEC commissioner explained about the new coalition of 10 northeastern states, including New York, known as the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI).

“We are working to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to buy pollution “allowances” if a power company pollutes over their limit,” he explained.

RGGI will focus on power plants that burn fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas.

Carbon dioxide causes global warming from burning fossil fuels. Gasoline, methane and propane contain mostly carbon. When these fuels are burned, they react with oxygen and produce carbon dioxide.

“We are going to require power plants in all ten states to buy pollution allowances,” explained Grannis. “If power companies are going to pollute our air, dump their exhaust, we will make them buy their allowances. Eventually they will figure out ways to cut down their pollution. This has never been tried before.”

The market driven system will be rolled out in the next few months. “We would use the money to aggressively fund clean energy made from wind, solar, geothermal,” said Grannis adding

that Governor Eliot Spitzer just introduced the “15 by 15” plan which is a program to cut emissions by 15 percent by 2015.

Federal government slow to accept changes

But politics has stood in the way of many such initiatives, which, according to the forum’s panel, started with United States ignoring the Kyoto Protocol. The protocol is the pact agreed to by governments at a 1997 UN conference in Kyoto, Japan, to reduce greenhouse gases emitted by developed countries to at least five percent below 1990 levels by 2008-12. A total of 174 nations have ratified the pact, but not the United States. (The United Nations Climate Change Conference is going on right now in Bali until December 14).

Greene and Moore said it’s hard to set an example of good environmental practices when this country hasn’t sat at the international table of climate change issues.

“The federal EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) has even blocked New York from adopting efficient emission standards,” said Grannis. “The New York DEC is now suing the EPA – it’s in court right now.”

A bill sponsored by Senators Joseph Lieberman, (I- CT) and John Warner, (R- VA) that would cut emissions by 63 percent over four decades and is currently being debated in Congress, according to Moore. The bill, if passed, would place caps on the greenhouse gas emissions of refiners, power plants and large manufacturers.

The Bottle Bill

A hotly contested environmental battle that has been waged for years is over the Bottle Bill. Many from the audience at the forum were anxious to know why it hadn’t been passed into law. The Bottle Bill would put a 5 cent deposit on every beverage sold in the country.

“This bill has always passed in the assembly,” said Galef. “But it’s always getting stuck in the Senate.”

Now known as the “Bigger Better Bottle Bill,” if it becomes law, it will include all plastic and glass bottles, not just the refundable ones. New York State Senate Majority Leader Joe Bruno has consistently stopped the bill in the senate claiming it would result in a large tax increase in New Yorkers’ grocery bills. The bill is expected to be voted on again in 2008 as part of Governor Spitzer’s 2008-09 executive budget proposal.

“This is an example of where the will of the public is not recognized by our legislators,” said Greene. “Your legislators need to hear from you, and if your senator is Vincent Leibell, he

is a guy we've always been able to work with."