

Davis: Going local on climate protection

By Henrietta Davis/Guest Columnist

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How can we be hopeful about protecting the planet? The president has decided to remove the U.S. from the Paris climate agreement. It would be easy to spend time lamenting this outrageous act. But this is not the time to lament what's happening on the federal level. Instead, now is the time to go local — time for action at the level of cities, towns, and states — to take the lead on climate protection right here and right now!

More specifically, cities and towns should start by reducing energy used and greenhouse gas emissions from buildings. That's where local power is poised to take truly significant action.

Massachusetts is already number one in the nation for energy efficiency, reducing greenhouse gas emissions by using less energy in buildings (tied with California last year). In addition, across the commonwealth, 180 cities and towns large and small have designated themselves as Green Communities, pledging local action under that state program: they will take an inventory of energy use and planning to reduce their municipal energy use by 20 percent in five years. They've also committed to establishing renewable energy sites, adopting quick permit processes for renewable and alternative energy facilities, and minimizing life-cycle energy costs for new construction.

Some cities and towns in Massachusetts are taking further steps: going net zero from carbon emissions from individual buildings. Schools are being built to use no carbon for their operations. (For example, the King Open School on Cambridge St., in Cambridge is under construction right now, on target to be a Net Zero School.)

Also, communities are exploring the challenge to go net zero from emissions from all buildings - municipal buildings, privately owned buildings, commercial and residential buildings.

What's the big deal about buildings? According to U.S. Green Building Council, 39 percent of all U.S. emissions come from buildings. Not many people realize that the operation of commercial, industrial and residential buildings in the U.S. makes up the largest sector producing greenhouse gas emissions, larger than transportation.

Furthermore, the power to regulate building construction and operation rests entirely with the local and state government. There is no federal role here.

In Cambridge, fully 80 percent of all carbon emissions come from buildings, mostly from municipal, commercial and institutional entities.

Spurred by citizen advocates, in 2015 the Cambridge City Council adopted an ambitious Net Zero Action Plan for vast reductions in greenhouse gas emissions from all buildings in the city, aiming to have zero climate harming emissions by 2050. Not just from buildings owned by the city government, not just new buildings, the plan takes aim at transforming energy use in all buildings. This plan - formulated by a community-wide task force in 15 months of work - is on track to eliminate 70 percent of carbon emissions from buildings by 2040.

Statewide, the Massachusetts Climate Action Network (MCAN) is a group of communities working together to reduce the impact of greenhouse gas emissions. At the spring MCAN conference, held in early March in concert with Toxics Action, over 550 Massachusetts citizens spent a day together looking for climate solutions and exchanging ideas and resources. Climate action is happening here! Lexington is beginning a net zero reduction plan; additional discussions are underway in Brookline and elsewhere.

We can't look to the federal government to do this work. It must be done locally. Cities and towns working together with the state need to decide what is best for them to decrease building emissions.

At the Paris climate talks in 2015, Paris Mayor Annie Hidalgo and Michael Bloomberg, former mayor of New York City, began an alliance of over 4000 cities worldwide, pledged to reducing their greenhouse gas emissions. These city leaders believe it's up to cities and towns, especially in states like Massachusetts, to take the lead.

No, this is not the time to lament the lack of federal leadership. Instead, it is high time to get together with neighbors, to work with city, town, and state officials to figure out what more we can do here, especially about buildings. Local action will make a difference. The time for that is now!

Henrietta Davis is a former mayor of Cambridge and a member of the Cambridge Net Zero Task Force and a board member of MCAN and USGBC-Boston Chapter.