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Eco-Friendly Initiative Proposed For Fairfax

Connolly Tackling Climate Change

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Fairfax plans to become a "cool" county, where wind power, hybrid vehicles and environmentally friendly building techniques would reduce emissions of greenhouse gases to combat global warming, Board of Supervisors Chairman Gerald E. Connolly will announce today.

Connolly (D) said that he is developing the program with the Sierra Club and a few other large counties across the nation and that he wants it to be a model for communities everywhere.

Connolly, who will outline the multimillion-dollar initiative in his televised State of the County address at 6:30 p.m., said his plan has the support of the Board of Supervisors. The board is dominated by Democrats.

For Fairfax's 1 million residents, Connolly's proposal would mean rides on ethanol-burning buses, tax breaks for owning hybrid cars and new neighborhoods with more trees and green space. Residents might also grow accustomed to seeing green on public buildings -- vegetation planted on the roofs of schools and firehouses to consume carbon dioxide, Connolly said.

Such measures are in place in Montgomery and Arlington counties, which are generally supportive of progressive environmental policies. In business-friendly Fairfax, Connolly's plan would not impose regulations, but it would establish incentives for private-sector energy conservation.

If the Board of Supervisors carries out Connolly's initiative, it could place Fairfax in the vanguard of U.S. efforts to curtail emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases widely believed to contribute to global warming. But it will take millions of dollars -- to plant trees, buy parkland and vehicles and construct or retrofit "green" buildings to be more energy-efficient and less polluting.

"There are over 3,000 counties, and this could have an enormous impact across the nation," said Connolly, who is scheduled to announce his bid for reelection tomorrow. "We've got an administration that until very recently has denied the reality of global warming, denied the science that is overwhelming and compelling. So what we're trying to do here is lead by example."

That is something many other jurisdictions are already doing -- without the fanfare.

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Last year, Montgomery became one of only two jurisdictions in the nation requiring private and public buildings to meet strict energy-conserving criteria promoted by a nonprofit group. Also, Montgomery obtains 10 percent of its energy from wind power and is committed to increasing the number to 20 percent in the next five years.

Arlington is considering a higher tax on electricity and natural gas bills next year to help pay for \$1.5 million in energy-saving initiatives such as solar-powered projects and energy audits for homes.

Arlington Board Chairman Paul Ferguson (D) praised Connolly for putting forward a "positive environmental agenda" for the region and the nation. But Ferguson noted that establishing precise, measurable goals for reducing emissions is the key to a successful program.

"Otherwise, you know you're doing positive things, but you don't know how far you're going in the right direction," he said.

Connolly said many pieces of the initiative are underway. Two "green" fire stations that recently opened make use of clean energy sources and were built in part with recycled materials. The county government obtains 5 percent of its electricity from wind power and operates 90 hybrid vehicles. It has purchased thousands of acres, including the 3,200-acre former Lorton prison site, for the purpose of conservation.

And supervisors will consider investing as much as \$2.5 million in energy conservation in the coming year, according to a budget proposal under consideration.

Such existing efforts raise questions about what is new in Connolly's initiative and whether it is largely about generating publicity for a politician poised to launch his bid for a second term. But Connolly said there is more to be done in Fairfax: A fleet of 3,600 vehicles can be replaced with less-polluting vehicles over time; an inventory of more than 400 buildings, including schools, can be retrofitted or replaced over a generation; an area of 400 square miles presents opportunities for land conservation and tree-planting.

Connolly also said the larger purpose of his initiative is to export programs underway in Fairfax to other parts of the country. "This puts us on the national scene, so it's no longer only about the local effort," he said.

Among the counties working with Connolly and the Sierra Club to develop the Cool Counties program are Washington's King County, which includes Seattle, and Illinois's Cook County, which includes Chicago. The initiative is expanding a program that began in Seattle in 2005 and that 418 municipalities across the nation have signed on to -- including Alexandria, Chevy Chase and the District. Participants have pledged that by 2012 they will reduce carbon dioxide emissions 7 percent from 1990 levels.

The Sierra Club's Cool Cities director, Glen Brand, said the accord is a good "starting point" for the organization's goal of reducing carbon dioxide emissions 80 percent by 2050. But governments have to follow through on their promises, which can require such costly up-front investments, Brand said.

Most mayors, Brand said, "really don't have a clear idea of what to do next. And so the leadership is there, but the execution is really more important than signing the agreement."

Similarly, the Clean Counties initiative should be judged, in part, on how it measures success, he said.

Connolly's chief of staff, Dominic Bonaiuto, said those details remain to be worked out. Connolly said he hopes that Cool Counties' goals will be more tangible and far-reaching than its municipal counterpart.

Staff writers Bill Turque and Miranda S. Spivack contributed to this report.

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