

Connecting the Dots for Cleaner Air

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This is a good time to offer kudos on clean air efforts. We're not plagued by the ozone days of summer, so we can take a moment to reflect on the good choices many are making on behalf of the region's health.

Many governments, businesses and individuals are now connecting the dots. They are realizing more and more that collective decisions and personal decisions can impact not only our air quality but also our citizens' health and economic prosperity.

When the Center for the Environment at Catawba College launched its Clean Air Initiative in 2003, we had a steep hill to climb in this region. Both the Charlotte and Triad metropolitan areas were on the federal dirty air list, which threatened our ability to garner transportation funds and attract new industry – not to mention impacting the health of our citizens.

Few people had connected their driving, recycling and housing choices to the quality of the air their children were breathing. Businesses had, for the most part, not connected their energy use to air quality. Some elected officials had not seriously considered the impact that unplanned development would have on air quality.

Now you can hardly pick up the paper without seeing evidence that many people, personally and collectively, are getting it. They are making choices that support both growth and the environment.

Energy Conservation

Businesses are recognizing the economic benefits of energy conservation. Food Lion has been repeatedly lauded for its dedication to saving energy. In January, it stepped up its environmental efforts by joining the Environmental Protection Agency's new GreenChill partnership. That means it pledges to exceed regulatory requirements to protect the ozone layer and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Wal-Mart has launched a campaign to reduce energy use across the country by encouraging customers to purchase compact fluorescent bulbs. This type of bulb, incidentally, uses 75 percent less electricity than incandescent lights and lasts 10 times longer. Because it uses less energy, it produces 450 pounds fewer greenhouse gases over the life of each bulb.

More than 50 companies and organizations in the Charlotte region have committed to a project called

“Clean Air Works!” We'll learn more about this work-site-based program at an Executive Summary Breakfast on March 29 at the Center for the Environment facility on the Catawba campus.

Our own students at Catawba College spearheaded a Campus Greening Initiative that has resulted in a number of energy-saving measures on campus and a pledge by the trustees and administration that all new construction will be LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified.

Buildings & Buses & Trains

More and more government officials are making environmentally sound decisions, and the people are supporting their efforts. The citizens of Guilford County approved a \$300-million bond referendum to build three “green” schools in the next two years. The schools will incorporate features like natural light, solar panels and under-floor heating and cooling systems to reduce energy costs.

The city of Salisbury has demonstrated that officials are mindful of the benefits brought about by compact design, walkability and connectivity between neighborhoods – all of which can reduce our dependency on the automobile and therefore decrease air pollution.

School systems across the state have retrofitted their buses with diesel oxidation catalysts, which reduce harmful emissions. For example, the Rowan-Salisbury Schools retrofitted 116 school buses, which reduced emissions of particulate matter by 20 percent, hydrocarbons by 50 percent and carbon monoxide by about 40 percent. That's good news for our children. That's good news for our air.

Charlotte's light rail Blue Line is scheduled to begin its run from Interstate 485 in south Charlotte to uptown in the fall. Everyone who boards that train will reduce the emissions that his or her car will spew into the atmosphere.

Charlotte City Council member Pat Mumford, who is chair of the city's Transportation Committee, will talk about Charlotte's transportation efforts March 29 at the Executive Summary Breakfast I mentioned earlier. (If you would like to attend, please call 704.637.4727.)

On the bus front, a connector service between Salisbury and Kannapolis will be launched next year,

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thanks to federal funds. Concord is going to provide free transit service for two weeks a year during the Charlotte Motor Speedway's race weeks. And Salisbury is just one of several cities that will offer free bus service on ozone action days this summer. All of these efforts will get people out of their cars and onto mass transit – and that's another step toward cleaner air.

These are just a few things that point to the progress we are making. But we can't rest on our laurels. North Carolina is one of the fastest-growing states in the country, so we need to continue the fight for cleaner air.

The more people we have who can connect the dots – who can see the relationship between transportation and air quality, energy use and air quality, housing design and air quality, land development and air quality – the better chance we have of creating an economically and environmentally healthy future.

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