

Clean Air Conference Draws Participants from Across State

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story by Scott Jenkins appeared in the March 23, 2006 issue of the Salisbury Post.

N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources Secretary William Ross summed up air quality and other environmental concerns March 22 with an analogy by scholar Jared Diamond:

It's a horse race. The horses are environmental salvation and environmental destruction. And the race is picking up speed.

"I think we're all rooting for the horse of environmental salvation," Ross said at a clean-air conference hosted by the Catawba College Center for the Environment.

The conference, Clean Air: Community Strategies for Action, drew participants from across the state to discuss challenges to improving air quality, the cost of bad air and potential solutions.

Winning the horse race, Ross said, won't be the result of one or two big solutions, but a lot of small ones.

In a session on overcoming barriers to community change, participants talked about strides made at various levels, including the state's Clean Smokestacks Law, which has reduced industrial pollution.

Salisbury leaders got a chance to showcase some of the city's efforts to improve air quality: adding biodiesel, hybrid and electric vehicles, encouraging commercial and residential connectivity, planning for bicycle and pedestrian, as well as vehicular, use of thoroughfares, among other things.

Salisbury has made a priority of protecting

and expanding its tree canopy, a key component in protecting air quality, Mayor Susan Kluttz said.

"To be successful ... it's not just one environmental advocate in your city," Kluttz said. "It has to be a different way to thinking in your city."

And Dan Mikkelson, the city's director for land management and development, said more projects are in the works, such as connecting Salisbury to Kannapolis, Concord and Charlotte by bus.

"I think the city has really embraced what it takes to begin addressing the issue of air quality," said John Wear, Center for the Environment director.

It can't end there, though, said Dr. Linda Rimer, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's liaison to the Carolinas. Air pollution, she said, is just a symptom of "a much worse disease ... the way we're urbanizing in this country."

Rimer urged governments and agencies to form partnerships across political boundaries in order to tackle their common problems. Some have already shown it's a successful strategy. The bigger dilemma is how to get citizens to care, she said.

"We can stop big-box stores, we can stop landfills, but how do you get people to come out and spend their time proactively and positively?" she said.

The Sierra Club's volunteers are doing that by pushing for higher gas mileage in cars, less dependence on coal and oil and more efficient energy consumption, said National President Lisa Renstrom, who lives in Charlotte.

CENTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

The group is also asking state and local leaders to take the lead in reforming environmental practices, including the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions, which aren't affected by Clean Smokestacks and other initiatives.

"The leadership at the federal level is simply not there," Renstrom said. "It has to be done in the states."

North Carolina is taking steps toward cleaner air beyond Clean Smokestacks, said Larry

Shirley, director of the State Energy Office. The state has actively sought to increase efficiency in its own energy use and to expand the production of renewable sources of energy to replace fossil fuels.

Over the past couple of decades, the state has enacted efficiencies that resulted in a current energy consumption that's 25 percent less than it would have been otherwise.

"And we've only scratched the surface," he said. ■