

Maine Winter Sports Center

August 8, 2008

A CALL TO ACTION

The Maine Winter Sports Center is dedicated to developing a sustainable model for rural communities in Maine. Our Healthy Hometowns program gets a lot of attention for our efforts to address childhood obesity and our ski venues and events get a lot of attention for our efforts to create economic engines in their communities. But we are about more than that, including working to empower communities through the development of an effective volunteer base. While these volunteers support MWSC programs and initiatives, the nature of empowerment often leads these groups to dive into other issues affecting their communities.

The biggest issue facing Maine's rural communities right now, and probably for the next decade, will be the cost to heat the homes of our most vulnerable citizens. To address that challenge the most powerful resource our State has to offer is the strength of our communities and the responsibility Mainer's feel for each other. That strength will be put to the test starting this winter.

The dramatic increase in the cost of oil has pushed the world economy, and certainly the US economy, past a tipping point. While we have felt the sting of rapid increases in oil prices before and have weathered those storms without long term effects, this crisis is different. This one is forcing us to finally deal with the consequences of our dependence on an energy system that is putting at risk our environment, our economy and our national security.

The perfect storm of tensions in the Middle East, Global Warming and the cost of oil pushing the business models of whole industries into the red are forcing people to embrace a new reality. The auto industry, the airline industry, transportation of goods, and the food industry are all unprepared to deal with oil at \$120/barrel. Although there are bound to be fluctuations in the price of oil, the driving forces behind the cost will ensure that those prices stay high, therefore, the sooner we can let go of our grasp on oil dependence, the sooner we can move on to the necessary work of finding alternatives, and the sooner we can regain control of the forces that determine our economic vitality and our ability to look after our people.

We need a call to action that is a cross between JFK's 1961 pledge to put a man on the moon in 10 years and President George H.W. Bush's call for a thousand points of light. We have demonstrated so often over time that when the American people put our collective minds to a problem, that there is no problem we can't overcome.

Our first step needs to be acknowledging that oil is not a long-term answer:

- * For the most part, we are purchasing oil from countries that wish ill upon us and in the process we are financing their ability to do so.
- * Our dependence on their oil also puts too much control over *our* economy in their hands.
- * Increasing drilling within the US is not the answer because the additional capacity would be relatively short-lived and would not even enter our marketplace for at least 10 years. The Bush administration acknowledges that this additional capacity will only reduce the cost of oil by 2-3 cents per gallon when it does finally come on line. We need to be embracing a change in the fundamentals of our approach to energy *now* and to have moved largely beyond oil in the next 10 years.
- * There is also the issue of the cost. The price of oil will continue to be a roller coaster, which will only trend higher. China and India are not only the two most populated countries in the world (they represent 38% of the world population); their economies are also among the largest and fastest growing in the world. At current rates their economies will guarantee that worldwide demand for oil remains strong and expensive – regardless of any efforts on our part to either strengthen the dollar or reduce consumption. Furthermore, the countries producing the oil are not in complete control of their own production and distribution. Terrorism and local conflict are a constant threat to the oil supply. As the strongest economy in the world, we used to have leverage on OPEC to control the cost of oil. But with the emergence of China and India, that leverage is largely diminished. The days of \$2/gallon gasoline are over, and probably even \$3/gallon gas as well. We can expect OPEC to lower prices periodically to try to prevent the development of marketable alternative energy technology, but that will be a balancing act at best and won't offer long-term relief.
- * The short-term answer is to use existing technology and techniques in order to use a lot less energy. The long-term answer is to develop renewable energy that will dramatically reduce our dependence on oil from areas of the world that look to do us harm. These areas also happen to be constantly in a state of, or creating for others, political turmoil. We need to be in control of our own energy needs. The good news – and unfortunately the bad news as well – is that we are.

Finally, there is the issue of Global Warming. Even those most resistant to the idea of Global Warming can no longer deny that fossil fuel is having a dramatic, and negative, impact on our weather. Those new weather patterns are manifesting themselves in storms of greater frequency and intensity, in changing rain patterns that are causing crop failures on a massive scale and in the melting of glaciers that provide a critical source of water to millions of people around the world. It is also causing the polar ice to melt at an alarming rate, which is having a compounding

effect on the strength of these new weather patterns and also threatening to flood millions of acres of low lying coastal areas around the globe.

This is not a Democrat vs. Republican issue; it isn't a pro-business vs. environmentalist issue. Fossil fuel is changing our global landscape with tragic consequences for millions of people around the world. If you are not moved to look beyond oil for the next generation of energy by the arguments of \$5/gallon oil, the fact that we are financing the terrorists, or that we need to be in greater control of our own economic future, you should at least be moved by the impact oil consumption is having on our ability to survive on the planet.

The solution to our dependence on oil has always been available to us, but there has never been the combination of motivation and urgency to pursue those options. Between wind, solar, wood, geothermal and tidal power we can dramatically reduce the amount of oil used to produce electricity, heat our homes and power our factories. Electric and hydrogen engines offer realistic opportunities to eliminate gas-powered cars. The combination of renewable energy sources can insure that hundreds of billions of dollars that are currently leaving our economy to purchase foreign oil can be kept in our economy and reinvested in solving the pressing issues of our times. What we need now is the *'we'll put a man on the moon in ten years'* call to action that mobilized a generation of America's brightest minds to solve the challenges of manned flight in outer space. We need to be in control of our own energy needs. Again, the good news – and the bad news as well – is that we are.

Two parallel realities are playing out simultaneously. On the one hand this is an exciting time. We are faced with an enormous challenge that will require a focused and concerted effort on the part of scientists and industry. We will have to work together as a country, but success will mean that we have largely freed ourselves from foreign control of our economy (all we need to do then is regain control of our foreign owned national debt). This can be the beginning of a new era in national vitality. On the other hand, and set against this backdrop of incredible opportunity lies the reality that there are tens of thousands of Mainers who can't wait for us to harness Mother Nature's power. The cost of fuel has made it impossible for them to heat their homes.

In the first President Bush's 1989 inauguration speech he spoke of America's "...thousand points of light...the community organizations that are spread like stars throughout the nation, doing good." In times of a tight federal budget and a number of pressing social priorities the senior President Bush was calling on the country's community-based organizations to step up to meet the needs of their neighbors. "We have more will than wallet, but will is what we need." Then he went on to add, "...we will do the wisest thing of all: we will turn to the only resource we have that in times of need always grows – the goodness and courage of the American people." It is that sense of community that has defined rural communities, and much of Maine, for hundreds of years, and which we need to call on again now.

President Bush believed that we were capable of solving our greatest challenges when we came together as a country to do so. His was a call to our social support network in the same way that President Kennedy called out to our scientists; both were looking to inspire greatness in a time of great need.

We need both the scientific and social communities to step up today. We need our scientists to use America's entrepreneurial spirit and Yankee ingenuity to harness the power of renewable energy. But, we also need our social infrastructure to keep those most vulnerable from falling through the cracks in the meantime.

There is a role for the State government to play in this as well – there should be no higher priority for the State in the next six months than the welfare of those unprepared to meet the coming winter. Money needs to be made efficiently available to those most in need to help them make their homes more energy efficient. From a practical standpoint however, the work of applying for the funds, finding the resources to assess individual homeowners needs and then finally finding the contractors to order and install the replacement windows, install more energy efficient furnaces, insulate homes, etc, is more than can be expected to be completed in the next 5 months. Though this work needs to be engaged – and quickly – we need to be realistic about the fact that there will be tens of thousands of Mainers this winter that, without our help, will be forced to live in unacceptable conditions.

The real work will need to be done by communities, by individuals, by you and me. It will be neighbors looking out for neighbors. In the heat of the summer winter seems far off, but the time for us to start on this is now. Don't get paralyzed by the scope and complexity of the problem, just dive in and help those around you that need help. Be one of those thousand points of light.

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