

Dear Santa Fe County residents:

I would like to report to you about a conference that I attended in Portland, Oregon, week before last. The topic of this conference was "Adaptation and Resilience to Climate Change." This was a profound experience for me and gave me a feeling that there is much positive action going on in our country.

We are now experiencing climate change, up close and personal, in our County. There is a definite warming and drying trend that is leading to the largest forest fires that we have had in our lifetimes and to water problems, particularly in the rural areas. Very little discussion about climate change is occurring at the Federal level or even at the State level. This topic, for example, has been notably absent during the Presidential election. But, fortunately, that is not the case at the local level.

I participated in what was called a "Climate Leadership Academy" as a member of a team from the City of Santa Fe. Our Santa Fe team was assembled by Katherine Mortimer (Sustainable Santa Fe Programs Manager) and included Mayor Coss, Councilor Carmichael Dominguez, Katherine Mortimer, Cindy Padilla (Director of the City Environmental Services Division), and me. I was very pleased and honored to be asked to be part of the team. The other teams at the conference -- from all over the country -- represented diverse areas, such as New York City, Metro Washington, D.C., Ft. Lauderdale, the Twin Cities in Minnesota, Austin, Tucson, Flagstaff, and cities along the West Coast.

One powerful lesson from the conference was that at the local government level, there is a great deal happening in the area of adaptation to, and building resilience to the effects of climate change. This is probably because local governments deal with real problems that affect the people that live in their communities. And we are seeing extreme weather events affecting all communities across the country.

In the arid southwest our problems revolve mostly around the effects of dry weather conditions -- particularly forest fires and water shortages. By the way, in District 4, there are now a number of homeowners who have reported to me that their wells are going dry and they are being forced to haul water. On the other hand, along the coastal areas of our country, sea level rise is contributing to high tides that are starting to lap up against residential communities. In places like Oregon, several 100-year heavy rainfall events in a row have led to huge stormwater runoff problems.

Some of the cities that were represented at the conference have actually developed Climate Change Adaptation Plans. Flagstaff and Portland are two examples of cities who have taken this subject very seriously. The staff in those city governments have given a great deal of thought to the challenges that their communities will almost certainly be facing, and they have come up with plans for how they might deal with each of those challenges. They have also identified the gaps in their services that will need to be filled, in order to successfully deal with extreme events.

In addition, many of the actions that these communities have undertaken have ended up saving money. For example, Portland has worked assiduously to save energy by implementing measures

to insulate commercial buildings and homes and to save water (moving water around requires lots of energy). So much energy has been saved in Portland alone that a new large coal-fired power plant did not have to be built. Think how much money that saved. Also the owners of the more efficient buildings and residences saved on utility bills.

It is my opinion that we in our area -- including the City of Santa Fe, the County, and other surrounding local governments -- would be well served to give some thought to how we can adapt to the future that we are facing. I will say, however, the both the City and the County are already making some progress along these lines. Just to give you one example, the County has a County Wildland Fire Safety Group, and the staff from this department have done property hazard assessments in a number of areas of the County that are particularly vulnerable. They have gone house to house to check for such factors as whether there is water available for fighting a fire, whether there are flammable materials around the house, and how accessible the area is to fire equipment. Each house that is assessed is placed onto GIS maps and is color-coded as to the scale of vulnerability to wildfire.

The County is also giving serious thought as to how we can have redundant water supplies available to our communities. The Buckman Direct Diversion water treatment project is an example of diversifying our water resources from our historical practice of only using groundwater. More could be done in this area, though, especially with regard to more robust rainwater collection opportunities. But at least we have made a good start in recognizing the problem in the first place.

The County and the City also have many more accomplishments that I could highlight. But I just want to emphasize the point that we still need to do more -- much more. These kinds of actions will not only make our community safer, but in many cases they may also save us money (just like the Portland example above).

One of the participants at the conference said something very profound: Like it or not, we human beings are now the major agent of change on our planet; we are designing our future every day; we are conducting a massive planet-wide experiment. My comment is that we can fail to make our future brighter, or we can take positive steps toward a future that is better for our planet, our country, and our community. It's up to us, but time is running out.

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