

Candidate Commentary

Campbell

A Sustainable Low-Carbon Economy

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Candidate For VT House

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its updated assessment Oct. 8 on the pace and severity of global warming. It's grim.

Burning fossil fuels has already warmed the earth about 1.0° Celsius (1.8° Fahrenheit) since the late 1800s. Today, at 1.0°C, we see intensified storms, disappearing Arctic ice cap, retreating glaciers in Antarctica and Greenland, melting permafrost, acidifying and warming oceans, and widespread bleaching of coral reefs.

The effects of another half-degree of warming will be serious, even calamitous — yet more intense storms, heat waves, droughts, deluges. Warming of 2.0°C, most likely even more, threatens to trigger a warming feedback loop as dark Arctic seas and Greenland lakes absorb more solar radiation and the permafrost releases eons of frozen carbon.

The chances of limiting emissions to stay within total warming of 1.5°C are, shall we say, remote. Globally, we would need to halve emissions by 2030, 11 years from now. We would need to cut emissions nearly to zero within two decades after that.

We are on track, then, for much more than 1.5°C global warming within the lifetimes of most of us. The effects on civilization cannot but be catastrophic, causing mass migration, violent conflict over land and resources, and social breakdown, to say nothing of incalculable financial losses. The Syrian civil war is perhaps a precursor.

Locally, the effects of climate change within a few decades will include weather extremes and habitat transformation, as plant zones and species and bugs march north. Might be good for dairy farmers, but not so good for maple producers. Vermont could also see significant in-migration as coastal areas become uninhabitable.

But the global effects will be felt here too. Disruptions in the global economy will disrupt local business and consumers. Fossil fuel prices will inevitably rise, as the social, economic, and environmental costs of dumping wastes into the sky for free finally become politically untenable.

As ever, the people most affected by these dislocations will be the most vulnerable: those already struggling in marginal economic circumstances. The wealth and well being gap could get wider still.

This was on my mind as I read

See **Campbell**, Page [A5](#)

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Campbell

Continued from Page A4

Scott Beck's recent column (Oct. 19) expressing concern about Global Foundries' electric rates. Once again, environmental responsibility was cast in opposition to economic viability. This view prevents us from truly addressing the challenge of transitioning to a low-carbon economy.

We must recognize not only the danger of the climate crisis, but also the opportunity. Today, Vermont spends \$2 billion on fossil energy; most of that goes out of state and out of our economy. The energy transition will create new jobs and new opportunities for existing and new businesses, and keep more of what we are already spending within our economy.

Increased demand for biomass (wood chips and pellets) will replace the currently depressed market for wood pulp.

Residential, commercial and industrial energy efficiency improvements will continue to be high-value investments and provide good jobs.

Energy generation and transmission will provide new avenues of investment.

Transportation transition to electric power and charging infrastructure will create new opportunities, for example, a new network of internet cafés with EV chargers so customers can get coffee and check email while their car charges.

These investments will be a major engine of economic activity if embraced and managed carefully.

Rural towns like St. Johnsbury are in fact vital to a future of decentralized energy sources and locally oriented uses. They are the hubs in the hub-and-spoke energy future.

They are also the hubs in our economic and social future. Investments in coping with the climate crisis are also investments in the viability of local communities. Supporting local businesses and attracting and retaining a trained workforce are critical.

We don't need more taxes; we need to focus on strategic investments to grow our community. Quality affordable education, childcare, internet, housing, healthcare, arts and culture, recreation — this is what will grow our community.

These policies nurture a vibrant community. We may not completely insulate ourselves from the dramatic disruptions ahead. But if we build a stronger community, we will be much better able to weather them.

The climate crisis is like the T Rex in the rear-view mirror in Jurassic Park: closer than it appears. Let's not dawdle.

Scott Campbell of St. Johnsbury is running as a Democrat for the position of St. Johnsbury representative.