



Times-News

Big green energy savings for a small planet

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ECO NOTES

Happy Earth Month! Many people know about the oft-touted "low carb diet" promoted by Dr. Robert Atkins as a way of taking off the extra weight. Since the Atkins diet, gone is the notion that a low fat Twinkie won't haunt us again where we least expect (or want) it. Low carb diets aren't just for losing body fat. They also help reduce our carbon footprint, a diet that provides benefits to ourselves, our children and our planet.

Living a high energy lifestyle has its consequences. For many years we had access to cheap oil and as a result petroleum became the basis of every aspect of our life. We saturated our food in oil (fertilizers), we sautéed our homes with it (concrete, asphalt shingles, vinyl siding), we stir-fried with oil to make our containers (Tupperware, plastics) and even drizzled oil to produce our medications.

Americans have been diagnosed with the "Beverly Hillbillies Syndrome." You know how it is, you shoot your rifle, hit some black gold, Texas tea, and off you go packing up granny and the kin to Beverly Hills. Winners of lotteries are said to experience this as well. (I unfortunately wouldn't know from personal experience.) The sudden wealth and fame causes erratic behavior, wild overspending, divorce, disease and worse. People not prepared for their sudden wealth often spend until it all suddenly disappears, taking with it whatever happiness and comfort that used to exist.

All of us have experienced a taste of the Beverly Hillbillies Syndrome in our lives. Leaving lights on everywhere we go, driving gas guzzling cars, using inefficient heating and AC systems at temperature levels far beyond what's necessary. But there is something about \$4 a gallon gas, 15,000 children dying each year from asthma and 11,000 deaths annually in the Southeast due to air pollution that takes the luster from our oil riches. The strife in the Middle East and the billions of dollars we're spending in foreign oil-rich lands leaves a bitter taste. We haven't mentioned climate change but certainly it has become increasingly clear that what we do to our environment, we do to ourselves, and the window for action is rapidly disappearing.

So let's bring this back around to our low carb diet. How can we start living a low energy lifestyle?

Looking at our homes, healthy built homes provide many incentives that keep us (and the planet) healthy. Healthy built homes create a healthier outdoors by using erosion control, and saving existing trees. They save water by using high-efficiency irrigation and plumbing fixtures. They use high-efficiency windows and insulation. Heating and cooling systems produce greater comfort using efficiency equipment and sealed air ducts. Energy Star appliances and lighting greatly reduce energy usage. Indoor air quality is healthier through the use of nontoxic finishes which minimize mold. Materials that are used are from durable, local and recycled-content sources. All of this results in lower energy bills, higher quality of life, less "sick building syndrome," less effect on local habitats and less negative contribution to climate change.

In addition to the individual steps we can take, the best solution is always a community solution. One of the problems with living the Beverly Hillbillies life is the loss of community that an oil-enriched lifestyle entails. We used to live near each other in close-knit communities depending upon one another. But over the past 50-60 years our societal makeup has been based on traveling (often alone) by car to get to places, living on the far edge of suburbia or rural tracts in sprawl-type developments, and relying on electronic devices for entertainment rather than each other's company. As we've grown apart as a community, we've lost what was one of the most valuable things that made America a great country to live in. We were the place where neighbors helped neighbors in times of crisis.

To bring our community back together with a sense of purpose around energy alternatives, ECO is sponsoring an Earth Day Energy Expo on Saturday, April 26 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Blue Ridge Community College Patton Building. The expo will feature speakers from across the region discussing renewable energy, energy conservation and green building, including award-winning filmmaker and energy conservation advocate Jeff Barrie, who will offer the WNC premiere of his latest film. Other presenters include national air quality expert Marjorie Meares on Wind Power, Brian Winslett on Bio-Fuels, Fact and Fiction, and Ned Doyle, our own local expert, on the future of energy in WNC. The day will also include workshops and presentations on home energy efficiency, solar energy and more. A film studio will feature the best in green documentaries. Additionally exhibitors from around the region will present green technologies and help answer questions as will local environmental organizations.

On a community scale, ECO will present its energy conservation program at the expo, Project Green Light. The project is a communal effort which includes churches and local community organizations in a festive, friendly competition, enabling the community as a whole to share in the fruits of a lower energy lifestyle. Together we can find answers to turn our community riches, our sense of community, back into gold.

David Weintraub is executive director of ECO, the Environmental and Conservation Organization, a grassroots, non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and conserving the natural environment of the mountain region. For more information on this and all of ECO's public programming, please contact us at (828) 692-0385 or on-line at www.eco-wnc.org.



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