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Let's get that big carbon footprint off our Bluegrass

By Rob Rumpke

It's going to take more than increased public transportation concepts and voluntary carpooling to solve some of the issues raised by the Brookings Institute's recent conclusion that Lexington has the worst carbon footprint among large U.S. metropolitan areas

So Bluegrass Tomorrow is attempting to address those and other issues with its ”InnoVision 2018“ project, a comparative analysis of 22 regions similar to the Bluegrass, including most of the Southeastern Conference cities that have a flagship university at their hub.

The study's findings will be presented Sept. 25.

We know that one of the reasons that Lexington has such a negative carbon footprint is that we burn so much coal to generate our energy and power, and there are many cities and regions across the nation that depend on coal as much as we do. But coal is also the reason we have such inexpensive electricity rates, an important economic development incentive.

The Innovation Study includes such SEC regions as Gainesville, Fla.; Athens, Ga.; Columbia, S.C.; Fayetteville, Ark., Baton Rouge, La.; Knoxville, Tenn.; and Tuscaloosa, Ala; as well as similar college regions such as Austin, Texas; Madison, Wis.; Boulder, Colo.; Eugene, Ore.; Columbia, Mo.; and Ann Arbor, Mich.

Here's what we're learning from the study cities.

In Gainesville, a public-private solar power partnership has been developed with Wal-Mart to pay 30 percent, or up to $1 million, to construct a 250-kilowatt photovoltaic array that will provide shade over its parking lot, and the power generated will go into the city's grid.

In Columbia, an aggressive energy and environmental commitment led by citizens resulted in a renewable energy ordinance for the city's power supply. Columbia Water & Light will receive energy from wind and two biogas projects in 2008, and the utility will accomplish the 2013 target of 5 percent renewable energy by the end of this year.

The voter-approved Renewable Energy Ordinance requires the city to buy or generate electricity from eligible renewable energy sources and that they make up 5 percent of electric retail sales by 2013, 10 percent by 2018, and 15 percent by 2023.

We're learning that a ”transportation revolution“ is taking place in Boulder, which has one of the lowest single-occupant vehicle commuting rates in the country: 55 percent.

And a Transportation Demand Strategy will take that percentage even lower by reducing available parking — thus making it cheaper to find an alternative, increasing bike and pedestrian off-street lanes and increasing regional public transportation.

Charlottesville is also implementing an aggressive six-county transportation-planning organization with a five-year plan to ”UnJAM“ the region's roads via alternative transportation methods.

Fort Collins' Fort ZED (zero energy district) was the brainchild of a collaborative community conversation. The core idea is to turn Fort Collins' UniverCity District, which encompasses the campus of Colorado State University, the downtown Old Town district and the downtown river corridor into one that is a net zero energy

user.

This means the district would create as much thermal and electrical energy locally as it uses within its built environment.

Any energy not created directly in the district must come from within 50 miles and be from a clean source, such as wind or solar. This program, when complete, will be the largest net zero district in the world.

In Oregon, Eugene's Emerald Express rapid transit system uses dedicated lanes to make bus travel faster than with a private automobile. The Federal Transit Administration will pay 80 percent of the estimated $61 million to develop the initial 12-mile route, with the state of Oregon pitching in another $5.5 million.

Local funding will be less than 10 percent of the entire cost. Rapid bus transit emulates the efficiencies and operations of light rail at a fraction of the cost: $7,000 a mile, compared to $50,000 to $70,000 a mile for light rail.

Texas' capital, Austin, has set some aggressive green environment goals. All city facilities, fleets and operations will be carbon-neutral by 2020.

The city has committed to power 100 percent of its facilities with renewable energy by 2012, to meet 30 percent of the entire city's energy needs through renewable resources by 2020 and to make all new single-family homes zero-net-energy capable by 2015.

Austin has also established a Regional Climate Action Team to inventory greenhouse-gas emissions countywide, work with stakeholders and technical advisers and make recommendations for short-term and long-term reduction targets and implementation strategies for the metro area, including transportation, land-use planning, emerging technologies, waste management, natural areas and multigenerational education.

In Michigan, the Ann Arbor City Council has set vigorous energy and environmental goals: 30 percent renewable energy for municipal operations by 2010 and 20 percent for the whole community by 2015, and a 20 percent reduction in global warming emissions, from 2000 levels, by 2015.

There are many other examples of green innovations in the ”InnoVision 2018“ project. What is most important is that the Bluegrass, as a region, address its carbon footprint problem and develop its own solutions through open source collaboration, not only in Lexington but in all of the surrounding Bluegrass counties.

Coal — as a cost-effective method of producing energy and power and as a major factor in producing a reasonable cost of living in Central Kentucky — is very important to our economic engine. So we need to start with that premise.

But what are the other Bluegrass solutions, strategies and goals upon which we can agree to develop our own green environment program in Central Kentucky? What innovations can we borrow from other regions similar to ours?

We applaud some of the transportation ideas that are being discussed, such as regional LexTran service and the Bluegrass Area Development District's transportation study. That's a start, and it's much more than a transportation issue.

Perhaps some of the ideas are here. But let's use what we're learning to begin that discussion now to reduce our carbon footprint.