

How town impacts climate

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Belmont's efforts to save the environment will start at its own doorstep.

Sustainable Belmont, a subcommittee of the Vision 21 Implementation Committee, presented results from a study of the town's greenhouse gas emissions last week.

The study was conducted by graduate students from Tufts University's Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning.

Results of the study will provide a foundation to develop a climate action plan, as more than 200 communities across the country are doing.

Greenhouse gases contribute to global warming and climate change, according to most scientists.

Belmont emits approximately 415,000 tons of carbon dioxide every year, according to the study.

Electricity data shows that the town emits about 42,000 tons of carbon dioxide annually.

"Residential takes up more than half, which is not surprising, given Belmont is 'The Town of Homes,'" said Tufts student Kevin Lane.

Transportation data shows the town produces approximately 220,000 tons of carbon dioxide a year. The number represents about 53 percent of carbon dioxide emissions in the town.

Tufts student John Foss said they did not consider residential vehicle ownership because Belmont is considered to be a cut-through community.

"If you just look at analysis of vehicles owned in Belmont and miles, it's not a correct analysis of the transportation sector within Belmont because of external forces entering the town," Foss said.

Another Tufts student, Alexandra Clee, said residential waste produces about 1,800 tons of carbon dioxide every year.

Approximately 4,392 homes in Belmont use heating oil, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. The study found the town emits about 98,500 tons of carbon dioxide from heating oil annually. Commercial use is not included.

Most of the natural gas consumption is residential, said Tufts student Nicole Guanzon. The combined carbon dioxide emissions from natural gas from both the residential and commercial sectors is about 53,000 tons, she said.

Belmont's carbon dioxide emissions per ton/person/year was almost twice that of Somerville's, which seemed to surprise many people at the presentation.

How to reduce emissions

The students suggested cutting down on heating emissions and costs by using programmable thermostats.

These thermostats can be set to turn the heat off when nobody is at home and when everyone is asleep, said Tufts student Nathan Phelps.

Because transportation seems to be contributing the highest amount of carbon dioxide, the students suggested the town immediately institute an anti-idling campaign.

Signs could be placed at locations that attract vehicular idling, such as schools, Foss said.

He said a long-term goal for the town could be to start a "Safe Routes" program for children to walk to school.

"The community is right for this program because it's a suburban community and kids can easily walk or ride [their bicycles] to school," he said.

State Rep. Anne Paulsen said Arlington has one of the most successful Safe Routes programs in the state. She said the federal government gives more than \$1 million a year to the state to institute the program.

"It would be a wonderful thing to do here," she said.

Planning the next step

Deborah Lockett, a Sustainable Belmont member who worked with the graduate students, said the climate action plan can take anywhere from eight months to a few years to develop.

Sustainable Belmont Co-Chairman Jan Kruse said the next step is to analyze the information provided by the students. The committee might also consider including cut-through traffic in the transportation numbers, Kruse said.

She said the committee will begin community outreach - a process she believes will take one to two years.

Dr. Peter Frumhoff, a Belmont resident who is a senior scientist and director of the Global Environment Program of the Union of Concerned Scientists, said the municipalities that have developed a climate action plan can make a huge impact on the environment as a whole.

He said, "It is a mechanism by which municipalities can begin to take action on climate in the absence of federal leadership, and in the absence of us moving forward as aggressively as many of us like to see."