

Op-Ed: The local challenges of climate change

BY STEVAN HARRELL

Climate change has come to Whatcom County. If we didn't know it before, record temperatures in June and August should convince us. Temperatures in Blaine on June 28 reached 100 degrees for the first time in history; a few miles to the east in Lynden, it got to 106 degrees. According to an international science team, these extreme temperatures would have been "virtually impossible" without climate change.

The northwest county faces its own particular challenges. Shellfish beds in Drayton Harbor are threatened by sea-level rise and ocean acidification – if the ocean gets more acidic, oyster and clam larvae may be unable to "set" or form shells, and producers may have to close up or move elsewhere. As the sea level rises only a few inches, so do the highest tides, and the Semiahmoo Parkway on the spit is now regularly inundated during king tides. Blaine city manager Michael Jones points out that the city will need to "embark on a significant effort" to elevate and reinforce the roadway.

Cities like Blaine, however, have limited funds, and thus limited ability to adapt to the changes in climate that we have seen already, let alone to the changes now projected by climate scientists. Jones points out that the city has already made efforts to incorporate green practices, including replacing street lights with low-energy LED lamps, as well as making city hall more energy efficient. But the city needs to do more, and Jones points out that cooperation with Whatcom County and the other small cities could make a big difference.

Fortunately, Whatcom County now has a plan. Volunteers from the Climate Impact Advisory Committee have produced the county's Climate Action Plan, which county council plans to take up at a meeting soon. County executive Satpal Sidhu has signaled his strong backing for the plan: "Working with climate experts and county staff, the committee has created a plan that is supported by science, supported by community members and very much supported by me."

The plan's most important recommendation is to establish an Office of Climate Action in the county government in order to deal with the multiple problems we face now and in the near future. The office, to be headed by a senior climate advisor to the county council and county executive, would coordinate and expand the work that county departments are already doing to face the challenges of a changing climate.

The plan lays out two principal tasks:

1. Move quickly to a low-carbon economy that stops contributing to global warming;
2. Adapt to those changes that are already here or will inevitably happen soon.

The plan emphasizes that we

need to approach these tasks with urgency, equity, transparency and accountability.

Greening our county: Climate mitigation

Greening our county economy means climate mitigation: Reducing and eventually eliminating net emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG). Whatcom *per capita* GHG emissions are among the highest in the state. Almost all those emissions come from burning fossil fuels – about half from the refineries at Cherry Point and the rest mostly from transportation and building heating.

The recently passed historic "Cherry Point Amendments" to the Whatcom County Comprehensive Plan guarantee that there will be no new refineries built in the county, but it will be difficult to reduce emissions from the current refineries unless they convert to processes other than petroleum refining. This will require creative and cooperative solutions among refinery owners, scientists and engineers, labor unions, and representatives of the public.

We can move quickly and aggressively to electrify both our buildings and our transportation system. The plan recommends that new buildings be 100 percent electric and that retrofits of existing buildings replace natural gas with electricity for space heating and water heating.

Our electric grid also needs to green as it grows. Blaine, along with Sumas, was prescient to build its own electric utility that uses mostly renewable hydroelectricity, as does Whatcom Public Utility District 1. Puget Sound Energy, which serves other parts of the north county, still generates about two-thirds of its electricity from fossil fuels, but is working hard to switch to renewables. But countywide we need support for local wind and solar power generation, including rooftop solar and distributed generation such as community solar, which will make renewable power affordable for communities of color and economically disadvantaged populations. Distributed generation of electricity is key to building resilience to climate change and natural disasters. We also need to electrify transportation.

The county government can lead the way by electrifying its own fleet, but the main task is to make charging vehicles convenient by building more charging stations.

Preparing our county: Climate adaptation

Even if we can slow and then stop greenhouse gas emissions, climate change is already here, and its impacts will get worse. The second part of the Climate Action Plan deals with climate adaptation, making our neighborhoods, fisheries, farms and water systems more resilient to inevitable changes.

In the next few decades, not only will our county get warmer, but precipitation patterns will also change. Less rain will fall in summer and more in winter, and much of what now falls as snow in the Cascades will fall as



▲ Stevan Harrell.

rain. This means less snowpack and less water available for fish, farms and families in the summertime. Salmon runs from California Creek to the Nooksack River mainstream will suffer from warmer water. Summer dry periods will also lengthen.

To adapt to these changes, we need to distribute and use water equitably and efficiently. Any solution must take into consideration how climate change will affect the rights and needs of tribes (whose senior rights are guaranteed by treaty), farmers and municipal users. The first step is an accurate assessment of current and projected future water supplies. We can also economize on water use, particularly in agriculture, through developing new crops and new technologies. County support and collaboration with universities and research institutes can help farmers and other water users adapt to drier summers, wetter winters and hotter temperatures.

Importance of the Office of Climate Action

There is a lot to do and not much time. The county needs to act on the Climate Action Plan by immediately establishing the Office of Climate Action and moving to fund it in the next biennial budget. In addition to the senior climate advisor, the office should include an information specialist to create and maintain publicly available databases of climate change and climate action. This will give us the human and financial resources to implement the plan's recommendations before the worst impacts of climate change affect us directly.

Climate change requires climate action. Whatcom County has the opportunity to be a climate leader. The county Climate Action Plan provides guidelines for climate mitigation and adaptation, starting now. County council can soon take a first step by approving the plan, and we can hope that it will lead to constructive action.

Stevan Harrell taught anthropology and environmental studies at University of Washington in Seattle from 1974-2017, after which he retired with his wife Barbara to Bellingham. He is planning a book on the history of agriculture in Whatcom County. Harrell has been working on the Whatcom County Climate Action plan for the past two years, first as a volunteer interviewer and then as a member of the Climate Impact Advisory Committee.

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