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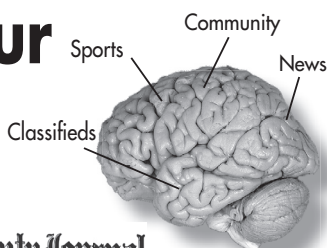
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Combating COVID-19 by acting locally on climate

Editor's note: This is the second of a two-part report from an Aug. 13 League of Women Voters of Mason County meeting. The first part was on page A-12 of the Aug. 20 editor of the Shelton-Mason County Journal.

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When Nick Manning, climate and health program manager with the Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility (WPSR) Climate Program, addressed a Zoom meeting of the Climate Change Committee of the League of Women Voters of Mason County on Aug. 13, he offered a big-picture perspective on how the pandemic and climate change are linked.

At the same time, Manning engaged community members on the obstacles facing would-be climate activists on the ground, during which he attempted to temper his realism about the prospects for such reforms with an optimistic outlook on the future.

TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE IN MASON COUNTY

Manning acknowledged that state Sen. Tim Sheldon, D-Potlatch, harbors some views that differ from WPSR, and has been receptive to arguments made by the Timber Unity group.

"We may not get his vote," Manning said, "and we may not even get his support. But it's worth neutralizing those false arguments, pointing them out for what they are, and making sure people in the county understand, when the Timber Unity group says climate change isn't happening, that's crap. And you really need to push good information so that at least the decisions that are being made are transparent and are made on information that's accurate to the situation going on."

Regardless of Sheldon's eventual vote, Manning said he believes in communicating the economic and health benefits of green jobs to the broader community, if only to get that language into the public conversation.

Manning said he is encouraged by an opinion poll of adult residents of Mason County that found 64% agree climate change is happening, 68% climate change will harm future generations, 73% support regulating carbon dioxide as a pollutant and 83% support funding research into renewable energy.

Manning supplies less-encouraging statistics as well, sourcing the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to predict Mason County could see up to 63 days per year of high tide flooding, versus the current average of 20 days.

Manning also anticipates Washington could see a 300% to 500% increase in the number of weeks with risks of large wildfires. The number of days per year with unhealthy levels of particulate matter in the air has been increasing since 2012.

With the number of private wells in the county, coupled with the number of vehicles on its roads, he also warned residents that traffic runoff could result in the contamination of water.

Manning encouraged residents to

take what steps they can to help solve these problems, whether by lobbying legislators, hosting virtual town halls, generating media coverage of how climate issues impact local communities or getting involved in the Washington Climate Caucus.

FEEDBACK FROM THE COMMUNITY

Dave Daggett of Concerned Citizens of Harstine Island, who sat in on the Zoom meeting, complimented Manning's presentation, but also reacted to it by quoting a political consultant with whom he was acquainted.

"This is kind of distressing, but it's probably true," Daggett said, before quoting, "The most important thing to remember is five letters: WIIFM. That's what drives governance, and it stands for, 'What's In It For Me?' That's what the voters are going to be voting on."

Daggett described himself as "sympathetic" toward directing money to clean fuel projects, but concurred with Manning that such projects would need to generate progressive revenues for their communities, ideally even going so far as to put money into lower-income citizens' pockets.

Manning pointed out that Initiative 732 cut sales tax and yielded dividends for working families.

"The problem with it was, it did it so under the radar that it didn't have anybody to say, 'We're the winners here,' so no one was fighting for it," Manning said.

Climate Change Committee member Tess Fleener, a resource management geographer who worked on Initiative 1631, recounted hearing the same thing from her doorbell that she hears from her extended family members, who work in agriculture and timber.

"A lot of it is, they don't like being told what to do," Fleener said, "and I'd like to point out that everybody involved that you have mentioned is well-educated, and that is a large part of the problem. My cousins will tell you how they see climate change on their property, and in their business, but they are not going to vote for something that costs them more money and that they think is coming down from people in big cities."

Fleener conceded that Sen. Sheldon raises a good point about how much money county residents already spend at the gas pump, to the point that spending more at the pump is simply not viable for many people.

Manning agreed, comparing it to when he's had to visit Lewis County to tell farmers to use less water.

"That's kind of the reason why I see a ton of benefit in mobilizing more local folks, and making partnerships locally, and then relying on that voice, because it's more trusted," Manning said.

Manning encouraged those with climate concerns not to become discouraged by short-term setbacks, but to instead maintain a long view.

"All of these are multi-year efforts," Manning said, "and they build on each other. If it doesn't pass this year, it doesn't mean what we did is wasted by any means. And the work that we do that does pass this year is because we're able to build on the momentum of previous years."

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