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Love & Music, Yes. Carbon, No. Woodstock on global warming

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WOODSTOCK, N.Y. -- Michael Esposito rides his bike all the time, on cold nights from his old job at the Sunflower natural food store and on a recent warm day past shops here selling yoga clothes and soy drinks.

So the 67-year-old is excited over new plans in this countercultural haven to reduce Woodstock's net carbon dioxide emissions to zero in 10 years _ a hugely ambitious attempt to erase the town's "carbon footprint."

"It's more than important," Esposito said. "It's a necessity."

The goal might sound as unlikely as stuffing smoke back into a smokestack. Even sympathetic experts call it challenging. It likely would require many of the town's roughly 6,200 residents to install solar panels and geothermal hookups. But locals lined up behind the community project say they're sincere.

"We have ten years to step back from the abyss," said Randolph Horner, a local renewable energy project developer who is a driving force in the initiative. "... So why not declare that within ten years we're going to set a visionary goal?"

Woodstock is best known for the 1969 rock concert that borrowed its name (and was actually held in Bethel, some 50 miles away). But the old artists' colony is plugging firmly into the zeitgeist of 2007, a time when hybrid cars are hot, "An Inconvenient Truth" won two Oscars and more people are concerned about global warming.

One recent bellwether: The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,



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comprised of 2,000 scientists, expressed its greatest confidence yet this year that global warming is being caused largely by the accumulation of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere, mostly from the burning of fossil fuels like coal and oil.

As debates continue about whether the federal government is doing enough to curb emissions, concerned local officials around the country have crafted their own policies. Austin, Texas has a "Climate Protection Plan" that includes a goal to make city buildings totally reliant on renewable energy by 2012. Portland, Ore., has an Office of Sustainable Development to coordinate and encourage the use of everything from green building to biofuel.

The Woodstock town board upped the ante during a meeting last month by approving a nonbinding resolution that called for "implementing policies resulting in no net emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases" by 2017.

The key word is "net." That means residents can keep their cars as long as they produce enough offsets to their emissions.

The four-page resolution lists a bunch of ways to reach the carbon-zero goal, including green building, bike paths, tree planting and biodiesel municipal fleets. Horner said the consumer efficiencies should be coupled with onsite generation like solar. Geothermal heating and cooling systems would take a massive bite out the town's appetite for fossil fuel, Horner said, and the power grid should be able to deliver more electricity from renewable sources like hydro and tidal within the next 10 years.

Horner hopes the Woodstock name will bring the idea cachet. He said he has already taken calls from other towns.

Renewable energy experts say the goal is technically possible but difficult. Michael Armstrong, a policy analyst with Portland's Office of Sustainability, called net zero is a "monstrous challenge." But Horner insists that as fossil fuel prices spike over the next decade, alternative energy will become more attractive both to producers and to residential consumers. Solar panels and geothermal systems will make more sense economically.

"It's literally and practically feasible," Horner said.

Woodstock, a rural town with no heavy industry, has some advantages over big cities like Portland or Austin. Jim Decker, a member of the group charged with coming up with more concrete plans, said they can focus on reducing residents' carbon footprints.

And Woodstock residents, in general, tend to be more sympathetic to save-

the-planet ideas. When people joke about "latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, New York Times-reading, body-piercing" liberals, they could be describing a lot of people here. Locals walking around the quaint main street on a recent sunny day expressed a lot of enthusiasm for the plan.

"I assume that people that would gravitate toward an arts center are a little more aware than the Wal-Mart crowd," Esposito said.

Still, there are any number of ways the plan could be short-circuited. Decker says one potential problem could be enlisting the many people from New York City who keep weekend homes in Woodstock. And even the residents who support the notion in general are a foggy about how to wipe out their carbon footprint.

Residents Alan Carey said he switched over to compact fluorescent bulbs, burns more wood and tries to drive less. Standing by his Volvo in the parking lot of the natural food store, he said he doesn't know what else needs to be done, but he's open to doing it.

"I don't know if we can do it," Carey said, "but we're going to try."

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On the Net:

Portland sustainability: <http://www.portlandonline.com/osd/index.cfm?cP>32927>

Green Building Council: <http://www.usgbc.org/>

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