

My wife and I, and two of our friends attended a Vermont legislative budget hearing on Monday, February 25, in Winooski. I was there to testify regarding carbon reduction strategies: weatherization and the application of all VW settlement funds to electrification of our transportation sector. But, we all came away with a new realization of the challenges we face in Vermont and difficulties our legislators face as they try to construct a budget.

In addition to “my” issue we heard heartfelt pleas regarding funding for:

- Mental health beds to keep people, particularly those with drug dependency out of jail or general hospitals, and in treatment where they have a chance of recovery.
- Social workers to assist those in recovery to get back to productive lives, to assist immigrants in learning to integrate into a new country, to help the elderly. And, in all cases it was stressed that pay in this profession is grossly inadequate and turn over is high and costly.
- More options, staff, better pay and resources for child care, particularly for low and middle income parents. A teacher testified that, after 11 years of primary level teaching, she and her husband were still unable to afford to have kids of their own because child care would cost more than their mortgage and they were considering moving out of Vermont to a state where the pay was better.
- Funding for the Community College of Vermont, where we met, - did you know they have no full-time faculty? Those who teach there and students talked about low pay for staff, no offices for staff and high turnover - who develops curriculum under these circumstances? CCV students talked about the difficulty of affording to go to college and the suffocating debt they faced. We learned that Vermont is 50th in the country in regard to support for higher education, resulting in high tuition at our state colleges and university.
- In all of this we heard heroic stories of people going the extra mile to do their jobs while facing challenges of their own trying to survive financially. Clients testified that their outreach workers, child care workers and teachers had made incredible differences in their lives. There are heroes out there.

It's hard to raise the existential threat climate change is presenting when we see so many immediate needs, but we need to face that threat right now. A new report just out suggests that we are losing high altitude cirrus clouds that might result in temperature rise of 14 degrees fahrenheit by the end of the century - possibly

ending life on Earth for most species including us. As it stands right now we are facing a 4 degree temperature rise, enough to negatively affect our kids' and grandkids' lives.

On all these issues we have to act now, we need to demand meaningful action to reduce carbon emissions in Vermont and the country, so doubling the weatherization budget is a start. And we need to apply all VW settlement dollars to electrification of our transportation sector - heating and transportation in Vermont produce almost two thirds of our carbon emissions and we have increased those emissions 12% since 2009 - we're losing ground. And we need to strongly support the teachers, social workers, medical workers and all who meet our day-to-day challenges at the same time.

But none of these things will happen if we don't dramatically shift our attitudes about paying for them. Nothing is free, there is a cost to everything we do, either directly or indirectly. We have what we think is cheap oil and natural gas, but we don't factor in the cost to the climate and our health, the true cost from well-head to tailpipe and beyond. So a price on carbon makes sense if applied equitably. Expensive child care drives down a family's standard of living and drives them out of the state, as does expensive tuition. Lack of treatment for addiction and mental health problems ends up costing in terms of productivity and crime, costing more in law enforcement and prisons and, even our insurance costs.

So how do we pay for all this? First of all I support Senator Chris Bray's concept of "all in". We all need share in the costs as we are able, and that means those with more need pay more. If I need to sacrifice a bit to pay proportionally more in taxes and fees than a person of lower income, I consider it just. And if somebody at the high end of the scale needs to pay even more to support the state and country that enable them to thrive, that's also just.

The time has come for us to urge our legislators to enact legislation to address our challenges and to pay for them in an equitable manner. Failure at this point will only lead to more cost and real chaos later.

Richard Butz  
Bristol, VT