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Energy: Status quo is doomed

Gene Smith

It's good that issues like energy, pollution and urban sprawl are finding their way into the mainstream of America's political discourse. Maybe we'll have better luck this time — or, better and smarter, make our own luck.

I'll be optimistic about that if more people conquer the reflex that makes them see everything as a choice between embracing whatever has just been proposed and wistfully retreating to the status quo.

Not everything that's proposed can or should be embraced. But in many cases sustaining the status quo is infeasible, too.

People who ride around in gas-guzzling behemoths (reality check: My little RAV 4, which, properly serviced, gets 28 miles to a gallon, is a gas-guzzler, too) talk about finding relief in nuclear power and energy-saving light bulbs. But unless you know how to convert entire fleets of SUVs to electric power with almost no lead time, you're wasting your breath. Electric power generation accounts for practically none of our oil consumption. And oil, regardless of its point of origin, is the problem: We don't control enough of it to sustain our economy — our status quo — at the rate at which we're consuming it.

Discussion of the environment is dominated, these days, by global warming. I'm not sure that's good. But I'm a lot less comfortable with those for whom saving the planet is less important than who gets or does not get credit for it. And I'm most uncomfortable with those who keep ignoring a fact that's been right under our noses for decades: Most of the things we need to do to reduce the human contribution to global warming are things we would need to do for the sake of clean air, good health and lower medical and insurance costs even if there were no warming — natural or human-induced. Some years ago, North Carolina whipped its phosphate pollution problem — by banning phosphates in laundry detergent. Today, the ozone layer is holding its own at both poles — because government restricted the use of chlorofluorocarbons. Where does defaulting to the status quo figure into any of that?

Opportunity knocked this month when the General Assembly got some free advice from a lot of people knowledgeable about many important things. Will the legislature, which is us in microcosm, resist the stand-pat reflex and give the work of the Partnership for North Carolina's Future the consideration it deserves?

Your guess is as good as mine. The Partnership's information is free, but its advice is to raise and spend money.

The information: Our status quo is toast unless you know a way to talk almost 4 million people out of moving here over the next couple of decades, making this the nation's 7th most populous state. (It was just this year that the U.S. Census Bureau told us we'd knocked New Jersey out of the No. 10 position.)

The advice: There's a population tsunami headed our way and our educational, physical and environmental architecture isn't up to it; so get busy selecting the best ways to raise money to "build the equivalent of a new South Carolina within this state."

The Partnership, a coalition whose expertise ranges from land management to economic development to city and county government, is clear about the state's needs: "schools, roads, clean water and land protecting natural resources," along with utilities and adequate housing. It is equally blunt about the consequences of failure: lost jobs, a

damaged economy, loss of livelihoods and reduced quality of life in a state that is doing too little to meet the needs of those already here.

House and Senate leaders have already signaled their commitment; but their commitment is no better than our own. If we tell ourselves that inaction means no change — Well, you know what tsunamis do.

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