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The Cool City Challenge: Getting a Low-Carbon Lifestyle to Catch On

By Mark Fischetti | March 30, 2012



Most people are aware that reducing **carbon emissions** could help the planet. But convincing a particular individual to change his or her behavior in ways that emit less carbon—not to mention the behavior of an entire city—can be a monumental challenge.

David Gershon, founder of the **Empowerment Institute** in Woodstock, N.Y., is taking on that challenge, with help from three urban

managers who hope their cities can become models for the future.

Gershon, who authored the 2006 book and program **Low Carbon Diet**, has spent 20 years researching how to change community behavior. He has found that the traditional approaches often don't work: giving people information, passing laws, offering financial incentives or just plain pleading. Yet tests he and others have conducted show how a small group of people who commit themselves to a change in behavior can influence a wider and wider circle of people, potentially adding up to large scale change.

Evidence that supports this thesis came from a series of EcoTeams that Gershon formed in the early 2000s. The teams of five to eight families in a neighborhood began to practice various conservation steps, which gradually spread to their neighbors and eventually to 20,000 people. On average they reduced their solid waste by 40 percent, water use by 32 percent, energy consumption by 14 percent and CO₂ emissions by 15 percent. And each household saved an average of \$225 a year. Today there are more than 300 of these **Cool Communities** in 36 states.

Now Gershon has enlisted three municipalities in California, each with 50,000 to 75,000 residents, to try to scale up the cool communities approach citywide. He hopes that the cities will in turn inspire others to follow suit. Gershon is relying on one key manager in each California location to lead the charge: Mitch Sears, the sustainability programs manager for Davis; Debra van Duynhoven, the sustainability coordinator for Palo Alto; and Richard Dale, executive director at the Sonoma Ecology Center in Sonoma.

The plan is to get 25 to 75 percent of each city's citizens to reduce their carbon footprint by 25 percent within three years. Each municipality will also team up with a local university or research institute to figure out how to make the entire city carbon neutral by 2025.

Gershon plans to create buzz by announcing the plan as the **Cool Cities Challenge** at the **Rio +20** United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in June. At that time he will release the names of three Brazilian municipalities of similar size that will also begin the challenge. Results will be announced as part of the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio.

Data show that 70 percent of the carbon being emitted globally is linked to cities, according to Gershon. "How we got here was pretty unconscious," he says. "But we control the future."

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