

Local Leaders In Montclair Address Climate Change

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By Steven Maginnis

Civic and business leaders and activists in Essex County gathered at the Montclair Fire Department on Pine Street on May 14 to announce their various initiatives to combat climate change on the local level. In light of new initiatives from the Obama administration to deal with climate change, Essex County Freeholder Brendan Gill said he wanted to highlight the actions being taken locally.

“Climate change is not just an environmental issue, but it also has tangible impacts on public health safety and commerce,” Gill said. He cited the various instances of extreme weather that have affected New Jersey alone, from Tropical Storm Irene in August 2011 and Hurricane Sandy in October 2012 to the “October Surprise” snowstorm of 2011 and the more recent heavy rain that flooded part of the Montclair-Boonton NJ Transit railway

on April 30 of this year. Another similarly heavy rainfall, in fact, is anticipated for May 16 at this writing.

Fourth Ward Councilor Renée Baskerville, one of the speakers at the 40-minute conference, spoke about the effects of climate change from her perspective as a pediatrician. She said that climate change would adversely affect children more than adults, noting that more polluted air and water and altered agricultural would stunt children’s growth. Children, Dr. Baskerville said, would have less access to the fresh food and water vital to their development and would be more susceptible to disease. She advocated for greater education to understand the effects of climate change and to make people more aware of the problem.

Deputy Mayor Robert Russo, representing Mayor Robert Jackson, who was unable to attend, talked about how Montclair was at the forefront in reducing the township’s carbon footprint by purchasing natural gas vehicles and equipping public buildings with solar panels. He lamented that Montclair, though, was limited in what it could do.

“We’ve done everything we can, we’re not doing enough,” he said. He was pleased that Montclair was setting examples for other communities, and he welcomed President Obama’s efforts to establish carbon pollution limits from power plants, set new efficiency standards for vehicles, and investing in new alternative-energy programs, but he was also quick to bash climate-change-deniers who were sticking their heads in the sand “like ostriches.” He did not mention the most recent politician to question climate science, U.S. Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL), by name.



Flanked by members of the Montclair Township Council and the local business and environmentalist leaders (including former Montclair Mayor Jerry Fried, at far left), Essex County Freeholder Brendan Gill explains local initiatives to combat climate change.

Former Mayor Jerry Fried, a supporter of the New Urbanist movement advocating more walkable communities with more transit access, said that the greatest environmental problem facing the United States is the car-dependent model of tract housing, shopping malls and freeways that has led to an inefficient living pattern, degraded the quality of life, and used energy wastefully and inefficiently.

“The reason why there is sprawl, the reason why there are distant suburbs and it takes people an hour to drive to get to their jobs, is because for decades, the federal [government] spent billions and billions of dollars on creating these roads, which, frankly, drew people out of cities and densely populated areas, and it brought suburbs which are the most inefficient,” Fried said, echoing the sentiments of urban planning critics like James Kunstler and Philip Langdon. Fried, a founder of Bike & Walk Montclair, added that Montclair was fortunate to have a townscape developed before the postwar auto age, which provides cycling and walking opportunities as well as ample transit, and he said that Montclair should continue enhancing its cyclist- and pedestrian-friendly street pattern as younger people increasingly opt for more walkable suburbs and urban neighborhoods. Fried has also advocated restoring the Bloomfield Avenue trolleys, which were dismantled in 1952.

New Jersey Bike and Walk Coalition Executive Director Cynthia Steiner echoed Fried’s statements in her remarks, and she also spoke on behalf of Pinnacle CEO and CentroVerde developer Brian Stolar, who was unable to attend. Steiner cited Pinnacle’s innovative use of sustainable components at the CentroVerde complex, with rooftop greenery to reduce heat trapping and control rain runoff and a 35,000-square-foot solar panel that will power an automated car-parking facility that will automatically guide vehicles into parking spaces to reduce driving time in the garage and offer car-share opportunities to reduce the number of cars overall.

Steiner added that her groups’ partnership will “launch a variety of transportation options” to CentroVerde tenants that will be expanded to other township residents in the interest to expanding access to Montclair’s six railway stations, providing bike-share opportunities, and electric and low-emission shuttles.

A few speakers also stressed energy conservation as a way of reducing carbon footprints. Fried cited the need to conserve electricity at home and drive more fuel-efficient cars, while Meredith Nole, the president of American Efficient Lighting, said that buildings could be designed or retrofitted to eliminate wasteful equipment and reduce energy usage. Nole illustrated the need to take climate change seriously by referring to an article on energy efficiency and a climate change efficiency initiative issued by the state of New Jersey. Both publications are from the 1990s.

“How does this happen that we’re in 2014 and we have a real mess?” Nole said. While illustrating the lack of progress and the worsening situation in the previous two decades, she was interrupted by a screaming toddler who had to be carried out of the room by his mother.

“I hope it wasn’t anything I said,” Nole quipped.

Despite the dire nightmare scenarios of melting ice in the Antarctic and ten-foot sea level increases, Montclair Sustainability Officer Gray Russell was optimistic about leadership at the local level making a difference. He noted that the township’s efforts to increase energy efficiency in its public buildings – which have saved Montclair \$65,000 – helped earn a Climate Showcase Community designation from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. “Actions at the local level are driving the state, national and global initiatives, which are necessary for sustainability and resilience – and to prevent the worst aspects of climate disruptions,” he said.

Gill concluded the conference saying that he was “excited” with the efforts from local leaders about what can be done in the future – not just in Montclair, but in New Jersey and the nation.