

The Boston Globe

Mass. can lead on greenhouse gas reduction

By Mike Ross, former Boston City Councilor February 25, 2015

There are still plenty of people who refuse to believe that human activity is responsible for climate change. That half of the US Senate is among them is all the more frightening. Thankfully, here in Massachusetts -- even after record amounts of snow have deluged our communities -- most residents join with the scientific community in facing the truth (well, minus a conservative voice or two, even on this page).

Massachusetts -- along with California -- is one of the few states that is actively looking to do something to reverse the effects of greenhouse gas emissions. In 2008, the Legislature passed a law that requires emissions be reduced by 80 percent by 2050. That is aggressive. It's like saying that in 35 years the average automobile will get 150 miles per gallon.

Yet despite some good progress by former governor Deval Patrick's administration -- perhaps the most aggressive in the country -- at its current pace, Massachusetts will not hit its goal, let alone help save the planet.

A dashboard on the state's website keeps track of where the state is in terms of reducing greenhouse gases. In 21 years, emissions have been cut by 15 percent, less than one percent a year. To achieve the 2050 goal, we'll need to reduce emissions by more than twice that amount.

State Senator Mike Barrett believes salvation comes in the form of a revenue-neutral carbon tax. Barrett is optimistic that his legislation will pass despite voters' recent rejection of indexing raises in the gas tax to inflation.

Barrett is optimistic, because in his bill, every Massachusetts resident, business, nonprofit, and municipality will share in the upside. Emit just slightly less carbon than the average user, and you'll come out ahead, with real money left in your pocket.

Here's how it works. Every year, everyone receives an allowance of funds. Businesses and municipalities receive an amount proportional to how many people that they employ. Residents each get an equal share per person -- around \$56 to start. Everyone -- even homeless people -- will receive a carbon credit.

Then comes the carbon pricing, which targets everything that emits carbon, but especially fossil fuels. Under the program, gas at the pump won't just go up 3 cents, it will go up 27 cents. And, as time goes on, the pricing increases.

What Barrett is betting on is that in order to avoid the tax, people will eventually change their behavior. More hybrid cars, smarter designed buildings, less waste.

Not only does Barrett foresee lower greenhouse gases, but he also believes the carbon tax will result in a stronger economy. His analysis isn't theoretical, either. It is based on the model presently underway in Canada.

British Columbia stepped out in front of the rest of Canada and initiated its carbon tax program in 2008. It has substantially cut emissions and also experienced high economic growth. Politically, the carbon tax has been a winner, with two-thirds of those surveyed in a recent poll in the province favoring the law. Meanwhile, the province's personal income taxes are tied for being the lowest in all of Canada.

The idea of a lone state like Massachusetts getting out ahead of the rest of the country and leading a program of this magnitude might strike some as incredulous. But this is precisely what the Commonwealth has been doing on a host of issues -- from marriage equality to health care. Being ahead of the curve is a good thing, especially when our future depends on it.