

Diet plan

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Local event aimed at reducing CO₂ poundage draws 225 people to Woodstock Jewish Congregation



Participants of all ages were not shy about writing on the tablecloth.
[photos by Andrea Barrist Stern]

by Andrea Barrist Stern

Hurley resident David Gershon, an empowerment trainer and the creator of the “Low Carbon Diet,” had initially expected some 75 area residents would participate in his Global Warming Café on Sunday afternoon, February 11, at the Woodstock Jewish Congregation. Instead, a crowd of 225 people – some coming from as far as Westchester and Albany counties – were present to learn how to shed unwanted pounds of CO₂ caused by their wasteful lifestyles.

With virtually every table and chair at the congregation in use, participants discussed their concerns about global warming, their hopes for a healthier planet, and listened as Gershon discussed his program that is designed to help the average individual drop a minimum of 5,000 pounds of CO₂ in

as little as two months. The team process involves friends, neighbors, fellow members of faith-based groups, and work colleagues cooperating in small groups of ten to 12 individuals to follow prescribed activities over a six-week to two-month period.

“The results were fairly significant,” said Gershon after the session. At least 12 teams were formed on site and more were coalescing at press time,

according to the program’s founder, who also created a previous iteration of the effort called the “Household EcoTeam Program” that trained several hundred thousand people in over 22 counties between 1990 and 2001 to lead more sustainable lifestyles.

“I was amazed,” said Gershon of the turnout. “I think people came for two reasons. They needed a forum to process what global warming means in their lives and they haven’t had a place to do that yet. They also needed to find out how they can take action. Mining the collective wisdom of a group is a powerful tool.”

When Gershon asked participants at the end of the afternoon how many of them were interested in lowering their carbon footprint, everyone raised their hands. When he asked how many were willing to

form groups to follow the “Low Carbon Diet,” virtually everyone present indicated they were interested in doing so.

footprints. The next one is scheduled for 7 p.m.-9 p.m. on March 15. Gershon will work with activists and officials from five commu-



Attentive, diverse group at Global Warming Café.

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“These people will be the foundation of something that can really grow in this town and this region,” said Gershon, who has already partnered with Al Gore’s Climate Project, the Sierra Club, Interfaith Power and Light (which represents 5,000 ecologically minded religious congregations throughout the country), and Cities for Climate Protection (a municipal initiative of 400 cities nationwide) to distribute the program.

The event was free and the only cost associated with the program, other than those involved with carbon reduction, was that of the \$12.95 book. Gershon, who is working on a voluntary basis himself, emphasized at the event that even the proceeds from the book are being used to reduce CO₂ output.

Tele-tubbies

The trainer has also developed a free, two-hour tele-training to help community activists and officials assist their communities and organizations in lowering carbon

nities while others listen in. Individuals from as far as India, Europe and Canada as well as from around the United States are already scheduled to participate. For more information, visit Gershon’s Web site, www.empowermentinstitute.net and click on “Cool Community tele-training.”

One of the groups Gershon is now in contact with is Pacific Gas and Electric, the CEO of which was one of a group of business leaders in the headlines recently as they encouraged the Bush Administration to mandate a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. Gershon said the utility is interested in taking an innovative role in the effort to reduce global warming. In part, he noted, such actions will also save the utility an enormous amount of money if it does not have to build new power plants.

Possibilities for both financial and CO₂ output savings were clear on Sunday as participants of a pilot group of residents from the region, who had tested the “Low Carbon Diet” locally over a two-month peri-

od last summer, spoke about their experiences. Some had installed costly solar systems through low-cost loans from the state while others had made changes that were as simple as lowering the temperatures of their water heaters, tuning up their furnaces and sealing drafts, changes that cost virtually nothing and actually saved them money as well as carbon poundage.

“The goal of the program and the invitation that was put out was to be able to bear witness about all of our feelings and concerns about global warming and to learn about a program to help us reduce our carbon footprints,” said Gershon, acknowledging that most participants “came prepared to act.” If this program is “preaching to the choir,” Gershon said that is just what it is intended to do. While some strategies are based on

cuss global warming strategies for the Hudson Valley.

“I was impressed by the turnout and the format that had people speaking to strangers about their hopes and fears,” said Marcell on Tuesday, February 13. “It created a sense of bonding...and had everyone on the same page in a way I hadn't seen before. We usually see the scientific side and this presented the emotional side, which is something we need to do.”

Out of control

Marcell, who said she considers herself to be “green” already, was intrigued by Gershon's statistics that pointed out the typical American household generates 55,000 pounds of carbon dioxide annually. By contrast, the typical German household contributes 27,000 pounds and its Swedish counterpart only 15,000 pounds. Collectively, U.S. households produce about eight percent of the planet's carbon dioxide emissions.

The United States contributes an estimated 25 percent of the world's greenhouse gases even though it accounts for just 4.5 percent of the world's population, according to Gershon.



targeting the laggards, Gershon said it is more effective to reach out to innovators who will readily grasp an idea and run with it, enabling it to filter down afterwards to those who require more convincing.

Kristin Marcell, director of special projects for the state DEC, was at Sunday's event and is now planning to present the “Low Carbon Diet” program to her associates at the state agency at an internal DEC meeting later this week that is intended to dis-

Marcell said she was moved by the reports of several members of last summer's pilot group who said they also considered themselves ecologically minded only to learn they were contributing 110,000 to 185,000 pounds of CO₂ to the environment a year because of activities such as air travel. “And here they thought they were doing everything right,” said Marcell.

One carbon hungry couple who participated in the pilot surprised to learn they were

not as green as they thought had reported a total CO₂ reduction of 114,000 pounds. It included 5,750 “hard pounds” through taking actions in the book and an additional 108,800 “soft pounds” through the purchase of green energy (28,800 pounds) and carbon offsets (80,000 pounds).

Woodstock Environmental Commission chairwoman Mary Burke said her “general feeling” at Sunday's program was “Wow.” Added Burke, “It wasn't that I didn't think people were concerned, I just didn't think you'd reach them that easily.”

Even though all of the actions for reducing one's carbon footprint were outlined in Gershon's book, Burke said she wishes there could have been a free handout for people that listed some of the things people could do for those who needed to leave early. Such a handout would have identified inexpensive actions that return a substantial benefit, like many of those included in the book, and could have had more people doing something positive by the very next day.

Woodstock Town Board members Liz Simonson and Bill McKenna and Ulster County legislator Don Gregorius were among those present on Sunday.

Gregorius said he exchanged cards with a Putnam County legislator at Sunday's event because both are interested in seeing how the program might be useful at the county level. Several weeks ago, Gregorius and Ulster County Legislature chairman Dave Donaldson also met with Melissa Everett, executive director of Sustainable Hudson Valley, to discuss similar ideas. The county has already ordered two hybrid buses and is starting other initiatives to offset greenhouse gas emissions but wants to do even more, he said, noting, “The question is how can the county best implement what is already excellent stuff?”

McKenna said he attended because “the town board as a whole is committed to this issue.” The police station has solar panels on the roof and the new highway garage will use a geothermal heating and cooling system and probably solar panels on the roof as well, he said. He finds the “café format” an interesting one that “gets people talking as they move from group to group spreading ideas around.”

Simonson, who had to leave early for a memorial service, said she plans on participating in a “Low Carbon Diet” group. “I think that whenever people have discussions where they can get out on the table how they feel and have connections with people, it is good,” said Simonson, who had participated on one of Gershon's ecoteams a decade ago.

Simonson related she was at one table with two young boys who found the prospect of reducing their carbon footprint “exciting” even as several middle aged participants were dejected about the possibilities. She said the boys' enthusiasm made her feel, “that I have to pick myself up, dust myself off and get moving.” Added the town councilwoman, “Once the Woodstock Town Board is finished with its cell tower discussions, I intend to focus on sustainability issues because that's where my heart lies.”

Copies of the Low Carbon Diet are available for \$12.95 each through Gershon's Web site, www.empowermentinstitute.net. For further information, contact Gershon at the site or Melissa Everett, executive director of Sustainable Hudson Valley, at Everett@sustainhv.org.