
Opinion

SUSTAINABLE MARBLEHEAD: Learning from the coronavirus pandemic

By Lynn Bryant

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In our January message to the community, we stated that Sustainable Marblehead was looking forward to the upcoming year with the clarity of vision that 2020 offered. Our optimism was not just based on the significance of the number but also on a deep enthusiasm for the work we were planning for the year. Unfortunately, the year has not started off as any of us would have expected. COVID-19 has changed the world as we know it, and we have all been forced to slow down, stay in and live our daily lives from the confines of our homes. During this time of shared uncertainty and sacrifice, our commitment to sustainability has not changed, but it has expanded to prioritize the health and safety of our community: its residents, businesses, town employees and community leaders.

Being forced to slow down and stay home offers the opportunity to look at things differently. Some of us may be examining the choices we make about how much we consume, asking ourselves how much we really need while feeling gratitude for what we have. Maybe we are noticing that we waste less food when we shop less frequently. Maybe we are learning new things: how to plant a garden from seeds, how to create meals from food we have on hand, or how to create new ways to engage our children. Families may be committing to using less plastic and incorporating composting into their daily lives. Awareness can expand with the gift of time, and we have a tremendous opportunity to reflect on our impact on the environment — not just during the coronavirus crisis, but also going forward.

Satellite images have shown sharp reductions in air pollution in urban areas where people have been forced to stay at home and businesses have been forced to close. Of course, this is not the way we want to see carbon emissions reduced. The health and financial impacts of the virus will be devastating to many people,

and temporary improvements in air quality at the expense of human health and economic security is not progress. It does, however, show the impact that human activity and behavior can have on the health of the planet and how important it is for all of us to come together to address this next looming crisis.

We have learned in recent weeks that hoping an anticipated crisis will not occur is an ineffective way of protecting ourselves from the inevitable. The similarities and differences between the coronavirus and the climate crisis are numerous and should be a conversation for a later time. But the climate crisis should not be a surprise to us, and its curve will not eventually flatten and disappear if we do not act. In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that we can only continue to burn fossil fuels at our current rate for another 10 years before the carbon accumulating in the atmosphere pushes the earth to a climate tipping point beyond which it can no longer be reversed. We must respect what science is telling us and plan accordingly.

Toward that end, Sustainable Marblehead will soon be asking the community to continue its commitment to achieving carbon freedom by supporting two warrant articles which we will be presenting at Town Meeting. In 2018, Marblehead voters overwhelmingly passed an article setting a goal of using 100% carbon-free energy. This year, we are asking voters to commit to a specific time frame for achieving this important goal.

Article 44 proposes bringing townwide greenhouse gas emissions to net zero over the next 20 years and asks the town to report annually on its progress in achieving this goal. Article 45 further asks the town to designate \$50,000 for a director of sustainability and energy efficiency who can assess opportunities for energy efficiency savings and secure funding from grants and other programs which will likely far exceed the salary cost. If passed, these articles will put us on a committed path toward confronting the oncoming climate crisis.

To read more about these warrant articles and our report, Carbon-Free Marblehead 2040, which outlines the rationale and methods for achieving carbon freedom, please visit our website at <https://sustainablemarblehead.org>.

As all of us continue to stay home and practice social distancing, we urge our community to stay safe, stay strong, and look to the future with courage, optimism and vision.

Lynn Bryant is the executive director of Sustainable Marblehead.