

Global talks: Locals attend eco-conference in Sweden

World environmental conference brings vital message home

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July 06, 2008 6:00 AM

PORTSMOUTH — As he chatted with experts from a cross section of countries attending the International Eco-municipality Conference in Sweden last month, city resident Bert Cohen asked those assembled at the table whether they thought the international community had less than 10 years to seriously address global warming.

Cohen, an environmental activist who teaches a class on sustainability at the University of New Hampshire, wanted to know if he were being an alarmist or if they shared the same fears about the future of the planet.

Their answer was startling.

"It was unanimous, yes," Cohen said. "It was pretty profound for me because it was emotional. It had to do with urgency."

The conference was an opportunity for him and fellow resident and activist Skye Maher to talk about what Portsmouth has done to be more sustainable, as well as learn from other communities from all parts of the world. Together, Cohen and Maher have organized the local Piscataqua Sustainability Initiative.

Cohen said even though the subject matter is the result of human destruction of the planet and wastefulness, talking with so many energetic and like-minded individuals at the conference was stimulating and intense.

"I'm hoping they're wrong. I'm hoping I'm wrong; I've been wrong on many things," Cohen said. "But the fact that a lot of informed people with various perspectives think the time span is short makes me say, just on a precautionary principle, that here in Portsmouth we should be doing whatever we can right now to change this around as quickly as possible."

The conference brought people together from throughout the world to learn ways to be more sustainable in their communities.

Maher said the issues that affected each community — and their response to those issues — were drastically different, but all shared the same sense of urgency to solve the problems.

"Everyone had very different perspectives, while all knowing that the same problem is impeding their opportunity to survive," Maher said.

Some of the individuals, from places like Kenya and Uganda, not only face environmental troubles such as desertification of Africa, but must try to address the problems within unstable political and economical systems.

"They understand differently than we do the urgency of this issue," Maher said. "Places where food and water security are much more prominent (issues) than they are here, places that are not as wealthy as we are. They have issues that make this much more real to them."

Both Maher and Cohen said their presentation on Portsmouth's efforts was well received.

People were particularly impressed with the cooperative atmosphere among city government, the

Portsmouth Listens study circle participants and grassroots efforts, such as the PSI.

Cohen said they hope to bring back to Portsmouth the sense of urgency and continue efforts to make sustainability part of everyday conversation. Every person's individual skills can help the global system operate more efficiently when there is an understanding of the need, he said.

The Piscataqua Sustainability Initiative fall meeting is scheduled for 9:30 a.m. to noon on Saturday, Sept. 30, in the Levenson Room at the Portsmouth Public Library.

Signing up for the PSI fall study circles is an easy way to mobilize efforts and expand knowledge, he said.

"The system we're talking about is a global system," Cohen said. "We're all interconnected and I think we all know that, so how do we make use of our own knowledge, interest and passions?"

fall meeting

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