

# County setting out to lead the way to green

By LINDA CAIN

“Currituck County has often been a leader, there’s no reason not to be a leader in this,” Currituck planning director Ben Woody said of the county’s potential for going green.

And the place to start, is at the top so to speak.

Lead by example, Woody suggested.

That’s how to get to the front of this movement — that despite its trendiness, has undeniable merit. And need.

Woody and chief planner Holly White led a discussion about Currituck’s going green initiative with county commissioners and other county officials last Monday evening.

They think it’s important for support to come from the commissioners, not only to select and set policy, but to let everyone know this is vital to the way the county does business, while also encouraging participation from within the departments as well as from the citizenry. So that it’s not just a few people going around turning off extra lightbulbs in the courthouse.

Public Works is already replacing those burned out lightbulbs with more efficient ones, something that will help reduce the near \$500,000 a year the county spends in energy costs for county buildings (not including the schools that add about \$50,000 a month during the winter months).

Woody noted that with only a ten percent reduction in energy use, something that has been accomplished by other counties and cities, the county could save as much as \$50,000 a year, that could be used elsewhere.

Turning off those unused lights, and computers, is one of the simple, but significant things, that can be done to help reach that goal, since lighting on average accounts for 35 percent of a building’s energy costs (heating is 6 percent, air conditioning is 16 percent).

Woody also pointed to other steps, included in an “Energy Pledge,” that would help save energy, and money, such as — seal air leaks in buildings, use automatic controls to turn off lights, use programmable thermostats, change air filters and tune up HVAC systems routinely, educate the staff.

Not only are these steps something the county can take, but in doing so can encourage citizens to do the same, especially when there’s money to be saved.

Reducing waste is also a money saver. It costs the county \$68 for each ton of trash, \$50 a ton for recyclables. Not only does recycling save money, but it also reduces the amount going into the landfill.

Board vice chairman Paul O’Neal noted that having commingled recyclables at the convenience centers instead of having to separate the items makes it easier for citizens to recycle, and board chairman Owen Etheridge added that the “swap shop” at the Shawboro site gives people the opportunity to drop off items they can no longer use and for others to use those items again.

White and Woody pointed to some of things the county is or can be doing — as also noted in a Waste Reduction Pledge — such as reducing paper files, printing on both sides of the paper, having recycling bins conveniently placed in offices and meeting rooms, asking for less packaging in shipping orders, purchasing products with a recycled component, receive and pay bills electronically (the county gets over 150 separate electric bills each month), use software instead of paper sticky notes and calendars, recycle and eliminate plastics, educate the staff.

However, vice chairman O’Neal also noted that he wasn’t going to accept everything Al Gore has been heralding about environmental issues, saying that “it also has to make sense,” as commissioner Gene Gregory added that he doesn’t want to see the county spend \$25,000 to save \$25.

Woody agreed that there has to be a balance about the cost of doing things in a different way

and the overall savings. As a future project, he suggested doing all the cost-saving work to one county building and balance that expense with the reduction in energy bills over the course of a year.

If the commissioners adopt a formal Sustainability Plan, some state and federal stimulus money could be available to assist with the work, noted economic development director Peter Bishop.

Commissioner John Rorer commented that since there are different types of county-owned buildings — old, new, mobile units — to use one of each type to track possible energy savings and where it makes the most sense to implement.

All the data and course for the future presented Monday evening did not just happen overnight.

A group of people have been getting together since last October to talk about these things, folks from the county’s departments, Currituck’s and North Carolina’s Cooperative Extension personnel, other experts from North Carolina State University and from East Carolina University, folks from N.C. Sea Grant and the Coastal Federation, the University of North Carolina Coastal Studies Institute, as well as community members.

Woody pointed to the expertise of this group, as commissioner Vance Aydlett said he was very impressed with the people he saw at the table working on Currituck's green initiative. (Aydlett was later asked to serve as commissioners' representative to the group).

One of the things they've done already is to take a look at the county's commerce park in Maple. They did more than look, they redesigned it with the environment in mind, and thereby encouraging future tenants to do the same. (The new design will be coming to the commissioners for approval at a future meeting).

In addition, Woody explained that a private developer is joining the effort by working on a green subdivision design, and he suggested considering incentives to prompt future developers to do likewise.

Vice chairman O'Neal said the county can also use energy efficient designs as it prepares to build a new recreation/community center and animal adoption center.

With the organization skills of Currituck's Extension Center, an environmental Expo was held last fall as a kick-off event for the going green effort in Currituck, that has since included citizen participation in using rain barrels and tracking the amounts of water collected for reuse (there's a rain barrel at the courthouse as well), environment inspired work shops, recycling promotions, dispersing information including over county and Extension websites.

Another thing the group has done is to write a mission "To provide leadership, education, and opportunities that help government, staff, citizens, and businesses operate in a manner to conserve, sustain and enhance our environment and natural resources."

The commissioners instructed staff to bring a proposal forward that they can adopt that will set in motion the going green initiative.