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GUEST COMMENTARY

Let energy prices go up

By Diane Dandeneau

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There are a lot of people that are fighting Xcel Energy's rate increases, and I agree with them on their points - as Xcel is using the money to pay for assets that they will in turn make more fossil fuel based energy with continuing the status quo.

But the real solution to our greater problems is for energy prices to go up. We need to invest in cleaning up the dirty fuels we are using, and increase the investments into new alternative energy sources, and most of all, not waste so much. And increasing the cost is the only way that most people are going to change their behavior.

I have been working with small businesses and individuals on energy efficiency and solar for the past 5 years and have concluded the following:

*A small number of people will change their behavior because they care about others and the planet. This group is proactive in making change.

*A slightly larger number of people will change their behavior because they care about the others and it is good for them. This group is interested in learning about the issues and will make informed decisions and take action.

*The majority of people do not like change and will only change their behavior because they are in pain. This group does nothing until they feel the pain, and then will react, usually under duress.

I am not a sociologist, so my goal is not to statistically support my premise but to talk about behavior change from this baseline understanding from watching basic human behavior. We saw this when auto fuel prices skyrocketed and the number of people suddenly driving less and buying smaller cars increased dramatically. The problem with supporting energy costs going up is that we are afraid to do something that could cause people pain - especially those more vulnerable in our society.

But, what I have seen from my work in energy efficiency is that we can achieve a significant reduction in energy use (up to 25%), in every business and household by making some minor to moderate energy upgrades AND behavior changes. The problem is getting people to focus on making those changes (see above reasons). The state and local utilities and governments are creating some great incentive programs to help pay for energy audits, energy retrofits and renewable energy, but for most people, there is not enough pain or reason to focus on it. Even in this economy, energy prices are just not high enough to get people's attention.

The other thing that is missing from the programs is education. Most of the money that has come from the Government is going directly to incentives for implementation, with almost no money for outreach and education. I had a discussion with someone with the Department of Energy and they said that they haven't touched behavior change since Jimmy Carter wore a sweater. The problem with this approach is that it is ALL behavior change. And behavior change must be supported by education if we want to achieve the most effective change.

From the amount of waste I have seen, I believe that we can drastically reduce our energy use in our

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buildings just through education. In businesses, just looking at where unused equipment or lighting can be turned off and optimized, can save large amounts of energy. In homes the effects of changing out light bulbs can be exponentially improved by increasing the awareness around what is using energy and individuals choosing to turn things off. A project by the Green Heart Institute in Lyons, CO has helped 71 families (do date) in that community save 21% on their total energy use primarily through education and nominal incentives.

I propose a 15% increase in energy prices with that money going to the following:

- 1.Fund outreach and education programs that create jobs for local organizations and educators within the community (such as Boulder's Center for Resource Conservation) - with priority outreach going to the highest energy users and most vulnerable.
- 2.Provide funding for Marketing and Communication around local programs and successes within the communities.
- 3.Extend financing programs like Boulder County's Climate Smart Loan Program and work with local banks for other options.
- 4.Invest in infrastructure upgrades, projects and programs that support and increase the shift to renewable energy sources.

So, if we charge 15% more on energy, then help people save 25%, put the funds to good use, then everyone wins. Well, except maybe the utility company. They will be forced to change their business model, and as we know, most people don't like change.

Diane Dandeneau is the executive director of the Green Heart Institute, and former director of Colorado Interfaith Power and Light. EDITOR'S NOTE: This is an online-only column and has not been edited.

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Hmmm, how about we quit subsidizing "the new energy economy" in Colorado through corporate welfare (tax subsidy) and see what the market value (or true cost) of energy derived from wind and solar and other renewable sources really is? Point is, we have a long way to go toward energy independence and are going to need "dirty fuels" for a long time to come, and we should allow the market to set the price of that "dirty fuel." If renewable energy ever becomes viable, people will make behavior change quite nicely without a massive new dose of government interference.

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