Massachusetts Quakers Host Carbon Tax Forum

By Maureen Lanan and Mary Gilbert

As Friends deeply concerned about climate disruption and seeking ways to reduce the fossil fuel pollution spewing into the air, the Cambridge Quaker Earthcare Witness committee of Friends Meeting at Cambridge (FMC) was excited to learn that a carbon tax bill has been introduced in our state legislature.

On February 2, 2014, FMC hosted State Senator Mike Barrett (D-Lexington) and Gary Rucinski of Citizens Climate Lobby to discuss the new Massachusetts carbon tax legislation introduced by Barrett and State Rep. Tom Conroy (D-Wayland). The bill was first proposed at the beginning of 2013 and has stalled in the Massachusetts House and Senate Joint Committee on Revenue. They are expected to hear it this spring. (We can make phone calls on that.)

The bill is a state-level version of a national carbon tax supported by Citizens Climate Lobby (CCL). CCL recommends a national tax be levied at the point when fossil material is first taken from the earth. This idea has precedent: Texas taxes oil and other resources at the point of extraction from both private and public property. For a national carbon tax, the tax money would go into a special fund and pay dividends evenly to citizens across the U.S., much as Alaska pays citizens about $1,300 a year from oil revenue. The added cost would be transferred to consumers, who would adjust their purchasing choices on the inflated fuel cost. Energy conservation would be based on free-market consumer choice.

Could a carbon tax grow the Massachusetts economy? REMI (Regional Economic Metrics, Inc.) did a study based on taxing carbon-based fuels, such as gasoline, at the point of purchase by end-users like drivers and householders. The study assumes sales, personal income, and corporate taxes could be reduced by 25, 25, and 50 percent, respectively. It also shows that for the lowest tax scenario it modeled—$15 per metric ton of CO2—$2 billion would be added to the state economy by 2035 and CO2 emissions would be reduced by 10 percent. As the tax is increased, the economy would continue to grow and emissions would decrease.

Barrett said the study found the proposal slightly regressive, and he is exploring ways to address those concerns. He says the bill is a positive forward step and that it uses a “free market” approach conservative economists support.
The state of Washington projects similar economic growth and reduced emissions from a proposed carbon tax there. British Columbia has had a $30/ton carbon tax in place for several years. It is popular because it has measurably increased economic growth and decreased CO2 emissions. A carbon tax could grow the Massachusetts economy while reducing green-house gas emissions.

Since no fossil fuels are mined in Massachusetts, and the U.S. Constitution forbids taxes on interstate or international commerce, how might the carbon tax work here? Utility and gasoline companies would assign an added charge when the fuel is purchased. This fee would vary depending on the carbon footprint of the source, so electricity derived from coal would have a higher surcharge than electricity from natural gas because coal generates more CO2/kWhr than natural gas. (Currently no information about the embodied carbon used to generate energy from oil drilling, fracking, wind turbine production, or the like is available. Such cradle-to-grave tracking will be crucial to accurately assessing the carbon use posed by different fuel/electricity options.)

The bill will need a strong, state-wide constituency if it is to pass. Common wisdom says that when at least 10 percent of voters believe in something intensely, a tipping point in legislative and popular support occurs. FMC wants to help the state reach this tipping point. Among Friends and friends we can lift up the moral imperative of climate change. Members of ecological or open space groups can ask them to put discussion of a carbon tax on their agendas. We can help build alliances between groups like 350.org, the Committee for a Green Economy, League of Women Voters, and the Sierra Club. Our state is having a gubernatorial election this year; questioning candidates from either political party about the tax will get attention and support for the bill from the candidates. And, of course, talking to your state legislators and their staff would help too.

Cultivating public support to help pass this bill may require us to develop relationships with people of different opinions and in different life circumstances. Rural residents need to drive longer distances and will be sensitive toward a carbon tax. The municipal and non-profit sectors must be considered when crafting the legislation. The book *The Righteous Mind* by John Haidt was suggested to help reach out to conservatives.

Climate change and a carbon tax may be gaining attention now only because the weather is so strange that it frightens people. We are lucky that Massachusetts has legislators who understand the threats of climate change and who have given us legislation to support. 

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