Juneau’s Journey Toward Renewable Energy

Margo Waring

JUNEAU, ALASKA COULD BE A MODEL for cities across the nation. A new non-profit called Renewable Juneau is trying to make this happen. Our mission is to “Promote local, renewable energy to create a healthy, prosperous, and low-carbon future for Juneau.”

We decided to keep our focus local because there are so many actionable opportunities accessible to us. And we sure are glad that we did! In the wake of this election, organizing at the local level is more important than ever.

Juneau has had hydropower fueling its residents’ electric needs for over 100 years, but a study from last year revealed that electricity is only 20% of our total energy usage. That’s why we’re trying to step it up and meet 80%-100% of our heating and transportation needs with hydropower as well.

One local company is helping meet Juneau’s needs with exciting innovations. They’re building a district heating system for our downtown area that would be powered by a seawater heat pump. Alaska already has seawater heat pumps operating in at least two public buildings (saving taxpayers millions of dollars) so we know that the technology works. Juneau would be the first city in North America to have such a system heating homes and businesses.

Additionally, Juneau has the second highest rate of electric vehicle ownership per capita in the U.S. Who would think? It’s because we are perfectly situated with a very small road system and 100% hydropower.

We have broad support for renewable energy, but there’s still work to do. Even though Juneau’s city council adopted a climate action and implementation plan in 2011, Juneau’s carbon emissions have continued to increase. In reality, very little action or implementation has occurred. An updated Energy Plan was drafted in 2016, but has received strong pushback from the Chamber of Commerce...
and other interests, despite residents’ support. That’s part of why we formed Renewable Juneau.

Our main methods are education and advocacy. We are educating our neighbors about renewable options at the individual level, while advocating for strong action at the municipal level and a regulatory environment that promotes renewables and reduces fossil fuels.

We began this year with three campaigns:

- Supporting the Juneau Energy Plan and calling for the Assembly to commit to 80% reduction in fossil fuel emissions by 2045.
- Promoting heat pumps for space heating. Public education focuses on: “What are they? How do they work? How can you get one? And what are the options for financing your upgrade?” Meanwhile, we are working with local installers to find out what can help the industry grow, such as training more technicians.
- Rejecting the proposal to bring natural gas to Juneau. Our utility company was bought out in 2014 by a company from “down south” who owns both hydro and natural gas facilities. They want to move beyond the electric market to displace home heating oil with natural gas.

The exciting news is that we’re only a few months old and we’ve already crossed our first major campaign off the list. In February, our utility decided to put natural gas on hold indefinitely. While we can’t take all the credit for this important win, we know that the conversations we had with legislators, Assembly members, regulators, and allies helped to keep this project from being automatically green-lighted, which seemed to be the likely outcome at the beginning.

We then added a fourth campaign. We have partnered with the Juneau Electric Vehicle Association to promote the use of electric vehicles in Juneau.

We are lucky to have many strong allies in this mission. In April, we hosted the local Earth Day celebration in partnership with the March for Science. The Fair highlighted heat pumps, electric cars and boats, local food, local schools, advocacy groups, and an indigenous dance performance.

Renewable Juneau is building momentum. We are raising money and promoting our work on social media (see us on Facebook and our website renewablejuneau.org). We are on our way.

*Margo Waring is a retired State of Alaska employee who now has more time to devote to climate action. Margo’s poetry has been published in Tidal Echoes, Cirque and The Atlantic.*
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