



FROM BWA'S CLIMATE CHANGE COMMITTEE

# Questioning candidates about climate change

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Pennsylvania is among leaders in fighting climate change at the local government level. In January, Reading became the 19th in the Keystone State to commit formally to clean energy. It joined roughly 130 communities across the country that have pledged to end their reliance on fossil fuels.

So what's happening in Monroe County, you might ask? The Brodhead Watershed Association Climate Change Committee wondered, so it asked the candidates, including incumbents, who are running on the Nov. 5 ballot, about the issue. (BWA board members and staff who are candidates were excluded from participation.) To introduce the relevance, the committee pointed out that global warming affects the Brodhead Creek watershed and municipalities within that watershed. Here's what went out to candidates earlier this fall:

*"As bipartisan Congressional support for carbon tax legislation increases (i.e. Energy Innovation and Carbon Dividend Act), it's likely the future will hold carbon use related fees for both individuals and governing bodies. Throughout our state, local governments are adopting resolutions and establishing plans to power their communities with 100% renewable energy. What actions would you take to decrease your municipality's carbon footprint, promote renewable energy, and save future taxpayers the burden of carbon tax fees?"*

This candidate query is a first for the BWA. Since it went out by email, committee members have no way of knowing whether it got through to every one of the dozens of candidates seeking public office. No county commissioner candidates responded, but seven local government hopefuls did. BWA received replies from East Stroudsburg Borough Council candidate Carrie Panepinto, Stroud Township supervisor candidate Larry Sebring, Tobyhanna Township supervisor candidate Lloyd Vought, Smithfield Township supervisor candidate Jacob Pride, incumbent Ross Township Supervisor Howard Beers, incumbent Pocono Township Commissioner Chad Kilby and Pocono Township commissioner candidate Ellen Gndt. Their responses ranged widely in length and detail. But their very acknowledgment means the climate change issue may rise to the agenda of those municipalities.

Some of their ideas include:

- Converting street lights to LED technology.
- Conducting energy audits at public facilities, and identifying ways to improve their energy efficiency.
- Transitioning public vehicles to alternative fuel or electric.
- Creating a traffic task force to reduce congestion, using sensors and other new technology so traffic lights can better communicate.
- Discouraging, and possibly limiting, vehicle idling.
- Curbing or banning outdoor burning.

- Amending ordinances to reduce parking lot size, reducing stormwater runoff and recharging groundwater.
- Requiring developers to use LED fixtures in new outdoor lighting.
- Expanding green spaces in developed areas, and fostering wildflower and wild plant areas to help protect air and water.
- Encouraging green businesses and environmentally friendly jobs.
- Banning single-use plastic bags.

The committee's question attempted to bring an issue with global effects to the local level. Those candidates who replied stopped to think about what they could do, as public officials, in their own municipality to address an environmental issue that affects everyone.

The city of Reading's commitment includes gradually moving municipal-owned facilities and equipment to clean, renewable electricity by 2030; community-wide transition to clean electricity by 2035; and using only 100 percent clean, renewable energy for heat and transportation by 2040. All energy-use sectors would use only clean energy by 2050.

Reading officials have committed to creating a Municipal Energy Master Plan to reach these long-term goals. They also hope to begin working in the near term with neighboring municipalities, creating a Clean Energy Plan by July 2020. The city will give priority to energy-efficient, low-cost solutions that will benefit all residents, including those in low-income or historically marginalized areas.

Article I, Section 27 of Pennsylvania's Constitution identifies our natural resources as the common property of all its people, and calls on government to conserve and maintain these resources not only for current residents, but for "generations yet to come." Long-range approaches like Reading's reflect a dedication to that duty.

Monroe County's county and municipal governments have varying achievements in the move toward energy efficiency, and they bring disparate financial resources. But how — indeed, whether — elected officials and residents address climate change on the local level going forward will have ripple effects. The adverse impacts of climate change affect everyone, and as time passes, those effects are likely to grow.

Putting the issue on the table is a first step. The BWA appreciates the time and thought candidates gave to the committee's important question and encourages all Monroe County's elected officials to plan for a sustainable future in the shared place we call home.