



Citizens' Climate Lobby Citizens' Climate Education



Media contact: David Ruekberg, david.ruekberg@gmail.com, (585) 329-9834

Rochester Business Journal: Environmental Business

By David Ruekberg, Citizens' Climate Lobby, Rochester Chapter

Fiscal Responsibility, Moral Imperative: Penfield Supervisor Leads the Way

British medical journal *The Lancet* recently warned of the consequences of rising global temperatures. “Children are particularly vulnerable to the health risks of a changing climate,” noted Dr. Nick Watts, executive director of the Lancet Countdown. Co-author Dr. Stella Hartinger added, “The path that the world chooses today will irreversibly mark our children's futures” (Rice 2019).

For anyone who still doubts that climate change is an emergency, economist Jeremy Grantham, who predicted the economic crises of 2000 and 2008, laments that in 2018 carbon emissions reached a record high. Fortunately, people are talking now about it. “The problem is,” he expressed in a Barron’s interview, “it’s all talk” (Norton 2020).

Fortunately, in the Town of Penfield, talk has led to action. Installing solar panels might seem like a purely economic and technical feat, but it’s also a move with a vital moral component: the well-being of residents, present and future, young and old.

National solutions are poised for adoption, such as the bi-partisan Energy Innovation and Carbon Dividend Act (HR 763), currently supported by 75 House Members, including Congressman Joseph Morelle. The bill would place a fee on carbon resulting in a monthly dividend to households, as well as encouraging innovation.

While Penfield Supervisor Tony LaFountain supports adoption of the Act, it does not cover municipalities, who have to develop their own sustainable energy solutions. This is where Penfield is leading the way -- and has been since 2010, when the Town installed solar panels to power a sewer pump station. The panels provided more than 100% of the power needed, and the excess garnered credits from RG&E.

Led by LaFountain, who formed Penfield's Energy and Environmental Advisory Committee (EEAC), Penfield next installed solar panels on Harris-Whalen Lodge, providing half that facility's power.

A former Kodak department director and Monroe County Legislator, LaFountain has learned the importance of managing costs and not "running to failure." Anticipating trends in energy sources away from fossil fuels, in 2013 the Town contracted with Larsen Engineering to study and design a larger solar project, then teamed with Solar City (a division of Tesla) to develop it, bolstered by NYSERDA grants.

The result is the 1.2 megawatt solar array adjacent to the DPW ("Solar Array 1607 Jackson Road" n.d.). LaFountain was cautious around cost and production estimates, pushing back on Solar City's optimistic estimate of output. Nevertheless, results have been promising. The station went online in May, 2019, and by October had saved Penfield \$84,000, producing 767,837 kWh ("Penfield Solar Paying off" 2019), right on target. Subsequently, the Town budgeted \$90,000 less for energy costs for 2020; as with the pump project, savings will be rolled into new sustainable energy projects.

LaFountain and the Town haven't stopped there. Penfield was the first town in Monroe County to install a free electric vehicle charging station at its library, followed by stations at the Town Hall and Harris-Whalen Park. Another at Four Corners in the works; as with the solar array, he plans to fund it with grants, although NYSERDA has recently reduced its allocations.

Education is important. "You have to get the information out there," LaFountain emphasizes. "No one group can do it. It will take a collective effort." LaFountain is glad to share his experience dealing with research, regulations, and implementation with other towns, and likewise to study their steps towards sustainable energy practices, including energy purchasing blocs. "This progress is contagious," he says enthusiastically.

With the solar array project behind them, on January 22 LaFountain and the EEAC proposed that the Town Board adopt Community Choice Aggregation (CCA). The widely-known implementation of CCA by Brighton, Irondequoit, and Pittsford promises to bring energy costs down for residents, relies on renewable sources, and includes an option for integrating Community Solar Arrays into its source stream, which would eliminate dependence on fossil fuels for electricity. A public hearing on the proposal is scheduled for March 4. If the enabling law is passed, the Town, acting as lead agency, would vett an administrator. Among their choices are Good Energy, which supplies green electricity and gas, and Joule, which supplies electricity from renewable sources only.

In considering strictly renewable versus mixed energy sources, LaFountain weighs the varied concerns of constituents. Some favor traditional fiscal conservatism, and others believe the consequences of inaction on climate change outweigh short-term costs. "We're going to listen, we're going to learn, we're going to do the right things for the right reasons," he asserts.

Action appears to be LaFountain's MO. He is studying locations for other solar arrays, and batteries to store surplus electricity. He notes that as solar panels have become both more efficient and lighter, installing them on Town buildings becomes easier.

Although these efforts have given LaFountain, by his own admission, "more gray hairs," there's an important payoff. "We've moved the needle a little more." As important as fiscal responsibility, he emphasizes, is his commitment to the future. "In my lifetime, climate change is not going to have much of an impact on me and my wife. But I have two daughters, and two granddaughters. My parents taught me to leave a place better than you found it. If you're invited over for a cup of tea, you don't leave crumbs on the table."

In Tony LaFountain's case, he also helps plan the menu for a more livable future.

###

893 - 16 (citations) = 887 words

Notes

- Norton, Leslie P. 2020. "The Man Who Called the Financial Crisis Has Another Warning for Investors." *Barrons Online*, February 12, 2020.
<https://www.barrons.com/articles/jeremy-grantham-called-the-financial-crisis-he-has-another-warning-for-investors-51581532462>.
- "Penfield Solar Paying off: Town Saves Nearly \$40K on Energy Costs over Summer." 2019. RochesterFirst. December 10, 2019.
<https://www.rochesterfirst.com/news/local-news/penfield-solar-paying-off-town-saves-nearly-40k-on-energy-costs-over-summer/>.
- Rice, Doyle. 2019. "Climate Change Is Damaging the Health of the World's Children and Threatens Lifelong Impact, Report Says." USA TODAY. USA TODAY. November 13, 2019.
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/11/13/climate-change-damaging-health-worlds-children/2575870001/>.
- "Solar Array 1607 Jackson Road." n.d. Accessed January 11, 2020.
http://www.penfield.org/index.php?pr=Solar_Array_1607_Jackson_Road.