

Waldo County

Citizen



A handful of students initiate big changes

By Christine Parrish

UNITY (Oct 27, 2004): Constructive Activists, a group of approximately 10 Unity College students, have had considerable success with voter registration drives and reducing local sources of air pollution.

First, Constructive Activists worked with EnviroCitizen, a national nonprofit assisting youth groups at campuses across the country, to register voters and to educate students and the public about environmental issues. EnviroCitizen provides tips on lobbying legislators, public speaking, working with the media and tactics for successful campaigns.

The goal behind EnviroCitizen is for on-campus groups such as Constructive Activists to successfully register enough voters within the campus community so that blocs of student voters across the country can influence local and national elections.

In the last two weeks, Constructive Activists have registered more than 100 students, or approximately 20 percent of the student body at Unity College.

"We don't influence them in any way when they fill out their voter registration card," said Stephanie MacLagan, an environmental policy major and a Constructive Activists member. She said the goal is to educate potential voters.

The second initiative has been even more successful. With the guidance of Climate Campaign, a network of national environmental groups such as the Rainforest Action Network and Clean Air -- Cool Planet, Constructive Activists initiated an effort to bring clean energy to the Unity campus and reduce the campus contribution to emissions that contribute to global climate change.

The campus group cooperated with the Unity Sustainability Committee, which is comprised of faculty, staff, and students, to conduct an energy audit on the Unity campus. The audit revealed how much carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases were emitted and their sources, including a breakdown of contributions from commuting traffic, heating buildings, electricity, garbage trucking and even methane released in the decomposition of organic wastes.

"The sustainability committee broke down the tasks and assigned them to different groups," said MacLagan, the state coordinator for campus energy audits and a student member of the sustainability committee. If people want to know how to conduct a college campus energy audit, they call her.

"Some work was done as part of classes. One class, for example, determined the average tailpipe emissions from student commuters and the average for faculty and staff commuters."

Mick Womersley, a faculty member on the sustainability committee, did much of the analysis for the energy audit.

"Unity College has always done things on a small scale, but the campus still emitted over 3 million pounds of carbon dioxide and other pollutants," said Womersley. Carbon, a byproduct of burning, hooks up with two oxygen molecules to form carbon dioxide, the largest component of air pollution that contributes to global climate change and respiratory problems like asthma. A gallon of gas burned in a car engine emits over 19 pounds of carbon dioxide.

But the effort went beyond data collection and analysis and moved to improve the campus energy record. Insulated windows and new boilers have increased energy efficiency and reduced costs, as have other campuswide efforts. A follow-up energy audit showed the campus had reduced air pollution by 30 percent.

"Most encouraging, we spearheaded the effort to bring a hundred percent renewable energy to the campus. And that has happened," MacLagan said. Maine Power Options, an Augusta-based company, supplies the campus with local hydropower and biomass.

After the Get Out the Vote campaign ends, Constructive Activists will tackle the third initiative: assisting the Friends of Unity Wetlands in address phosphorous run-off and algae blooms.

"We don't have a set plan for that," said MacLagan. "We will assist with education of landowners or whatever they think is useful. If landowners want help to reduce run-off, we would be willing to do that, too."