

IT'S EASY TO BE GREEN! (Calculate How You Make a Difference)

Soon, you'll tune into the news and see no more polar bears; Antarctica nothing but a messy melted snow cone; hurricanes and tornadoes waging constant war on our cities; Manhattan submerged like Venice in a flood; rivers and lakes oozing toxic, radiated sludge; and Northern Canada (not Georgia) the home of the temperate loving peach. Is this just the stuff deranged tree hugging liberal nightmares are made of, or do we need to get our affairs in order and hide in a hole in our backyards? We suggest the truth lies somewhere in between, and while part of the solution is in our own backyards, we are going to have to keep our heads out of that hole.

While think tanks and scientific institutions squabble over the details, no one will argue that there are not significant benefits to reducing air pollution, protecting water supplies from over use and contamination, keeping forests abundant and healthy, and decreasing our dependence on foreign and domestic oil. Although some may argue that climate change is not man-made, it is increasingly difficult to find anyone who thinks that there is not a climate change phenomenon occurring, and even harder to find anyone who does not believe the consequences could be devastating. The point is that we have limited natural resources and that a loss of these resources could cause widespread health problems; dire food and water shortages; decreases in the general quality of human life with rapid increases in poverty levels; unimagineable economic disasters; and worldwide unrest, violence, and war.

So, other than feeling overwhelmed and a tad nauseous, what can Election Officials do? Do we have the power to change this gloomy scenario? We suggest that we can be (and often have already been) a significant agent of change in the environmental world. This submission recommends that we highlight our efforts, measure the effects with tangible descriptions, use environmental concerns to stimulate our planning processes, and set an example for other areas of government. In the Travis County Clerk's Office, we have begun climbing this learning curve and offer one of the tools we have started to use.

The concept is simple. There are three things relevant to this conversation that we know a whole lot about – managing budgets, maintaining massive quantities of data, and working with large numbers of internal and external customers. What if we consider that natural resources are just like the finite taxpayer funds available in our counties? What if when we undertake new projects or report on the status of implemented projects, we provide information on how many natural resources will be spent or saved?

You may not realize it, but we have a lot to brag about. For years now, we have been following the trend of using technology to reduce our paper use. For example, many of us have databases instead of enormous paper files and allow our customers the convenience of finding information via the internet instead of having to come to our offices. That adds up to substantial environmental savings when you consider the amount of paper and number of automobile trips that have been reduced. Just consider how much we all save by using email and the internet and how that translates into carbon savings. One study we found says, "in the next 10 years, the effects of using broadband and the Internet will save an estimated 1 billion tons of carbon from being released into the air."¹

That leads to the next part of this suggestion. Except for being able to make a joke about reducing the amount of hot air you give off, you may find that talking about carbon emissions makes people's eyes glaze over. In response, we converted our numbers to easily identifiable quantities. For example, we introduced online poll worker training last year. During one election, we were able to train 317 election clerks online instead of asking them to drive to our office. We calculate that this saved 5,824 miles of travel or 2.6 metric tons of CO₂ emissions. After two elections, that is about the equivalent of removing an average passenger vehicle from the road for a year.² We could get even snazzier and say that after four elections, we will save the equivalent amount of CO₂ that would be released if you cut and burned all the trees in a section of the Amazon rainforest the size of 1.18 football fields.³ Until the vocabulary of carbon footprinting becomes mainstream, these types of examples may be your best tool for communicating this data.

Paper savings are even sexier. For example, we are phasing in the use of laptop computers at our polling locations. This will eliminate the need for printed lists of registered voters and paper poll lists to record voter names. Fully implemented, this program will save about 45,000 sheets of paper per election. We now have computers in 65% of our precincts and will be conducting five elections this fiscal year. Using the Environmental Defense Fund's fabulous paper calculator, we find our FY10 savings of 146,250 sheets of paper will save over 2 tons of wood or 16 trees. Not processing those trees will also save 27 million BTUs and 1.82 metric tons of CO₂ emissions.⁴ What about the CO₂ emissions created by those computers? According to the EPA, our 135 computers will emit 0.79 metric tons of CO₂. Subtracting out the reductions from using less paper, we will still emit 1.03 fewer metric tons of CO₂.

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We are certainly not saying we invented these ideas. There are numerous carbon footprint calculators out there. But, what we could not find was one suited to our line of work. So, with the help of information provided by the Environmental Protection Agency, Environmental Defense Fund, World Resources Institute, and the Green House Gas Protocol Institute, we put together one that easily fit our applications and incorporated it into a form that we are including in our annual budget submission. We are also asking that the Planning and Budget Office consider requiring all departments to submit similar information. We have just begun and hope to expand this information as time goes by.

We hope this simple idea of measuring the environmental impact of programs is just the start and spurs more thought that leads to better and more encompassing ideas for the future. While this kind of analysis may seem like an abstract exercise now, we hope and believe it will become commonplace. For ourselves and those soon to follow, we need to act now, and we need to help lead the way. Who better than Election Officials? We have a long history of getting things done.

¹ <http://www.theamericanconsumer.org/2007/10/31/broadband-services-economic-and-environmental-benefits/>, ² <http://www.epa.gov/oms/climate/420f05003.htm>,
³ <http://www.fightglobalwarming.com/content.cfm?contentid=5043>, ⁴ <http://www.edf.org/papercalculator/>