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Conservation is better option than nukes for clean energy

GUEST COMMENTARY

By Anthony J. "Tony" DeLucia

Annually, I have attended the New Partners for Smart Growth Conference. It is one of those meetings where issues like air and water quality get a lot of focus. For several years now they have offered at nominal cost "carbon offsets." This past year, for around $10 a piece some of us contributed toward purchases made by Boulder, Colo.-based Renewable Energy Choice of tons of methane not released from an Illinois landfill.

While I feel better taking such action, it is unfortunately far short of the effort required to get the clean air and sustainable future I so desire. To do that requires being part of the overall solution and thus understanding the players in the smorgasbord of topics and leverage points that constitute sound energy policy.

Recently, as both a story by Press Business editor Jeff Keeling ("Slow burn" on Aug. 23) and subsequent editorial on Aug. 24 ("TVA takes a strong lead on cleaner energy"), we learned how the Clean Air Act, climate concerns and locking in a consistent and affordable energy source for our region were the putative rationale behind the downsizing of operations at Tennessee Valley Authority's John Sevier Fossil Plant. We won't go without energy any time soon — such things rarely happen — but we are taking a gamble during a prolonged waiting period for construction of a state of the art combined cycle gas plant and as TVA ups the ante with the nuclear option — not weapons, but energy.

Actually, much can be said positively about the TVA strategy. Nuclear is not dirty, in the sense of carbon and other emissions from the combustion of coal via its legacy fleet of power plants. Locally, we like our energy "cheap" and the agency has mostly accommodated our wishes though using the dirtiest fossil fuel. Going nuclear is a part of a shift in philosophy.

But, we know that nuclear is not cheap to kick start. Just because the United States has a track record with 100 or so reactors currently providing 20 percent of today's energy, don't expect critics with a sharp pencil to have warm fuzzies about the cost of capitalizing construction of nuclear facilities. Here's what the Union of Concerned Scientists has to say: Two new nukes being built in Florida by Progress Energy with combined price tag of $17 billion-$19 billion will keep electric rates escalating for years. So you see, ultimately it's the ratepayer who pays the bill for nuclear power plant sticker shock.

Not to be a killjoy, but we need to look at power across all TVA's sources. Take coal for instance. Through its local mining, or from elsewhere like the Powder River Basin of Wyoming, coal has a complex role to play in our energy future. Costs and permitting efforts to build a new generation combustion coal power plant or combined gas cycle plant, both with the pure CO2 generated "harmlessly" pumped underground or transported by pipeline for use elsewhere, are a big business commitment within the industry. Given all the good they might do on the pollution and climate front, as with nuclear, the fully equipped "carbon capture models" don't make economic sense except when the price of the CO2 avoided is accounted for to reward industry performance. Cost savings over time or health and ecological disasters (heat waves, fires and flooding) linked to changing climate may cause folks to rethink what makes sense.

Where the rubber may hit the road is just there — when we start seeing transportation energy start to not-so-magically merge with our other energy needs. Remember, after all, this has been the summer of discontent with BP response to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill disaster. Detroit and other automobile manufacturers have ostensibly taken the electric car (EV) to heart. Once that revolution takes hold (and it will, sparing our petroleum reserves and minimizing the need for offshore drilling), what happens to the timing of demand for electricity? Some models predict that electricity usage in our auto centric Southeastern cities might be highest at night vs. the status quo of daytime peaks experienced currently due to air conditioning indoor spaces on a sweltering day. If millions of EVs are all being recharged overnight higher night time power loads requiring costlier fuels to be consumed would be quite a switch in the norm. Extra costs borne by the utilities would undoubtedly be passed on to you and me.

Add to this our ambivalence toward or lack of working knowledge of other solutions. There are the renewables, such as hydropower, wind, solar, biomass and geothermal. Part of proposed energy legislation has been to adopt a "renewable portfolio standard," providing incentives to push these truly clean technologies to market.

How much do we really want smart growth with taller, more energy efficient buildings clustered together rather than spread out with blacktop parking areas everywhere? We'd better learn to love our neighbor, that is for sure. How about just foregoing some of that driving?

Smaller will be better than bigger — sprawling cities, big homes or big cars won't resonate with the public or consumer through pocketbook factors. TVA will be emphasizing responsibility at the switch, thermostat and odometer, and more than recycling, landfills or urban forestry will occupy the planner's agenda for your municipality.

I foresee abundant opportunities where the pluses outweigh the minuses and can't wait to join others who are excited about energy efficiency, sustainability and growth readiness. TVA, listen up: A nuclear plant not built will really be a pretty sight.

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