

One County's Global Warming Failure

Exclusive: Even communities where many citizens agree that global warming is a threat to humankind and have the money to take action find that the politics of doing something can be complicated and seemingly insurmountable, like the case of Arlington, Virginia, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The difficulty of the United States and thus the world to confront the worsening crisis of global warming is underscored by the resistance even in well-to-do communities to invest the financial and political capital in public transit and other infrastructure necessary for reducing carbon emissions.

Take, for example, Arlington County and other Virginia communities, just west of Washington D.C. You might think that this area of well-educated and politically savvy people with median household incomes over \$100,000 would be at the forefront of doing whatever is necessary to get people out of their cars and into mass transit.

After all, scientists warn that a rise in temperatures by more than 2 degrees Celsius from pre-industrial days will wreak havoc on the earth – and we are already halfway there.

Yet, Arlington, which sits between the District and other close-in communities such as Fairfax County and Falls Church city, is turning its back on proposals for light rail that could reduce traffic congestion and help the environment. Arlington's new ten-year transportation plan looks only to make marginal improvements in bus service inside the county.

A big part of the problem is political. Although the County Board has a Democratic majority, Tea Party Republicans found a winning issue in opposing a light-rail Streetcar for Columbia Pike, a corridor that runs through a poorer part of South Arlington, which has been historically home to a multi-racial population. The predominantly white voters in North Arlington rebelled against this investment in South Arlington, even though the state and regional agencies had agreed to pay for much of it.

Some of Arlington's Greens also joined the opposition to the light-rail system, arguing that it would encourage gentrification.

So, in November 2014, an anti-Streetcar Republican trounced a pro-Streetcar Democrat, prompting two of the remaining Democrats on the County Board to flip their votes and kill the Streetcar, which had been in development for more than

a decade. With the Columbia Pike Streetcar out of the way, two new Democrats were elected to the County Board this November.

In other words, the lesson that Arlington Democrats learned was to avoid proposing a light-rail system, at least for the more racially mixed South Arlington. The Orange/Silver Metro subway lines already serve a major corridor through North Arlington.

Though some residents of other North Arlington areas, such as along Lee Highway, have expressed interest in improved transit, it would be politically difficult for Democrats on the County Board to spend more money on the richer, whiter parts of North Arlington after the demise of South Arlington's Streetcar.

Hence, Arlington is going small ball on transit, tweaking the county's internal bus system and making some modest moves to improve bicycle and pedestrian routes.

Once Burned, Twice Shy

After the Streetcar defeat and knowing that a vastly more expensive subway line for Columbia Pike was out of the question I urged the County Board to consider a third option, a modern Sky Train that would run above Columbia Pike and connect to the Annandale area of Fairfax County, another underserved community with clogged roadways.

Through some of the narrow sections of Columbia Pike, I suggested using suspension bridge engineering to reduce the number of supports. Plus, if done with enough aesthetic touches, the Sky Train could become an iconic image for the mostly-down-in-the-dumps Columbia Pike, which once was the principal route between Virginia and Washington D.C. and served as a Freedom Trail for African-Americans escaping slavery during the Civil War.

The Sky Train would have two key advantages, I noted. It would be much cheaper than a subway and it would operate on a different plane than the Streetcar, thus avoiding some of the legitimate concerns about a Streetcar intermingling with car and pedestrian traffic.

There was also the possibility that a simultaneous plan could be proposed for Lee Highway in North Arlington to undercut opposition among white voters who didn't want to invest tax dollars in the poorer, more racially mixed South Arlington. But the County Board once burned, twice shy apparently wanted to hear nothing more about light-rail systems of any kind.

So, with Arlington's politicians still feeling pain from the Streetcar debacle, the county is looking forward to the next ten years without any game-changing

transportation innovations for either its residents or the people who live to the west of Arlington. Almost surely, those roads leading into Washington will remain clogged with car traffic spewing out carbon dioxide.

As a microcosm of the challenges that many other communities around the globe will face, the Arlington experience shows how an unlikely coalition of forces from the Tea Party opposing any government spending to Greens objecting to gentrification that often follows improved mass transit can combine to frustrate the goal of reducing carbon emissions.

This one county's capitulation to such political challenges doesn't speak well to the sense of urgency that is needed to combat global warming. Despite the looming calamity, Arlington, a community that has the money and supposedly the political desire to fight climate change, finds it too hard to do so.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

A Shaky Promise on Global Warming

The Paris climate conference produced an international agreement for curtailing global warming, but resistance from some leaders, particularly Republicans in the U.S., makes the prospect for its implementation doubtful and thus dangerous, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Paris was certainly 2015's center for ticking bombs. The year was bracketed by major terrorist attacks in Paris first in January (murders at *Charlie Hebdo's* offices) and in November (shootings and bombings that killed 130 people at several locations) and ended with a December environmental conference which, given its non-binding results, opens the door to even more terror, albeit of a different kind, into the next century and beyond.

The 21st Conference of Parties, or COP21, ended in Paris on Dec. 12. If you are not familiar with the name or acronym, it refers to the latest gathering of nations (195 of them) looking toward a collective decision to limit global warming by slowing the release of greenhouse gases. Following the conference closure there was a short spate of positive reactions that has now been followed by a rather ominous silence.

Until very recently there was a large number of people – mostly business people, lobbyists and politicians – who denied that human practices, such as the use of fossil fuels, had any significant impact on planetary warming, and some dismissed the idea of warming altogether. These numbers seem to have shrunk, and most of those still adhering to such notions are not often heard in public. This muted opposition helped pave the way for the at once limited and over-hyped result achieved at the Paris conference.

The overall goal of COP 21 was an international agreement that would hold global warming to no more than 2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels by 2100, and then reduce the amount of warming even more in the years following. This goal was certainly agreed to in theory, but the conference also left us with no convincing reason to believe that the goal will be met in practice.

According to *Science* (18 December 2015), the publication of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, commitments were indeed made to pursue relevant “technological development,” mobilize “climate finance,” enhance transparency in the reporting of overall greenhouse emissions and have developed nations acknowledge their “legal responsibility” (but “without liability or compensation”) for the damage global warming is doing to poorer nations.

All of this is well and good in a half-hearted sort of way, but it should be noted that the entire deal will only go into effect in April 2016 if “55 countries representing 55% of global greenhouse gas emissions have formally signed it.” And even if this happens, subsequent follow-through in terms of the reduction of greenhouse emissions is still hypothetical.

Thus, as the Guardian newspaper reported on Dec. 12 in a confusing, contradictory way: “The overall agreement is legally binding but some elements – including the pledges to curb emissions by individual countries and the climate finance elements – are not.”

That should be quite sufficient to instill serious doubt about the ultimate outcome of COP21. Nonetheless, reactions were still upbeat. Everyone wanted to find the glass half full. Many climate experts, when asked if there was something about 2015 that made them hopeful, pointed to the Paris conference.

Michael T. Klare, writing in *Tom's Dispatch* on Dec. 13, proclaimed that as for those advocating the continued use of fossil fuels, “the war they are fighting is a losing one.” The transition to renewable forms of energy is inevitable. However, looking at the next hundred years, no one would say with certainty that the conference’s decisions would actually make a crucial difference.

Thus, Andrea Germanos writing in *Common Dreams* on Dec. 12 quotes commentator

George Monbiot in reference to COP21, “by comparison to what it could have been, it’s a miracle. By comparison to what it should have been, it’s a disaster.”

Why a Disaster?

The *Science* article cited above puts the situation in historical context. “The individual national climate plans in the run-up to the meeting could still result in as much as 3.5 degrees centigrade of warming by 2100.” At 3.5 degrees we can expect sea levels to rise anywhere from 3 to 7 feet.

Science goes on to explain that “much of the agreement’s promise hinges on the fine print to be hammered out in the coming years. And the provisions for individual nations to curb emissions further – crucial if the world is to limit warming to 2 degrees centigrade or less – has limited legal bite.”

In truth, even the 2 degree goal is insufficient. Those at most risk, such as the Pacific island nations, wanted to hold the line at 1.5 degrees. However, their fate, which in some cases is already terminal, was not deemed important enough to warrant the sacrifices the rest of the world would have to make to meet this demand. This in itself is a very bad sign.

There will, of course, be increasing efforts by environmental organizations, seeking to mobilize mass sentiment, to bring pressure on governments and industries. As one such mass movement leader declared at the end of the COP21 conference, “Now it is time to hold them [national leaders] to their promises. 1.5? Game on” (*Common Dreams*, Dec. 12).

No doubt such mobilization, like the hope for investment in renewable energy technology, will be very important in the long run. That it can achieve its ambitious goal in the short run is doubtful because there are other, even larger, organizable masses out there who will resist rapid, necessary change.

For instance, there are the inward-looking elements of the populations and leaders of the United States, China and India – the world’s biggest contributors to global warming. In the United States at least a third of the voting population is supportive of the conservative, anti-regulatory Republican Party that currently controls the congressional side of government.

Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Oklahoma, the chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, has dismissed the COP21 agreement as “no more binding than any other agreement” on global warming made in past.

China has recently admitted that it has been underreporting its coal burning in

recent years. This calls into doubt that nation's collective will to meet its COP21 pledges. To do so will unavoidably impact economic growth and increase unemployment with all the accompanying political consequences.

A major part of India's pledge to lower and/or compensate for growing greenhouse emissions is the preservation and expansion of the country's forests. However, approximately "275 million Indians subsist on resources extracted from forests," including forest wood itself, and past efforts at conservation in this area have led to political unrest and significant cheating through official corruption.

It is not that these three countries won't make efforts to, say, move to renewable energy whenever and wherever feasible. They will. However, it is both politically and culturally unlikely they will be able to do enough to hold down warming to 2 degrees, much less 1.5 degrees.

At this point one should ask what the Marshall Islands in the Pacific have in common with lower tip of Manhattan on the Atlantic coast of the United States. The answer is that both are threatened with inundation by 2100. In the case of lower Manhattan, it might be possible to build a sea wall to temporarily hold back the rising sea level. No such effort is possible for the Marshall Islands. It looks as if that island nation, with its roughly 53,000 people, is doomed.

The prospect that 195 nations can successfully coordinate their efforts to put in place policies that, over the next hundred years, will negatively impact their economies and the standard of living of significant numbers of citizens is far-fetched. Not impossible, mind you, but from a historical point of view, highly improbable.

What is probable is that local interests will promote denial long enough to make the necessary sacrifices politically unachievable. They certainly have done so this far. That means our grandchildren will almost certainly live in a very different atmospheric and geographic world than we do. And, of course, going forward, no one should invest in seashore real estate.

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