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Warming to Houston as a leader on the environment

City should add 'green' power to its civic résumé

By VICTOR B. FLATT

HUMAN-induced climate change is here, and it is more severe than scientists had originally thought. That is the unmistakable conclusion of the "US/UK Dialogue on Climate Change" conference that I participated in recently in London.

Within 70 years we have a reasonable probability of an average surface temperature increase of five degrees and an increase in sea level of more than a foot. Even if all human contributions to climate change now were to stop, temperatures and sea levels will keep increasing for at least the next 40 years.

An upcoming report from the National Center for Atmospheric Research will announce an increased probability of severe hurricanes following a path into the western Gulf of Mexico, as did hurricanes Katrina and Rita last year.

Though this news is not good, the news of human resilience is. The city of London has demonstrated how with strong leadership and determination, a major metropolitan area can protect itself from the worst effects of

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climate change, can continue to enjoy strong economic growth, can be poised to reap savings and innovative technologies from energy conservation, and can position its businesses and industries to use their knowledge of the issue to capture market share and make higher profits. And it has done all of this while reducing carbon output by more than 25 percent.

In the absence of coordinated policy actions from our federal government, several U.S. cities and states have been producing their own climate-change plans. But as a city with much to lose from the effects of climate change and much to gain by addressing it, Houston could leapfrog them all by engaging its entrepreneurial citizenry, governmental leaders and academic talent, to position itself as the U.S. environmental leader on climate change. Indeed, if Houston wants to survive and prosper, it has little choice.

First, Houston (and Texas) must plan for the inevitable increasing severe weather events. Last year's evacuation from Rita showed that we were not ready for hurricanes. With sea levels rising, flooding will be even worse. Some simple actions on evacuation planning, avoidance of flood plain development and protection of low-lying areas could do a great deal to protect human life and property. But we must first understand the full extent of what is coming before we can effectively address it. More information and proper dissemination of that information will assist our insurance and construction industries with understanding potential events and how to reduce them.

In terms of reducing our contribution to climate change, increasing energy efficiency is an obvious first step. This not only lowers carbon emissions, but also can spur economic growth. Houston Mayor Bill White has already started by assisting the public with information about electricity options on his houstonconsumerchoice.com Web site. This can provide immediate savings and set the stage for further policy improvements.

But Houston's greatest contribution could be doing something big.

With the strong environmental leadership of Mayor White, the innovation of our business community and the extensive research resources at our academic institutions, Houston could be the U.S. city that could tackle the big-picture issues. Our universities are already engaged in a variety of enterprises that are individually important, such as developing more efficient energy usage from "cool" fuel cells, nanotechnology to allow power generated with less carbon to be transported more easily, more energy efficient building design, and laws and policies that allow business to take the lead in deciding how best to reduce carbon emissions. Yet, by coordinating these separate initiatives toward a common goal responding to global climate change the impact of such research would be exponentially productive. A partnership of area governments, businesses, nonprofits and academic institutions, led by Mayor White, could coordinate and enhance what is already occurring.

Imagine Rice's Center for Biological and Environmental Nanotechnology and its Environmental and Energy Systems Institute, for example, working along with the University of

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Houston's petroleum and energy engineering programs, its Environmental and Energy Law program and its Sasakawa International Center for Space Architecture — which specializes in conservation in extreme environments — to focus some of their combined firepower on specific targets.

We have the intellectual capital; we just need the will and strategy to properly invest it.

There is no reason that Houston, the center of the international energy industry, should not also be the international center for the efficient use of energy. Imagine the global impact on climate change if the marketing and scientific power of our city was applied to these issues. By involving themselves in all forms of energy and usage, our major energy companies would then be in the forefront for increasing profits as the worldwide energy mixes and usage alter in the coming decades.

The world knows Houston as a global energy capital. Let's show our spirit of stewardship and innovation by adding environmental leadership to our civic résumé.

Flatt is the A.L. O'Quinn Chair in Environmental Law and the associate dean at the University of Houston Law Center. He is also a member of the Center for Progressive Reform.

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