Making *Fresh AIRE* Out of Thin Air: Launching a Local Climate Action Initiative with Minimal State and Utility Involvement

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ABSTRACT

In January 2007, Arlington County government unveiled *Fresh AIRE – Arlington Initiative to Reduce Emissions* (AIRE), an effort to address our contribution to global climate disruption. This multifaceted, collaborative campaign set out to: (1) reduce greenhouse gas emissions from County government operations by 10% by 2012 from a 2000 base year, (2) encourage, assist, and recognize businesses that join the County in reducing emissions from their activities, (3) inform and encourage residents to reduce their own emissions, (4) engage other localities and regional organizations in a broader effort, and (5) prepare a climate action plan for the Arlington community, with a goal of setting mid- and long-term targets for emissions reductions in the County as a whole.

Enthusiastic public support and positive press for this broad local initiative bolstered its support among elected officials, which in turn led to a dedicated stream of funding for long term climate action in Arlington through a new local utility tax. This modest local fee is functionally similar to a utility public benefits charge.

This paper describes the origins of this program, the development and use of the new local tax revenue for climate action; new policies and programs introduced to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the Arlington community; and how the early success of AIRE has helped stimulate additional climate action in the Commonwealth of Virginia and the metropolitan Washington DC region, and in both private and public sectors.

Introduction

Background on the location, economics, demographics, and political administration of Arlington County is useful to understand the locality's greenhouse gas emissions inventory, the political will that led to the launch of AIRE, and the catalyst role that Arlington provides to the state and region.

Arlington is an urban county of about 26 square miles located directly across the Potomac River from Washington DC (see Figure 1). Originally part of the area surveyed for the nation's capital, the portion on the west bank of the Potomac River was retroceded to the Commonwealth of Virginia by the U.S. Congress in 1846. Arlington is the geographically smallest self-governing county in the nation. No incorporated towns or cities lie within Arlington's boundaries. Arlington had an estimated population of 206,800 on January 1, 2008, a 9.2% increase since 2000. It is among the most densely populated jurisdictions in the country with a population density of about 7,900 persons per square mile. Arlington's population is racially, ethnically and culturally diverse. Arlington residents are among the most highly educated in the nation. In 2006, slightly over 67% of adults age 25 and older had a bachelor's degree or higher and about 34% had a graduate or professional degree (Arlington 2008).

Although perhaps best known to visitors as the home of the Pentagon and Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington boasts high quality residential neighborhoods. Residents are actively involved in the community. Arlington has 63 registered civic and citizen associations, dozens of commissions, and over 100 community service organizations.

Figure 1. Location of Arlington County, Virginia

Arlington's central location in the Washington DC metropolitan area, its ease of access by car and public transportation, and its highly skilled labor force have attracted an increasingly varied residential and commercial mix of properties. Arlington has focused high-density commercial and residential development around Metrorail stations in two Metro corridors, while maintaining lower density residential neighborhoods in the rest of the County. The U.S. EPA recognized Arlington's enlightened land use policies and transit-oriented development with the EPA's first Overall Excellence in Smart Growth award (EPA 2002).

Arlington had an estimated 205,300 jobs as of January 1, 2008, which gives the location a daytime population over 250,000. Arlington has more private office space than downtown Boston, Los Angeles, Dallas, or Denver. The tax base in Arlington is approximately 45% commercial and 55% residential; over half of Arlington residents live in multifamily dwellings (Arlington 2008a).

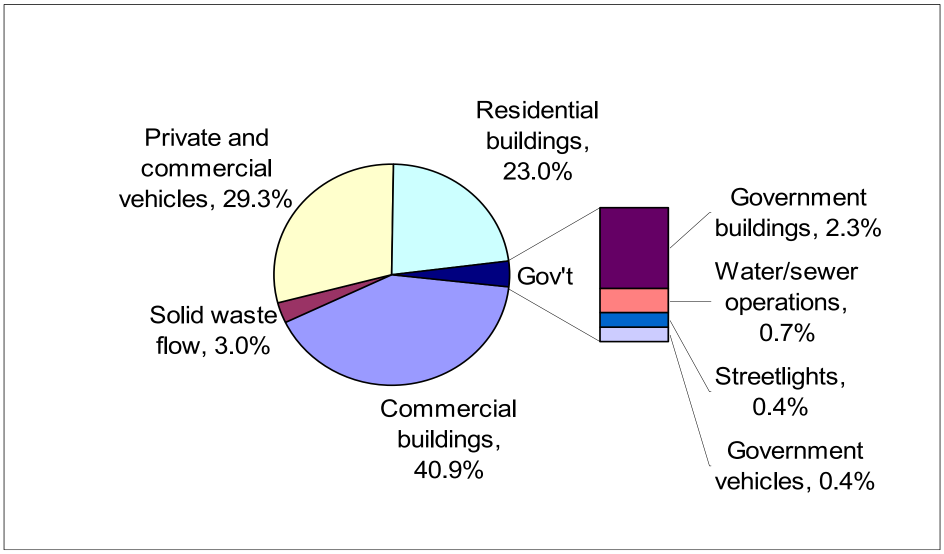
The five member County Board is the governing body of Arlington vested with its legislative powers. Members are elected at-large for staggered four-year terms. The County Board makes general policy decisions for all County government functions. The role of County Board Chairman rotates each year among the five elected Members, and is selected by vote of the Members. The Chairman assumes this role on January 1 of each year. The Board holds an organizational meeting every January 1, open to the public, where the Members speak of goals for the year ahead and the Chairman lays out his or her priorities for the coming year.

A Board-appointed County Manager is the senior administrator of the government. Virginia is a "Dillon Rule" state, meaning localities in Virginia have limited home rule, with strict limitations on the powers granted to localities by the state constitution (Writ 1989).

Arlington's Emissions Inventory

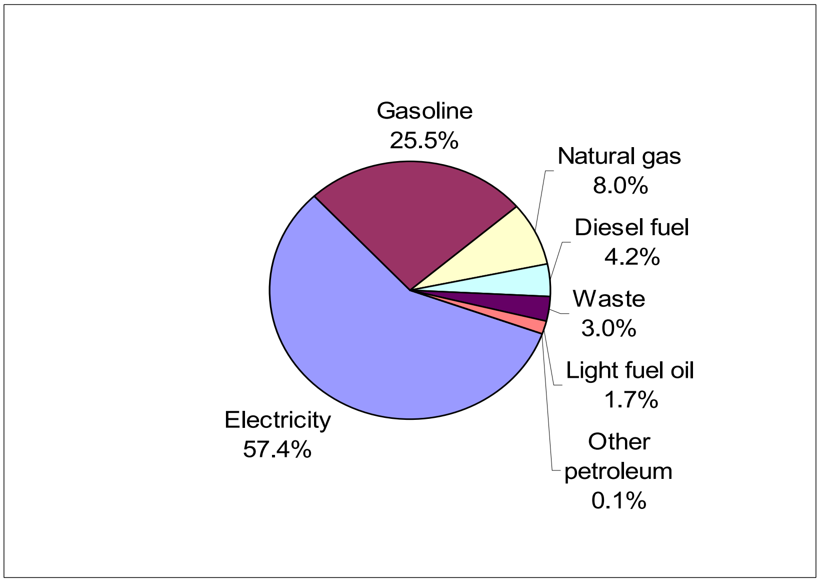
Arlington County was the first Virginia member of ICLEI–Local Governments for Sustainability in 2001. The County's energy manager used ICLEI's Clean Air and Climate Protection (CACP) software to create a preliminary inventory of greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) from both County operations and the Arlington community as a whole.

Figure 2. Arlington County Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Sector, 2000



Source: Arlington County government analysis, unpublished

Figure 3. Arlington County Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Source, 2000



Source: Arlington County government analysis, unpublished

The inventory was compiled using data obtained from our electric and natural gas utilities, U.S. Census figures for housing fuels, County government figures on solid waste flows, vehicle ownership and transit ridership, and state data on vehicle fuel sales. Our emissions inventory shows that Arlington County operations (government and schools) produced 108,715 mt eCO_2 in 2000, and the community as a whole produced 2,889,551 mt eCO_2, or about 15.2 tons per capita in 2000 (Morrill 2006). Figures 2 and 3 show the sources of these emissions by sector and by fuel, respectively, for the community (the government totals include Arlington Public Schools).

This inventory confirmed several intuitive results to staff. First, since Arlington has no industrial activity or commercial agriculture to speak of, our GHG emissions from those sectors are insignificant.[1] Also, as an urban community with extensive public transit and pedestrian-friendly and bicycle-friendly options, our transportation-related emissions are proportionately lower than many other communities, while our emissions from buildings are proportionately higher. In fact, combining commercial, residential, and government/school buildings, the buildings sector is responsible for 66% of our total emissions, well above the 36% share of GHG emissions by residential and commercial buildings in the nation as a whole (EIA 2007).

Origins of AIRE

In Arlington it is customary for an incoming chairman to advance one or two particular themes or initiatives during his or her 12-month term. Mr. Paul Ferguson, Vice Chairman of the Arlington County Board in 2006, is a strong environmental advocate and has long supported County action on green buildings, energy efficiency, and use of alternative fuels. In the summer of 2006 he attended an ICLEI conference in Chicago and also saw the documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*. These events strengthened his resolve that Arlington had to act on global warming. By Fall 2006, Ferguson was the presumptive Chairman for 2007. He made clear his interest in a focus on climate action to the Ron Carlee (the County Manager) and staff. Although he had been chairman twice before, in 1999 and 2003, Ferguson had not had an opportunity to prepare a platform for environmental issues when pressed into the Chairman's role in 1999 and 2003.[2]

From the onset of planning this initiative, the County Manager and environmental staff solicited input from and maintained involvement by a diverse group of employees from multiple County departments, including Environmental Services (DES), Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs, Community Planning & Housing Development, Economic Development, Human Services, and Libraries, as well as the Communications and Public Affairs staff in the County Manager's Office.

[1] This preliminary inventory did not include fuel consumption and emissions from the Pentagon (operated by the U.S. Department of Defense) nor Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (operated by the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority). We omitted these facilities anticipating their activities were beyond the scope of local government influence. However, we are currently revising our emissions baseline and forecasts to include these significant facilities, and we will include them in our climate action plans.

[2] First elected to the Board in 1996, Ferguson was twice unexpectedly elevated to chairman after beginning a year as vice-chairman due to extraordinary circumstances: in 1999 he succeeded Al Eisenberg who resigned from the Board to take a position in the Clinton Administration, and in 2003 he succeeded Charles Monroe, who tragically suffered a stroke and died just weeks into his term as chairman. In each case, Ferguson focused on completing the initiatives his predecessors had set in motion.

The fact the energy manager had already prepared a draft emissions inventory hastened the county preparation and capability for further action. The scope of the challenge was met with enthusiasm, teamwork and openness among participating staffers, who saw connections and opportunities across traditional departmental and functional boundaries. In addition, staff realized that responding to climate change with a comprehensive program could also serve as a framework for integrating many existing environmental programs into a more cohesive whole.

The County's fiscal year runs from July 1 to June 30. Since the Chairman presents a new initiative right in the middle of a fiscal year in progress, each chairman's initiative is usually launched with modest financial resources, and AIRE was no exception. Staff sought to identify meaningful realistic goals for which activities could be set in motion, with fingers crossed for future funding upon achieving early success. On January 1, 2007, Chairman Paul Ferguson announced the Arlington Initiative to Reduce Emissions (AIRE), with a number of specific goals and tasks for government staff and the community as a whole (Arlington 2007a). As the first jurisdiction to make a clear commitment to climate action in the metropolitan DC region with quantified goals, this announcement received immediate positive, high-profile media coverage (Gowen 2007; Washington Post 2007). The specific goals, strategies, and tactics presented at the launch of AIRE were:

- Reduce GHG emissions from County government operations 10% by 2012 from the 2000 baseline of 74,000 mt eCO_2 (schools were not included in this target),
- Reduce energy use in government operations by 2% per year from 2007 to 2012, through steady investments in energy efficiency retrofits,
- Increase the government's purchase of wind power (renewable energy credits) from 3% of our electricity consumption to 5% of our consumption in 2007,
- Plant at least 1,200 canopy trees during the calendar year 2007,
- Installing solar technology (water heating and/or photovoltaics) on county facilities,
- Strengthen the County's green building policy for public buildings, to require at least LEED™-Silver certification,
- Prepare strategic energy plans and climate action plans for County operations and the community,
- Engage business sector participation in this effort,
- Bring ENERGY STAR™ program resources to the commercial sector, to encourage, assist, and recognize accomplishments in that sector,
- Encourage residents to reduce energy use by taking advantage of Arlington's excellent transit, biking, and pedestrian-friendly options,
- Conduct at least 20 home energy audits for free, and develop case studies to share results and lessons learned,
- Promote the use of Energy Star lighting, including giving away at least 2,000 compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs) at events throughout the year,
- Work with Arlington Public Schools, other localities, and regional bodies such as the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (our metro planning organization) to raise visibility about global warming and actions localities can take, as well as national and international groups working on climate change such as the Sierra Club and ICLEI,
- Develop and maintain active outreach and communication efforts to all sectors, including a website, blog, and videos, to share our current efforts and best practices by others.

Results to Date

County Government GHG Reductions

As of December 31, 2007, the County government had reduced greenhouse gas emissions about 3.3% (2,440 mt eCO_2) from the 2000 baseline level. Much of this reduction was achieved through our renewable energy credit purchase, but several other changes between 2000 and 2007 contributed to this result, notably increasing energy efficiency in buildings and traffic signals, and the use of B20 biodiesel. Table 1 presents a summary of this net change. Our reduction in municipal CO_2 emissions is not especially unusual; Kansas City achieved a 6.8% reduction between 2000 and 2005 also through a mix of efficiency and biodiesel (Kansas City 2007).

Table 1. Estimated Changes in Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Arlington County Government, 2000 - 2007

Strategy	Increase (decrease) in annual emissions
Purchase of renewable energy credits (wind power)	(2,250)
More efficient traffic signals (LEDs)	(985)
Improved energy efficiency in existing buildings	(840)
Use of B20 biodiesel	(520)
Reduced gasoline use, largely from use of hybrids	(75)
Trees planted 2000-2007 (sequestering)	(45)
Energy use in new facilities added 2000-2007	2,275
NET CHANGE	**(2,440)**

Source: Author's calculations (unpublished)

Some of the tactical goals set on January 1, 2007 were reached with ease. The County is purchasing 4.8 million kWh of renewable energy credits, surpassing 5% of the government's total annual electricity consumption. Arlington planted 1,406 canopy trees in calendar 2007. Staff distributed about 5,000 CFLs to residents at public events over the past 18 months, and we have administered over two dozen home energy audits using qualified home energy auditors under contract.

Arlington recognizes that continued growth in services will require even more aggressive efficiency and conservation gains if we are to achieve our internal 10% target without undue reliance on green power purchases. While staff worked on further efficiency improvements and evaluated sites for deployment of solar technologies on County facilities, several policy changes and other events have enhanced the AIRE campaign for the future.

Policy Developments

AIRE was greeted with enthusiasm. Scores of congratulatory messages – and offers to volunteer or otherwise assist – streamed into the County Board office. Over 300 on-line applications were received for the 20 free home energy audits. Paul Ferguson was featured in a Capitol Hill press event organized by the U.S. Senate Democratic leadership (Arlington County 2007b). The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments convened meetings on climate action in the region. County staff attended dozens of meetings with civic associations, Board-appointed citizen commissions, school science fairs, Boy Scout troops, business leaders including the Chamber of Commerce and its individual members, and other community groups, spreading the word about AIRE, climate change, and how everyone can participate.

Funding and capacity building. In late January 2007, the 31-year incumbent Clerk of the Circuit Court, David Bell, decided not to run for reelection in Arlington. Paul Ferguson decided to run for Clerk of the Court in November, rather than run for reelection to a fourth term on the County Board (Stockwell 2007). Although Ferguson would remain an Arlington elected official (he was successful in his campaign for the Clerk of the Court office), the County Board was losing the lead spokesman for climate action.

However, to capitalize on the goodwill generated by the AIRE effort, and to institutionalize AIRE and build organizational capacity for its multi-year effort in the face of losing its most ardent champion in Mr. Ferguson, Arlington County Manager Ron Carlee proposed a new residential utility tax in his FY08 proposed budget, dedicating the $1.5 million revenue it produces to local climate action. This taxing authority is granted to localities by the Virginia General Assembly and codified in Virginia Code § 58.1-3814.

Arlington was the only Northern Virginia jurisdiction that did not levy a local residential utility tax.[3] By state law, the local residential utility tax collected by Arlington and other localities in Virginia is capped at $3 per month per account (electricity or natural gas), so the maximum a household could pay would be $72 per year. One of the reasons Arlington had not imposed a residential utility tax earlier was concern that a utility tax is regressive to low-income and fixed-income households. To make this modest tax less regressive, Arlington structured the tax to make the first 400 kWh of electricity per month exempt from the tax, and the first 20 ccf of natural gas per month is exempt from tax. This new tax was approved by the Board by a vote of 5-0 on May 5, 2007 (Arlington 2007c). The codified tax rates are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Arlington County Residential Utility Tax Rates

Residential Electric Utility Customer Tax Rate	Residential Natural Gas Utility Customer Tax Rate
"For electricity consumption in excess of 400 kWh such tax shall be $0.00341 on each kWh delivered monthly to residential consumers not to exceed $3.00 per month; provided, however, in the case of any multi-family dwelling served by a master meter or meters, such tax shall be $0.00341 on each kWh delivered monthly in excess of the number of units times 400 kWh with the tax not to exceed $3.00 multiplied by the number of individual dwelling units served by the master meter or meters."	"For natural gas consumption in excess of 20 CCF such tax shall be $0.03 on each CCF delivered monthly to residential consumers not to exceed $3.00 per month; provided, however, in the case of any multi-family dwelling served by a master meter or meters, such tax shall be $0.03 on each CCF delivered monthly in excess of the number of units times 20 CCF with the tax not to exceed $3.00 multiplied by the number of individual dwelling units served by the master meter or meters."

Source: Arlington County Code 2007

The $1.5 million provides capital for energy efficiency retrofits in County facilities and operations, and pays for four new employees (4.0 FTE) to boost our institutional capacity for both in-house activities and outreach to residents, businesses, and institutions. We created the following four positions to build institutional capacity for this effort:

[3] Arlington already did levy a local commercial utility tax, and the revenue from that tax goes to the government's General Fund.

- Energy analyst
- Energy outreach coordinator
- Construction management specialist
- Green buildings outreach coordinator

These positions work with the energy manager and green building program leader, and work in a cross-cutting way with other DES staff in recycling/solid waste, transportation and commuter services, and stormwater management. Table 3 summarizes the FY08 and FY09 expense allocations.

Table 3. Fresh AIRE Funding and Expenses

Expense	FY08	FY09
Outreach to residents and businesses	$272,000	$313,000
Energy efficiency improvements to County facilities	$600,000	$650,000
Innovative energy demonstration projects	$200,000	$150,000
Implement program objectives (staffing)	$428,000	$387,000
TOTAL EXPENSES	**$1,500,000**	**$1,500,000**

Note: Staffing line item declined from FY08 to FY09 due to one-time overhead costs of adding staff.
Source: Arlington 2008b

Clean Fuels "Hybrid" Tax Incentive Another important policy development supporting AIRE goals was the creation of a personal property tax exemption for "clean fuel vehicles," using a revenue-neutral distribution plan not unlike a feebate (DeCicco, Geller & Morrill 1992). Under the Code of Virginia, the local Commissioner of Revenue's office has the duty of taxing the assessed value of vehicles. The tax rate in Arlington is $5.00 per $100 of assessed value, with 100% tax relief provided for the first $3,000 of assessed value. The state provides some additional tax relief distributed to all localities, with some flexibility as to the manner in which each jurisdiction provides that relief to vehicle owners. With its FY08 budget, Arlington County enacted 100% tax relief on the first $20,000 of assessed value of vehicles qualifying for the Virginia Clean Fuels license plate by the Department of Motor Vehicles. The Clean Fuels license plate is available to alternative fuel vehicles, most commonly fuel-efficient gas-electric hybrids (DMV 2008).

Not all hybrids qualify for the Clean Fuels license plate, but a variety of hybrids across different model classes do. For example, to use the Toyota family as an example, its 2008 Prius, Camry, Highlander, and Lexus hybrid models all qualify for the Clean Fuels designation, and all are eligible for the personal property tax exemption. The total benefit of this exemption can be as high as $567 per year, although it declines as a vehicle ages and the assessed value declines.[4] The tax relief comes from a nonvariable pool of funds from the state distributed by the County, so providing tax relief to these Clean Fuel vehicles (hybrids) does slightly increase the personal property tax paid by all other (non-Clean Fuel vehicle) drivers. With an annual benefit of up to $576 per year, the cumulative value of this tax relief can total several thousand dollars over the

[4] On an assessed vehicle value of $20,000, the gross tax amount is $1,000 (tax rate of $5 per $100 value), but the state tax relief is $433, with the remaining $567 in tax paid by the vehicle owner unless the vehicle is a "clean fuel vehicle."

life of a vehicle, providing a meaningful incentive for purchase of efficient hybrid or other clean fuel vehicles.

Some residents have complained that this exemption is technology-based rather than performance-based, and rewards purchases of vehicles that are not inherently fuel-efficient. For example, the Highlander hybrid is only rated to get 26 combined mpg, compared to the conventional Toyota Yaris which gets 31 combined mpg. The County chose this approach for two primary reasons: (1) the administrative ease of using a predetermined qualification list such as that provided by the DMV, instead of creating a database tracking the fuel performance of all vehicles registered in the County, and (2) this approach provides an incentive across a variety of popular vehicle classes, rather than strictly providing incentives for small fuel efficient vehicles. We have not yet surveyed purchasers of qualifying vehicles to determine the extent to which this incentive stimulated their purchase of hybrid vehicles (versus free riders), but registrations of hybrids in the County have doubled to nearly 3,000 in the first year of this tax break.

AIRE as a Catalyst

Regional catalyst. In addition to these significant policy changes and activity on energy efficiency in our own operations, the success of AIRE stimulated climate action in our state, our region and arguably in the nation. For example, the immediate positive media coverage raised awareness and interest by neighboring jurisdictions, and the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments organized a climate change roundtable on January 29, 2007, and on April 11, 2007, the COG Board created an interdisciplinary Climate Change Steering Committee consisting of elected leaders from member jurisdictions and other interested parties (MWCOG 2008).

National activity. The launch of AIRE and its favorable reception in January 2007 helped hasten the development of Cool Counties, a nationwide campaign similar to the Sierra Club's Cool Cities program affiliated with the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement. While Arlington was planning AIRE, officials from neighboring Fairfax County – with a population five times that of Arlington – were in discussions with King County (Washington) and the Sierra Club on a proposed Cool Counties initiative. The strong positive local media coverage of Arlington's initiative added urgency to Fairfax's interest in climate action (Gardner 2007). Arlington officials contributed to the language of the U.S. Cool Counties Climate Stabilization Declaration, insisting that numerical targets be included in the Declaration. The two specific goals outlined in the Cool Counties Declaration – stopping emissions growth by 2010 and an 80% reduction in emissions by 2050 – have become Arlington's *de facto* community targets, at least until we complete our comprehensive climate action plan.

Virginia catalyst. Judging from membership in environmental interest groups, the American South lags behind other regions in activity and interest in environmental protection. Communities in Virginia show broad divergence on this matter, with Arlington and the neighboring City of Falls Church among the most active environmental communities in the nation, while downstate counties are more characteristic of the Deep South (Wikle 1995).

In recent decades, Virginians in general and businesses in particular have enjoyed low energy prices. For example, as of December 2006 the average electricity rate to commercial end-users in Virginia was the 7th lowest in the country (6.01 cents per kWh), 34% below the national average of 9.08 cents per kWh (EIA 2008). With such low rates, it is perhaps not surprising that Virginia ranks last or close to last in the country in energy efficiency funding (York and Kushler 2005).

Despite the apparent thin support for energy and environmental issues in Virginia in the past, Arlington's AIRE program has been a catalyst for climate action throughout the state. In late 2007, Arlington Board Member Jay Fisette became President of the Virginia Municipal League, the association of 208 cities, towns, and urban counties in the state. Fisette's President's initiative for 2008 – "Go Green Virginia" – brought the lessons of AIRE and our neighborhood climate outreach program to VML, creating a friendly competition between member jurisdictions and a series of regional forums promoting sustainability best practices. Dozens of localities of all sizes have joined this effort to date (VML 2008). Arlington was the only ICLEI member until 2005, but today there are now at least twelve ICLEI member jurisdictions from Virginia; five Virginia counties have signed the Cool Counties Declaration; and nine Virginia cities have endorsed the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement.

Private sector stimulus. Private companies approach County staff throughout the year seeking opportunities to do business with the County or collaborate in some manner. Independent conversations in May 2007 between the Arlington energy manager and representatives of Pepco Energy Services (an energy services company headquartered in Arlington), and representatives of the Virginia Tech – National Capital Region research office, led the energy manager to introduce these parties to each other. A result of this introduction was the formation of the Energy Efficiency Partnership of Greater Washington (Fahrenthold 2007). The Partnership seeks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from existing buildings through performance-based energy efficiency retrofits (Colless 2007).

In August 2007, entrepreneurs approached the County with an application seeking licenses to create a new taxicab company. Their proposal, making frequent reference to the County's AIRE campaign, was for a fleet of taxis consisting of entirely hybrid vehicles. The County Board approved licenses for a 50-taxi fleet, which began operation in January 2008 (Frederick 2007; EnviroCab 2008).

Conclusions

In its young history, the Arlington Initiative to Reduce Emissions demonstrates the power that local government action and leadership can have on a community and beyond its borders. The County established its greenhouse gas emissions inventory and is taking steps to reduce emissions both within government operations and across the community as a whole. In a state lacking ambitious utility or state energy efficiency programming, Arlington County has established a climate action program and is funding this effort through a local tax not unlike a system benefits fund. The government has reduced its GHG emissions 3.3% from its 2000 baseline, one-third of the way to its goal of a 10% reduction by 2012. However, since this campaign was only launched in 2007, staff believes the 10% reduction goal can be reached thanks to the new funding source created for climate action.

Elected officials and staff are active within the Washington D.C. region and around the state of Virginia to share their lessons learned and stimulate activity by others. AIRE has been a catalyst for action in our region, state, and elsewhere in the nation. We have also seen the private sector use AIRE as an inspiration for climate action for profit and the common good.

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