



## OP-ED: Energy Isn't What You Think It Is

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by Dan Jones

Watching the images of the wildfires in the West and the heatwaves and droughts in Europe and beyond, most of us are finally realizing that the greenhouse gases are changing our present as well as our future. We are going to need to shift out of the fossil fuel economy, but that is a daunting prospect—daunting, because we don't know what to do. Not knowing what to do makes some of us fearful that someone else might tell us what to do. For many, this loss of individual choice is frightening, too. That's because we have personalized our concept of energy so that it is equated with our consumption of fuels for our cars, furnaces, and appliances. Therefore, any real reduction in our energy use is seen as a demand for personal sacrifice. So we deny the reality of climate change, or cling to hopes that new energy sources will save us.

What if, instead of our fears, we see energy transition as an opportunity to transform our future into one that provides more security and support through community self-investment and sharing. Making that leap means shifting our mindset from the energy of personal convenience to a deeper understanding of how it has defined our economy and our land use.

Before 1780, and the invention of the steam engine, all work was accomplished by human and animal muscles. What we currently understand as economic “growth” was nonexistent. The creation of excess wealth that provided for growing economies started occurring when the steam engine allowed fossil fuels to begin doing much of hard work without muscle power.

With the invention of the steamboat and the railroad, we enjoyed speed and power only dreamed of before. More stuff was produced and more services delivered because this harnessed energy meant people could predict future production and borrow against that future. Fossil-fueled economic growth allowed debts to be paid back with interest, thereby providing returns on investment, which further powered our industry and consumption.

After World War II, cheap gas, economic growth, and cheap automobiles led to the next great leap in our expectations. Our cities emptied out as people sprawled into the suburbs and commuted downtown for work. Inorganic fertilizers, coupled with cheap transportation, shifted food production away from our population centers. Where once farmers were central to our economy, cheap fuels made them obsolete.

Vermonters moved out of our small cities into abandoned farms, creating “rural sprawl,” which hollowed out cities like Montpelier, where the downtown became devoted to commuter parking lots. That's how energy use directly created our economy and our land use.

By reducing our dependency on carbon, we could live in more efficient cities while returning the landscape to one dedicated to food and forest production. To do that however, we need to create actual good choices for us to make in transportation, housing, and finance.

That's where the Sustainable Montpelier Coalition comes in. We will be working with the people and the City of Montpelier to develop clear options for Montpelier's growth and development, real choices that are good for us personally as well as communally while serving to mitigate and abate climate change. From on-demand microtransit to housing for all ages and income levels and recreational opportunities interfaced with work, school, and play, we can make choices that can make us feel personally fulfilled and energized while we fight locally to reduce the effects of climate change.

*Dan Jones is the Executive Director of the Sustainable Montpelier Coalition and was a former chair of the Montpelier Energy Advisory Committee.*