Commentary from Brandon

Where are we going? And why are we in this hand basket? anonymous bumper sticker

Think about what Vermont will look like when the Cheney Energy Plan reaches its final stages, and gasoline, diesel, and heating oil reach the $10 to $15 a gallon level. Think about transportation, heating, electrical energy, jobs and population. By and large, it takes a car to get around in Vermont. Public transportation only works where the population is dense enough that there are a lot of people wanting to go from point A to point B at the same time. This might work in Burlington, but it is hard to think of too many other places in Vermont where this is true. Public transport in Vermont, from the usually near-empty red and white phantom busses that cruise smaller downtowns, to Howard Dean's aborted commuter rail experiment from Charlotte to Burlington, always requires taxpayer subsidies and usually burn more energy than they save. And no, bicycles are not the answer. Not too many people are going to get on their bikes in midwinter, the peak of Vermont's energy consumption year. People will end up driving smaller and more fuel efficient cars. There seem to be an awful lot of SUV's and pickups with For Sale signs on people's front lawns lately. There are acres and acres of them at new car dealer's and used car lots.

Not everyone in Vermont can afford to buy a new Prius or Honda however. Used cars from the existing, not terribly fuel efficient, stock will remain the only option for many people. If people lived closer together there would be some hope, but very little affordable housing is being built in downtown areas. Face it, right now affordable housing in Vermont means trailers, which are generally zoned out of metropolitan areas. I suspect that Vermont will depopulate fairly quickly, with the smallest towns leading the way. Home heating may become impossible for most people. I live in a small, fairly well insulated house. I heat with oil. During the coldest six months of the year I burn about 175 gallons of oil a month.
During the other six months, I burn an additional 350 gallons, mostly for hot water. If fuel oil goes to $10 or $15 dollars a gallon, I will end up spending $14,000 to $21,000 a year. I can't afford this, and I don't know too many people who can. Of course, there is always wood heat. A lot more wood will be burnt in Vermont homes and businesses, in addition to what will be used to run wood-fired power plants (see below). This may lead to some significant deforestation, and will certainly lead to dirtier air. Wood doesn't work very well in the more built up areas, and the thought of installing wood stoves in a lot of Vermont's existing housing and commercial buildings is pretty scary. Wood prices will rise to keep pace with oil prices. Cutting, splitting and transporting wood is fairly energy intensive in its own right, and the simple application of supply and demand will drive prices up further still. And no, an aging population of retired folk will not go be going out into the woods armed with chain saws to cut their own fuel. Electric energy is going to problematic as well. Politics in Vermont will prevent the construction of anything in the way of power plants that produce large amounts of cheap electricity – a second nuclear reactor or a coal-fired plant, for instance. Wind really isn't too practical, and solar advocates seem not to have noticed that the sun doesn't shine too often during Vermont's peak energy season. There is a brilliant move afoot to shut down Vermont Yankee within

four years, removing a source of four cent per kilowatt hour electricity from our power grid. Alternative energy sources should play to a region's strength. Large solar arrays make sense in the southwest deserts. Wind farms work in the plains states and along the coast. Unlike Tennessee or the Pacific Northwest, Vermont lacks the big river basins needed for large scale hydro. Also the days of building large scale hydro projects in the United States are over. We are one of the most forested states in the country. Large scale wood-fired plants seem to make sense. If new plants are built, let's hope that the mistakes of the McNeil plant in Burlington will not be repeated. You don't build a wood burning plant forty miles from the source of its fuel and bring it in by truck. Rather you build in the woods and ship the plant's output to the consumer via copper wire. Farming is going to get harder and harder with higher energy prices. One salvation might be a large scale conversion to biofuel production, but to make this work economically, the actual production of the fuel should occur fairly close to where the feedstock is grown. Also we're talking about very big farms, and Vermont is not really set up for this scale of agriculture. Possible, but not too likely. Conservation has had little real world effect on electric demand in most places. In Vermont, demand might actually decrease somewhat as the state depopulates and large scale energy users close up shop and head for warmer climes. This is not a terribly cheerful prospect. What kind of jobs will be left in Vermont? Even before the current energy crisis and recession, younger people were leaving Vermont. The net population of Vermont has still been increasing, primarily due to the influx of older retirees from other northeastern states. If this trend continues, there will be plenty of jobs for geriatric health care workers and attendants at as-sisted living facilities and nursing homes, in addition to the inevitable increase in welfare case workers. I don't see too many other growth areas. Many people would like to see Vermont become a leader in high tech, non-polluting, alternative energy development and production. Forty-nine other states would like to grow this way as well. Many are better positioned than Vermont. There are some decent schools in Vermont, but there aren't too many MIT's, Cal Techs, Berkelys, Stanfords or Carnegie Mellons around here. Making alternative energy (both the hardware that produces it and the actual energy itself) is going to require some serious industrial capacity. Vermont has not been terribly receptive to large industrial growth projects during the last thirty years, and the state's location away from major ports, railroad lines and transcontinental highways puts it at a competitive disadvantage. So what is Vermont going to look like? It will probably be a less populated, colder, older, and poorer state with fewer farms and small towns. The air will be dirtier, the tax base will shrink, and the whole state will get shabbier. On the other hand, everything might turn out just fine. The price of fuel may fall back to $2.00 a gallon, lots of bright and well educated young people may move here, global warming may turn Vermont into the new Florida, and a new cheap and clean energy source might be dis-covered. At about the same time, my Prozac will kick in and I'll feel much better.
Larry Rogers Brandon