

## COLUMNIST FOR A DAY ONE STEP AT A TIME

### **Journey to a climate-friendly life**

**By Andra Hollenbeck**

for the Mail Tribune

*A tree as great as a man's embrace springs from a small shoot; A terrace nine stories high begins with a pile of earth; A journey of a thousand miles starts under one's feet.*

**“Tao Te Ching” — Lao Tzu**

Though climate change was but a whisper in public conversations when I first purchased my home in the '90s, I still wished to save energy and be a good environmental steward.

Today the climate catastrophe sits at our front door, and it is easy to be confused about what we can or ought to do. It's good to know there are both small, individual and large, societal actions we can take to slow the increase in greenhouse gases and the resulting devastation. We need both. We no longer have the luxury of a slow approach. Acting on a personal level and a policy level are both necessary.

Here is an account of my individual and continuing efforts to live a climate-friendly life. Once I purchased my home, I realized immediately I would need to make some improvements. I could feel the air drafts from the old single paned windows, so that is where I started. Replacing the older windows with double paned, insulated windows and caulking around the outside of the house improved the indoor temperature.

That was good, but when summer heat arrived, I sometimes could just feel the heat descending from the ceiling. I realized there were other improvements I needed to make. I knew my next step.

Blowing insulation into the house walls and laying insulation in the attic began to make a difference. The house stayed cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter. Still, the wall gas heater and the window air conditioner proved inadequate to keeping my energy prices down and my home comfortable.

In the early 2000s, I attended an Energy Trust of Oregon presentation on how they could help people lower their energy use. They would conduct energy audits on homes and advise where to make improvements. This was my next step.

They conducted a pressure test on my home to find where heat and air could be leaking. Once found, the contractor sealed the leaks and drafts. I also added extra thick insulation to the attic and insulated the floor and water pipes at the same time. After sealing off the house and adding insulation, it made sense to then change my heating and cooling options. The horribly inefficient gas wall heater had to go. I installed a ductless heat pump, which gave me both efficient electric heating and cooling.

This change created further improvements to indoor comfort and again reduced my energy costs. At this point I was ready to consider solar panels.

My roof was close to needing to be replaced. As fire had become a serious concern, I opted for a metal roof. True South Solar consulted with me, and we found a solar panel array that would work and could be installed after the roof replacement.

Once installed, my energy costs decreased again. I was contributing to producing electricity, and I felt good about doing my part to fight climate change. I'm hoping that the cost of battery storage will come down so I can add battery storage to my solar system.

Another action I took over the years was to look for Energy Star labels whenever I needed to purchase appliances. Sometimes I did pay a bit more for the most efficient model, but the savings made a difference, and I felt better about my choices. Replacing light bulbs with lower electrical demand and unplugging equipment when not in use may seem incidental, but these actions make a small difference and make me feel better.

Recently I've come to understand that natural gas or methane is one of the greatest contributors to greenhouse gases. My next home improvements will be to replace my gas stove with an induction stove and replace the gas water heater with some sort of electric option. Electric cars are becoming more predominant, and that will likely be my next car, so charging capacity at home also seems like it would be helpful.

If I had looked at all these improvements and thought about doing them all at once, I would quickly have become overwhelmed and paralyzed. By taking one step at a time, doing what I could afford as I went, I have greatly improved my corner of the world.

It's a new mindset we may all need to cultivate if we are to tackle the greatest challenge of our time. Our energy supply needs to be resilient, predictable and sustainable. If each of us acts on what we can do and push for policies that decrease greenhouse gases and increase clean energy, we will weather this challenge and create the kind of world we can be proud to pass on.

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