

# It Takes a Village

## Eden Mills aiming to be the first carbon neutral village in North America

BY CHARLES SIMON



"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

- Margaret Mead

"Everybody talks about the weather but nobody does anything about it."

- Mark Twain

In late December 2007, a small group of citizens of Eden Mills (population 350) decided that while they might not be able to do anything about the weather, they could and would try to do something about the changing climate.

After hearing a CBC radio program earlier that summer describing the English village of Ashton Hayes' ambition to become the first carbon neutral British village, my wife and I were able to visit and talk to their leaders. On our return, the overwhelming response from a meeting with neighbours was, "Let's do it." Many had been depressed by Al Gore's documentary film "An Inconvenient Truth"; all were inspired by the notion that practical action could replace despondency.

Hectic preparation for the official launch of "Eden Mills Going Carbon Neutral" ensued. We built up interest and anticipation through a flurry of media communications and the creation of a website ([www.goingcarbonneutral.ca](http://www.goingcarbonneutral.ca)). Starting with our local university, the University of Guelph, we enlisted a broadening array of support and expertise. Our politicians came last: this was to be a community-driven, apolitical enterprise. By the time of the launch that November, the palpable buzz resulted in a village hall packed to the rafters.

After a quick rundown on the nature and threat of climate change, the presentations concentrated on a series of exciting projects that had already been started or could start immediately. They ranged from no-cost behavioural changes, such as turning off lights, to a straw bale classroom (replacing the poisonous and energy-wasting existing portables), solar collectors and tree planting.



Proposed Village Square and Public Garden. The Community Hall in the background has undertaken and will be completing a major energy retrofit

New ideas for projects were encouraged and all could participate and spark new ideas.

Underlying the carbon neutral strategy was a three-pronged approach: Reduce (fossil fuel use), Replace (with green renewable energy, Absorb (with trees, plants, etc.). When we have balanced what we send up (emissions) with what we suck in (sequestration), we will be carbon neutral. And setting the tone for the venture, we announced some "Big Rules," which included: "The project is non-confrontational and voluntary"; "We do not apportion blame or point the finger at anyone"; "We won't focus on the threats of climate change, but rather on the benefits of taking action"; and "We will have fun." The last was vital, and we have taken it to heart.

The response was galvanizing. Here were concrete actions that all of us could take. We didn't need and couldn't afford to wait for others to act. Not only were all of us part of the problem, we could be part of some tangible solutions. To elude greenwashing, we were going to measure our progress (or otherwise) towards carbon neutrality. University professors and students would assist us with research and expertise as well as keep a beady eye on the validity of our claims.

With the help of University of Guelph students, we measured our individual household

and village baseline carbon footprint in January 2008. An impressive 50 per cent of the 165 households participated. Inevitably, this survey had to be limited to emissions from our households (all energy sources) and travel (all forms). "Externalities" such as goods purchasing or workplace emissions were impossible to measure. Nevertheless, we were presented with a daunting figure of around 4,708 tonnes of annual emissions. Getting to neutral was not going to be easy.

A University of Guelph research project provided early cheer by informing us that the existing Eden Mills "forest" (a lofty sounding name for all the village trees) was absorbing and storing over half of our annual emissions. We had been disheartened to learn from the baseline survey that travel was guilty of creating roughly two thirds of our emissions. Now we came to realize that a portion of the severe penalty of no public transportation in this rural community was offset by our sylvan setting. A subsequent study by leading university experts provided us with detailed information on the carbon sequestration of the specific tree species we were planting in local soils and micro climate.

We initiated a series of well attended workshops in which experts provided a wealth of information and practical actions. All were



recorded and edited by a village professional filmmaker. They are available as DVDs to all who are interested. Eden Mills can now boast a bunch of villagers who are remarkably well educated in low carbon strategies. Our two youth groups pitched in energetically. One of their important contributions was to help plant hundreds of trees each Earth Day.

This education has translated into results. With the continuing help of university's Environmental Science students, we carry out biennial Household Surveys to track how we are doing. Support for the project is reflected in the consistent participation rate of roughly 40 per cent (high for a social survey). Encouragingly, our household energy emissions have reduced in each year of the survey. They made up 43 per cent of the total last year.

Travel makes up the remaining source of emissions, and it continues to be our greatest challenge. Air travel patterns are the hardest to alter, but land travel adds up to 37 per cent of the problem. University of Guelph students are currently undertaking

a full year research project to explore ways in which we might reduce car use significantly. If they and we should be successful, rural and suburban areas everywhere stand to benefit.

We are making significant progress. Combining emissions reductions with increased absorption through major tree planting (just under 40,000 trees), as well as our existing forest, we are within 25 per cent of our ambitious goal.

The Eden Mills initiative has been recognized across Canada and abroad. Several communities, groups and the local school board have been inspired by its example. Two Toronto neighbourhoods have initiated replica pilot projects under Project Neutral. Our local Member of Parliament, Michael Chong, has twice allotted precious time in the House of Commons to draw attention to the project and has exhorted all Members to support its ambitions and achievements. Our booklet "So You Want To Go Carbon Neutral?" is a best seller. It provides an eloquent and amusingly illustrated account of our journey up to 2010 (downloadable as a PDF from the website).

The community response and the project's achievements are bearing out Margaret Mead's contention that "a small group of

thoughtful citizens can change the world." And they are demonstrating that people are willing and eager to take effective individual and community action in response to the challenge of climate change. What they are seeking is a realistic set of actions. And through their actions, villagers are acknowledging that all of us are part of the problem and finding that we can and must be part of the solution.

*Charles Simon, principal of Charles Simon Architect + Planner, is an Honorary Member of the Ontario Association of Landscape Architects. He has an international reputation in environmental design, has won numerous awards (including several for the Kitchener-Waterloo YMCA's Environmental Learning Centre) and has taught and been invited to speak in a number of countries. He has been called "the grandfather of passive solar in Canada." In 2006 he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Toronto Green Building Council. And for his role in founding the 'Eden Mills Going Carbon Neutral' project he received the Ontario Agricultural College Volunteer Recognition Award in 2009 and the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012.*

## What Some People Have Said About the Project

"Congratulations...(Yours) is a wonderful model that offers direction and inspiration for other communities. At this critical juncture, people need to know that there are options, that others have floundered around and then found the creativity and imagination to develop and plan their work to achieving it. Well done."

—David Suzuki

"A thrilling moment for me was to hear the inspirational story of the little village of Eden Mills, Ontario, which has declared its intention to become the first carbon neutral village in North America.... It's the classic case of the 'little village that could'.... if others do follow the lead of Eden Mills, then this 13 per cent of our population [rural Canada] might not grow but it will certainly grow green, and that will be all to the good. To me, two of the big heroes of this week are Charles Simon and Libby Little, the two people who are making this real in the most practical of ways with volunteers and sensible thinking...doing rather than talking...We don't need leadership from the top, we can't wait; let's be part of the leadership from the bottom."

—Lary Beasley (Closing Keynote, International CIP Symposium, Montreal 2011):

"Several of the world's first full-scale jumps to energy regimes entirely free of fossil fuels...occurred amid small, isolated farming villages on the Danish Islands of Samsø and Aero.... The rural Township of Eden Mills in southern Ontario - best known for its literary festival - has dedicated itself to becoming Canada's first zero-emissions community and a living lab for the rest of the country."

—Chris Turner, in his book *The Leap*

### Comments on the Booklet "So You Want To Go Carbon Neutral"

Downloadable as a PDF from the website [www.goingcarbonneutral.ca](http://www.goingcarbonneutral.ca)

"Many community groups are at a loss when it comes to climate change. They don't even know where to start. This book fills a critical gap, by providing people with key information about what communities can do to go carbon neutral. Lively, beautifully organized, easy to read, and full of entertaining illustrations, this book is by far the best how-to guide for local climate action I've seen."

—Thomas Homer-Dixon:

"The booklet...shows us in which positive direction your community is moving. A small community with a sophisticated attitude. I am impressed about the huge efforts you all make and the great ideas you describe in your Handbook."

—Mathias Fridrich, Head of the Urban Design Group, Freiburg – generally considered to be the greenest city in Germany