



Environmental and Economic Leadership in Oberlin

By Nolan Moser

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A lot can change in one year. In February 2008, the City of Oberlin faced an important choice. Would the City Council bind Oberlin to a 40-plus year commitment to coal-based energy with a not-yet finalized \$3.5 billion price tag, or would Oberlin reject the deal; leaving itself with a 13 mega-watt power purchase hole to fill, with no immediate options in sight? In a close vote, and after considered study and ambiguous recommendations from outside experts, the Oberlin City Council rejected the coal power proposal.

With this action, Oberlin stepped into the dark – no prospects, no options, only a belief in two core concepts that:

- 1) new energy must be clean and socially responsible;
- 2) Oberlin, with its unique attitude and resources, could profit, building a better city and region, by doing what is right - rather than what is seen as cheap or expedient.

Now, in February 2009, the uncertainty is gone and it is clear that Oberlin's decision was the right one.

In May 2008, the Ohio legislature passed and the Governor signed Senate Bill 221, a far-ranging piece of energy legislation, which created aggressive renewable energy and energy efficiency targets for Ohio, making our state an overnight leader in sustainable energy policy. Shortly thereafter Governor Strickland pushed through a \$1.7 billion jobs package, which set aside hundreds of millions for advanced, clean, sustainable energy for Ohio.

November saw the election of a new President and Congress, committed to key policy goals dramatically effecting the construction of new conventional coal-based energy and renewable and sustainable energy. Finally, last Wednesday saw the U.S. Senate pass an unprecedented federal stimulus package, which includes billions on billions for the quick

construction of advanced energy resources and renewable energy, and nothing for traditional coal-based power technology.

Oberlin understood these trends from the very beginning; and this prescience, along with Oberlin's long-recognized commitment to social equity and environmental improvement, has put the city in an enviable position. Oberlin is in discussions with numerous developers on various clean energy projects, and has forged important working partnerships with energy leaders in state government. Oberlin's year-long quest for clean power is poised to pay off, and the timing – with the passage of Senate Bill 221, the \$1.7 billion Ohio jobs package, a new President and Congress committed to clean energy, and the just-passed stimulus bill – literally could not be better.

Meanwhile, communities that failed to follow Oberlin's lead face more uncertainty. They find themselves subject to the whims of unstable and volatile credit markets, project delays, and ever-increasing construction costs for a coal-based energy resource. And unless a carbon-capture component is added to the coal project, these communities will likely face high costs for CO₂ emissions in the immediate future.

Oberlin made the tough choice in February 2008 – standing on principle, and confident about its ability to create and build energy alternatives. It is time for us all to thank Oberlin, for showing real leadership when it was needed most.

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