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Technical Bulletins: The Energy Situation

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Municipal Technical Advisory Service

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technical bulletin

Municipal Technical Advisory Service
Institute for Public Service, The University of Tennessee
In cooperation with the Tennessee Municipal League

October 31, 1975

THE ENERGY SITUATION

IN OCTOBER I attended a National Symposium on Energy Policy for Local Government (in Atlanta). Much was said during the day and a half of speeches and discussions about our energy prospects, most of it not very encouraging. Former Gov. Tom McCall, Oregon, observed that a rational pattern of urban development, instead of the haphazard and scattered development that has occurred, would reduce energy demand by 50 per cent without imposing hardships on anyone. Another speaker referred to estimates by qualified individuals that presently known reserves of petroleum in the United States will be consumed in 35 years and gas reserves will be exhausted in 19 years.

Other sources of energy were mentioned--synthetic fuel from coal, geothermal, wind, solar, nuclear, tides and waves of the ocean, etc. Crisis conditions will exist if processes to provide energy from such sources are not perfected before the world's supply of petroleum and gas is exhausted (coal is also an exhaustible resource, although there is much more of it, and nuclear fuel is also limited if the breeder reactor is not perfected). To illustrate, just reflect for a few moments on the consequences of having no gasoline! The historian, Arnold Toynbee, has documented the rise and fall of many civilizations--the one we now know certainly would be drastically changed if energy sources are not developed to replace the exhaustible supply of petroleum and gas.

There was discussion of what local governments can do, including setting examples of conservation as energy users, regulation within their limited legal powers, and participation in public information programs. Charles Dean, general manager of the Knoxville Utilities Board, outlined a number of energy-saving approaches that have been used in that organization (on request he will provide this information to any city). Some local governments have reduced energy use by as much as 25 per cent.

The United States is profligate in its use of energy (about 6 per cent of the world's population using about 35 per cent of the total energy). In the short run, conservation can materially assist until hopefully alternate sources of energy can be developed. The most critical aspect of this approach is public understanding, as each person is an energy consumer. Too many people think that discussion of shortages and the need for conservation is part of the energy producers' strategy of hiking prices. Perhaps local government officials can play a significant role in this area by informing the citizens of their communities and in persuading them to adopt conservation measures. Their credibility is generally rather high, and people may be more inclined to believe them.

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