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Schwiebert recommends environmental coordinator

By Jonathan Turner, jturner@qconline.com

ROCK ISLAND - Mayor Mark Schwiebert returned energized last week from a national environmental summit, and wants the city to hire its own environmental coordinator.

'We should consider the usefulness of having an environmental coordinator at city hall,' to seek government grants that will be available to address such concerns, Mayor Schwiebert told the city council this week.

The federal government is markedly stepping up efforts to fund local programs on energy efficiency, renewable energy, greenhouse gas emissions, and sustainable building design, he said.

'Having a person on board, abreast of what's going on, can easily pay for itself,' the mayor said. 'The bottom line on the whole thing is, we've got a huge problem on our hands. Global warming is here, it's caused by human activity, and it can also be solved by human activity.'

Mayor Schwiebert was one of 45 mayors to attend the third-annual Sundance Summit in Utah, co-hosted by Robert Redford, ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability, and the Sundance Preserve.

'They had an excellent panel of speakers, of scientists and other experts, on what climate change is going to mean for us as a planet,' Mayor Schwiebert said. 'Some of what they said was astonishing and somewhat frightening.'

He said global warming can no longer be debated, that it is scientific fact and must be addressed.

'This creates enormous opportunities for us,' Mayor Schwiebert said. 'We need to be focusing on what we as a community can do to respond to this global crisis.'

Rock Island has taken several steps in the last 18 months to address environmental issues - including forming an 11-member 'Green Team' of city employees to find ways to reduce the city's negative impact on the environment, and acquiring the White Hydropower plant on the Rock River to reduce city energy costs.

Mayor Schwiebert pointed to Ann Arbor, Mich., as a leader in environmental stewardship. The city of 114,000 has had an energy coordinator on staff for over 20 years and also has an environmental coordinator and transportation coordinator.

'If you don't have someone working on your energy issues, it's just dumb economically and environmentally,' environmental coordinator Matthew Naud said Tuesday. 'We spend about \$6 million on energy. Saving 1 percent is \$60,000. It won't be hard to find someone who can save you 1 percent a year, and a good person can save you more than that.'

Dave Konkle, Ann Arbor's energy coordinator, was one of the speakers at the Sundance Summit.

'If you don't have someone paying attention to energy and global warming, the funds becoming available, then someone else is going to get them first,' he said. 'We've been very successful.'

Through energy-related grants alone (mainly from the federal government), Mr. Konkle has secured an average of \$150,000 a year, with \$1 million this past year.

Like Mayor Schwiebert, Ann Arbor's mayor is 'very, very enthusiastic about energy, the need to conserve energy, move to renewable energy,' Mr. Konkle said. 'We think it makes for a healthier community. Energy prices are out of control, energy security doesn't feel like it used to.'

While Rock Island is less than half the size of Ann Arbor, a number of Quad-Cities communities could split the costs of an energy or environmental coordinator, Mr. Konkle said.

'Each coordinator is a professional position, so with salary and benefits, you're looking about \$100,000 a person,' he said. 'But I'm able to bring in more money than it costs to employ me. Energy savings alone are \$100,000 a year. We've gotten a lot of national and international attention for our energy programs.'

'We're really studying it at this point,' Rock Island city manager John Phillips said, noting grants are typically sought by existing departments. 'The landscape is evolving rapidly.'