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Central New York still poised to become a thriving 'green' city

September 12, 2003

By Oliver Clubb

With the Destiny project now in limbo, isn't it time to step back and take stock of the basic idea, con-

ceived some years ago, that Destiny is going to rescue Syracuse? Haven't we as a community, focusing almost entirely on whether or not Destiny will deliver on its economic promises, wholly ignored the project's implications for global warming, air quality, traffic congestion and the health of our children?

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Pyramid has advertised Destiny as a potential "green" model for the world, even proposing creation of an "Oil Addiction Rehabilitation Park" for companies working on energy conservation and renewable energy technologies. However, these worthy ideas propounded for Destiny ignore most of its own "ecological footprint" - the greenhouse gas and air pollution emissions from producing all the consumer goods sold there, plus the oil consumed and pollutants emitted by all the cars, trucks and airliners bringing in consumer goods, supplies, shoppers and tourists.



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Global warming, caused primarily by just such burning of fossil fuels, is becoming an issue of ever-greater urgency with the warming climate. Despite our current good weather locally, it already is causing unprecedented heat waves and "extreme weather events" elsewhere in the world.

Facing this issue like many other states, Gov. George Pataki's greenhouse gas task force has issued a list of recommendations for addressing the accelerating danger. It notes that the state's greatest challenge is to reduce the growing CO2 emissions from automobiles and trucks - the very activity that Destiny would hugely augment.

Syracuse also has become one of the 12 cities and counties in the state to join the international Cities for Climate Protection campaign. Syracuse is developing its own local global warming action plan, and stands to reap substantial energy savings from the resulting conservation measures. If Destiny brought in anything like the hoped-for millions of visitors a year, however, its gas-guzzling consumer and tourist operations would almost certainly wipe out those gains.

There can be no "restoration" from the global climate catastrophe that awaits our children and grandchildren. And that's not the only air quality problem posed by Destiny. At a climate protection conference I attended recently, New Haven's Mayor John DeStefano Jr. noted that asthma levels among children living near Interstate 95 are "dramatically higher" than elsewhere. In March 2000, The Post-Standard reported on a study showing that children living near streets traveled by more than 20,000 cars a day are six times more likely to develop cancer than others.

If Destiny were built, wouldn't we suffer the fate of a city like Las Vegas, which has brought in dollars and jobs galore, but with such choked traffic and the West's dirtiest air that it is now often called "smog city?"

A second question: Are the economic assumptions behind Destiny still valid? The project was conceived of during boom times that are now gone and not likely to return in the foreseeable future. This seems a very strange time to place our community's hopes on a project premised on millions of Americans with bulging pockets traveling to Syracuse to spend their money.

Is there an alternative road to both sustainability and prosperity worth exploring? Establishing Syracuse as a center for developing green technologies and industries is a very promising idea. Consider what the Netherlands has achieved with its "Green Plan" aimed at creating, in one generation, a society of "negligible risk" for humans and ecosystems. Not only have the Dutch been achieving their environmental goals, but their economy has been growing by 3.5 percent annually, the highest rate in Europe - also with Europe's lowest unemployment rate. As Outside magazine noted recently, "Dutch industries now lead the world in clean technologies and super-efficient manufacturing. The Dutch now dominate energy technologies like cogeneration and wind turbines - huge and expanding markets."

Inspired by the Dutch example, then-New Jersey Gov. Christine Todd Whitman sent delegations to study what they were doing. Borrowing from the Dutch system, New Jersey is not only on target to achieve its greenhouse gas reduction goals, but is maintaining a 3.8 percent economic growth rate.

Seattle also has been parlaying its local global warming action plan into economic success. "Seattle's strategy is helping to seed a whole crop of clean energy enterprises," says K.C. Golden, the city's climate change and energy adviser, "positioning the region for a technology revolution



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that could easily rival the software and biotech industries as the global market for carbon-free energy sources mushrooms."

What we are seeing represents the future, both ecologically and economically. Central New York, with the resources available at Syracuse University, SUNY-ESF and the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, is in a great position to go down that same "green" road. Not long ago, the state granted Syracuse University \$22 million to create a Center of Excellence in Environmental Systems. SU called Pataki's announcement of the grant "the official launch of the region as the world's leader in environmental technology."

This fall, SUNY-ESF will host a statewide meeting of academics with the aim of establishing a consortium of green research, teaching and campus institutions, a project inspired partly by the success of the Great Lakes Research Consortium, also initiated and housed by SUNY-ESF.

Central New York has some catching up to do. But the environmental and economic opportunities are there. It's simply a matter of recognizing them, building on what's already here and going for it. Oliver Clubb lives in Syracuse. "Establishing Syracuse as a center for developing green technologies and industries is a very promising idea. Consider what the Netherlands has achieved"

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