



The Forum is where you debate (or Peak Oil and the Environment Conference Day 1)

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Returning home from one meeting, it was quickly time to move on to another, and so I spent Saturday lunch happily listening to 29 High School kids from overseas telling a Rotary District Meeting the answers to 3 questions; what they most missed from home; what they would most miss going home from the US; and what they said "back home" when somebody sneezed.

To remark on only the first (though I liked the Belgian third answer) it was remarkable the consistency with which, from Japan to Latvia, the answer to the first question was "public transport."

I was reminded of that tonight, at the first evening of the [Peak Oil and the Environment](#) meeting, when Alan got up in the question period to ask Roger Bezdek (second author of the [Hirsch Report](#)), who had just ably summarized the contents thereof, as to whether he could hold out much hope that the re-introduction of trains and trolleys might help reduce the wedge time for the vehicle efficiency sector in the future.

And I have to apologize, up front, that not having Stuart's talent for photos, not even our able session chair could make my offerings worth more than being given as a "virtual" photo essay, but I offer only the excuse that the second speaker, [Bill McKibben](#) offered us a virtual Powerpoint to accompany his talk. (In which regard, if the house is packed to the point of folks standing in the back, it helps, when there are no graphics, if you use the mike properly, since the poor staff wrestled between feedback and incomprehension to help us poor decrepit souls, at the back be able to hear. Fortunately tomorrow is being held in another hall. Plus, I suspect that there will be video records from the Forum readily available quite soon).

So how was the first evening? Well it has to be a struggle, when you have the full burden of the Hirsch Report to cover in 30 minutes, to be able to hit all the important bits. Roger did his commendable best, and covered the basic points in regard to where our salvation might come from, and, while steering as cautious a line as he could, why we are already a little late getting to the case, and how bad this might make the future.

Bill is already into that scenario, having spent some time living purely from the local harvest, which brought to him, and thence to us, the benefits of the local farmers' market economy and interaction. I must, however, confess to a small personal foible, and that is when, within the first two minutes of a talk, or paragraphs of a column, I hear or read about how absolutely filthy coal is, it sort of gives me a hint that I may not completely agree with what is going to follow. And I did not. Bill would be, I suspect, much further along the "we're all toast" path than I am comfortable

with, and (if I heard right) he felt that all the money being spent on remedial technology would be better disbursed, with a higher rate of return, by mailing low powered fluorescent light bulbs to everyone in the US. He feels, therefore, that we need to re-align our social arrangements and considers the Cuban experience indicative of a potential path forward. (I deleted my editorial comment here). I noted that his talk followed very much along the line of "[The Long Emergency](#)" - with which, you may remember, I have some significant disagreements.

As I noted to Eric in a post on why these meetings are, to me so valuable, the best part of them can come in the discussion and questions. The first was to Roger, and since there were three roadworks between me and the airport today, the question is timely. It was that "given the arrival of peak oil, how does that impact the sums being spent on modern highways" (editorially shortened). Roger replied that very obviously, as gas costs continue to rise, so the plans for new construction may well need to be revisited. He noted, in passing, that the most rapidly growing part of the community is that which commutes more than 50 miles to work, and that is the one that will be the most vulnerable.

When asked if, in light of Bill's suggestion on giving everyone free light bulbs, we might be better off if we were given new cars by the government, Roger pointed out that they had looked at these costs, and it would take several trillion dollars, which he then put in context. (Ed. Note: not to mention that we don't have the manufacturing capacity).

And in regard to Alan's question on trains, he pointed out that the tide is still flowing the other way, and we are still in the phase where goods are moving away from trains to trucks. The only things that use trains almost exclusively are coal users, and these have taken the system to the edge of saturation. Before we can reverse this, we first have to stop it growing, and the problems of the huge inertia that 50 years of this trend have acquired, make it unlikely to happen in the near future. He therefore doubted Alan's hope that we could reduce the wedge impact time from 25 years to 8, though in some places this might, locally, have some impact.

Now you may note that I liked one but not the other speaker, well that's the good thing about these meetings, the breadth of input is across the whole spectrum of the problem, and so I do get to hear views that usually get distanced from my desk (as I am sure my words end up similarly elsewhere). Given, however, the number of speakers, I must again apologize, since I suspect that, with just the odd scribbled note, I will likely not do any of them justice. So, if you have the chance, come on down, or up, or whatever the local direction is). The first panel is just before lunch, but there are some powerful speakers kicking off from the 8:40 start.

Oh, and a slight editorial note on trains and public transport, the Actress is thinking of visiting the Advocate this summer, and going there by train. She asked her e-community for opinions and they were about half-and-half divided between loving it and hating it. I have always enjoyed train travel, and was struck, while in Sweden, to find that to travel from the rail station to Adakgruvan I had to ride a bus that also functioned as the mail delivery van, it seemed to make a lot of sense, and I have often wondered why more rural places did not work public transport that way - I wonder if they still do up where the Lap would graze their reindeer outside my dorm window. I therefore encouraged her to take the train, but I suspect that there were too many voices on the other side of the balance.



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