



How Will Local Governments Respond to Large Increases in Energy Bills?

Posted by [Prof. Goose](#) on May 27, 2008 - 2:00pm in [The Oil Drum: Local](#)

Topic: [Policy/Politics](#)

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This is a guest post by Debbie Cook, [Mayor of Huntington Beach, CA](#), and [candidate for California's 46th Congressional District](#). Debbie has been a peak oil activist for many years; in this post Mayor Cook provides some interesting energy and peak oil-related things to think about from a local government perspective.

Robert Rapier posed an [interesting hypothetical yesterday](#) as to how individuals would respond to gasoline at \$100/gallon.

However, from my position for the last three years, the question has been “how will local government respond to large increases in energy bills?”

I am the Mayor of Huntington Beach, California, a full service city of 200,000 residents, 27 square miles, 1200 employees and 8.5 miles of beach. We have nearly 200 police vehicles, 3 helicopters, 15 fire engines/trucks, 7 ambulances, 1 HazMat vehicle, and 1 medical decontamination unit. In addition there are hundreds of miscellaneous vehicles and trucks for public works, marine safety, building department, water department, and administration. All said, we consume 495,000 gallons of gasoline/diesel/jet fuel per year. For every \$1 fuel goes up, it is a half million dollars out of our general fund budget.

Perhaps more shocking than the amount of fuel our city vehicles use is how much fuel is used to pick up our residents' trash, sort it at the transfer station, and then haul it 46 miles round trip to a dump that is running out of capacity. Prior to a recent conversion to natural gas vehicles, our contractor reported to me that they were using 525,000 gallons per year of diesel.

In addition to transportation fuels, our electricity bill is over \$4 million per year and natural gas is over \$1 million per year. We have 10 groundwater wells that pump 22,000 acre feet of water per year and 15 flood control stations with 49 engines that allow us to discharge 2.5 million gallons/minute of water during a storm event. I am told we have the highest discharge capacity of any community in Southern California.

There are countless services that local government provides to residents: streets, curbs, gutters, tree trimming, sewers, street sweeping, water, parks, community centers, emergency services, senior services including meals on wheels. All of these are energy intensive and mean local government is extremely vulnerable to supply disruptions and high costs. As budgets get squeezed, you can speculate as to which services will be the first on the chopping block.

I have spent the last three years [educating](#) elected officials and policy makers about the [peaking of world oil production](#) with only [limited success](#). I have been as frustrated as my fellow peaksters as to the lack of response or attention this critical issue has received from all levels of

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government. As Mark Twain once said, “There is a great deal of human nature in people.” Jim Kunstler’s article [The Psychology of Previous Investment](#) is the best explanation I have seen as to why it is so difficult to overcome the inertia of the status quo. Our mistake is in thinking that elected officials will act differently than the public that they are elected to represent.

Peak oil is a truth that does not benefit the status quo and as such will require each and every one of us to keep banging the drum. In the meantime, I’m afraid that no matter how high the price of fuel goes, we are likely to see more of the same—blame and finger pointing and limited leadership and initiative.

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