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(VPR HOST) *The legislature made an effort this past session to grapple with two huge issues that tower over Vermont: energy and climate change. Commentator Alan Betts, past-President of the Vermont Academy of Science and Engineering, reviews the results and urges Vermonters to take action.*

(BETTS) This past session, the Vermont legislature addressed two big issues: energy and climate change. How well did they do?

One bill, S-209, accomplished a lot. It expands net metering for electricity and encourages in-state renewable electric energy generation from wind, solar, biomass and hydropower. This got a major boost recently when Green Mountain Power proposed a plan to pay homes and businesses a 50% bonus rate for solar electricity. Solar power, which peaks in the daytime, reduces the need to buy expensive peak power on the spot market. So at last, with a combination of up-front tax credits to offset the capital investment and a premium rate for power, photovoltaic electricity has become an economic option in Vermont. Not a moment too soon: our long-term contracts for relatively cheap electricity soon phase-out, starting in 2012.

This same bill sets higher efficiency standards for commercial and residential buildings. It also directs Efficiency Vermont and the Department of Public Service to establish new programs to help retrofit homes and businesses for greater energy efficiency to save fossil fuel. With heating oil above \$4 a gallon, this is surely just-in-time delivery!

What should you do? Don't wait for the details: look at your house this summer with a critical eye. If you can add another 9 inches of insulation to your attic, just do it. It will pay for itself next winter. Go round with a caulk gun and weather stripping, and seal cracks and drafts in doors and windows. Or hire a professional to assess a more comprehensive retrofit. We need to double the energy efficiency of Vermont's homes and businesses in a hurry, and that will take effort and investment. But these are solid investments, giving huge tax-free returns.

Another bill, S.350, recognizes the need to measure greenhouse gases and sets up a Vermont Climate Change Oversight Committee to report back to the legislature next winter. So it's wait and see!

This same bill sets goals to improve public transportation options in the State but avoids tackling the obvious. Most of our travel in Vermont is in heavy, inefficient vehicles with a single occupant, and this is simply not sustainable with gas prices near \$4 a gallon and rising.

People know this and are angry and fearful about the future; but they are encouraged to blame someone else. No one mentions the fact that it has been government policy since the mid-1980s to keep our automobiles inefficient to help ensure a high price for oil. Few dare mention that the attempt to seize control of Iraq's oil has failed; and this has contributed to the rise in the price of oil.

We are all paying a huge price for these deceptions. Fortunately, the market is finally doing what the politicians have refused to do. People are beginning to trade their large cars for fuel-efficient ones. Perhaps Google Transit will now show us how to share transportation.