

Energy Use Here and In Germany

By **Gilbert Woolley** / Special To The Tab

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On a recent visit to Germany and Austria I tried to compare typical comments on and response to environmental issues in these countries. Each day I skimmed through a German language newspaper to look for environmental news. One notable difference was that I saw no mention of "solutions" for dependence on imported fuels and no complaints about gasoline prices, which are roughly twice as high as in the US. The explanation for cost tolerance is that gasoline has never been cheap in Germany (and other industrial countries of Western Europe).

Until the discovery of North Sea Oil in the 1960s, these countries were almost totally dependent on far away places (including the US) across thousands of miles of ocean, In the twenties and thirties it was recognized that in case of war, these oceans would be patrolled by enemy ships, including submarines. High taxes were imposed, not only to raise revenue, but also to decrease usage, and dependence on imports. As a result, the public never came to regard cheap gasoline as a "right" and most people drove less, and in smaller cars or on motorcycles, than in the US. Raising taxes is the sure way to reduce dependence on foreign oil but is politically difficult in the US.

Germany has well over 11,000 wind turbines, generating more electricity by wind than any other country and, as we traveled between Berlin and Munich, we saw many wind turbines. This area is not ideal for wind and some turbines were not turning, presumably because of insufficient velocity. Germany's only significant domestic source of fossil fuel is coal and the country is trying to meet its commitment to the Kyoto Protocol to reduce CO2. Wind generation increased by 44 percent last year.

Hotels in Berlin and Munich, which used key cards as room keys, also used them to conserve electricity. To turn on the lights and air conditioner in the room, the card must be placed in a reader by the door. When leaving the room, retrieving the key turns off the lights and air conditioner. The tank on the toilet had two levers, a small flush and a full flush. Using the small flush saves not only water but also the electricity used to drive the water and wastewater pumps.

Dependence on the automobile is also reduced by efficient and frequent public transit - subways, streetcars and buses. The most noticeable difference between Berlin, Munich and Vienna and American cities, however, was that bicycle paths were provided on all major, and some secondary streets. Imagine cycling down the "Unter den Linden", Berlin's Fifth Avenue. These cycle paths are clearly marked by the contrasting color of paving and are part of the sidewalks. This means that cyclists are not threatened by powered vehicles as is the case when cycle paths are simply painted lines dedicating a couple of feet of the carriageway to bicycles. And these paths are used by young and old, even by middle-aged ladies out shopping. Most businesses, including department stores, have bicycle racks near the entrances. In busy city streets it has been demonstrated over and over again that the bicycle is the

fastest method of travel but most people are afraid to cycle in traffic. The German cyclists confidently asserted their right to use these paths and often didn't warn pedestrians who had strayed on to them. This was a hazard to some of our (American) party who often ignored the cycle path markings.

None of these things is going to "solve" the energy problem or eliminate Global Warming. Neither is drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge nor in the coastal zone. The excessive use of energy did not happen suddenly, but built up over most of the twentieth century, and reducing energy use will also take time and require hundreds of millions of people to take simple actions to reduce energy use, like driving less and driving smaller cars, turning the thermostat up in summer and down in winter and adding insulation to their homes. It is not politically popular to say so, but the German, and European, example suggests that the "market" - that is higher prices - may be the most effective tool to reduce demand. One thing that will not reduce gasoline consumption is that additional lanes are being added to the Autobahn we were driving along. Experience in the US is that increasing the capacity of highways results in diversion of travelers from public transportation to private automobiles.

The German word for the Environment is "die Umwelt," literally the world around us. This seems to me to be less abstract and more "user friendly".

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