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Section: Local

Earth Hour: elementary school groups taking the lead

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Westport elementary school students are poised to join parents in promoting local support for a worldwide lights-out next weekend, at least for 60 minutes. Called Earth Hour 2009, the brainchild two years ago of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in Australia, the initiative asks governments and individuals everywhere to "vote" for an environmentally healthy planet Earth by signing up to switch off their lights from 8:30 to 9:30 p.m. on Saturday, March 28.

All five elementary school have a parent group ready to team up with students to get the word out about the initiative, according to Sandy Willis, co-chairman of the Green Committee at Green's Farms Elementary School (GFS).

In an e-mail message Wednesday, Willis said that links to information about Earth Hour are now available on the GFS Web site and that an electronic message would be sent out next Thursday, updating parents on the progress of the initiative.

She said that a student newscast about Earth Hour would be featured on morning announcements at GFS next Friday. "Hopefully, this will get the kids talking to their parents about shutting off their power on Saturday evening," said Willis.

Kimberly Lake, chairman of the town's Green Energy Task Force (GETF), said in a telephone interview Wednesday that awareness about Earth Hour is running high among elementary school students, in part, because it was featured recently in Times for Kids, a monthly magazine that students receive.

"They came home with an assignment to write about the article. It's a good way to get kids interested in the news," said Lake.

In a meeting Wednesday with Westport First Selectman Gordon F. Joseloff, Lake asked that the town register for the switch-off, which is how the "vote" is tallied, as more than 1,500 cities in 80 countries have already done, according to information reported in an editorial Wednesday in the Westport News.

In a telephone interview, Joseloff later said that he supports the initiative and urges residents to consider participating by turning off their lights, as long as that would be safe and consistent with the needs of their families.

"Let's join together in conserving energy, but I don't want too much government in the face of people, telling them what to do," Joseloff said. Town buildings, he said, are usually dark over the weekend, except for special functions.

Lake had one caveat about Earth Hour. "In a way, it can subtly give the message that doing without power is the thing, while it should be about raising awareness about converting to renewable sources of energy. This is not about going back to colonial times."

She was quick to add, however, that carbon-footprint reduction does require conserving energy. "I recently saw a satellite heat picture of the world at night," Lake said. "The United States was the most lit up."

GETF member **David Mann** said in a telephone interview Tuesday that 40 percent of carbon emissions can be attributed to electrical production, mostly from the use of coal in the process, a statistic, he said, that makes the case for carbon-cleaner renewable and sustainable sources of energy.

For Mann, this year's goal of having one billion participants in Earth Hour, if achieved, would have great symbolic value and send "a strong message to world leaders. Please help us."

He said that in addition to the registration tally, it should be possible to measure and quantify the dip in electrical use from a one-billion switch-off.

"The decrease in electricity demand should be easily tracked because power is transmitted on a time basis. We should be able to extrapolate the number of people participating," said Mann, adding that such participation could have an impact on the Copenhagen global conference on climate change that will meet in December under the auspices of the United Nations.

The organizers of the initiative have announced that they plan to present the results of this year's electricity switch-off to world leaders at Copenhagen. The goal of one billion "votes" this year was set against the background of 50 million recorded in Earth Hour 2008 and 2.2 million in 2007.

More information is available on line at www.voteearth2009.org and www.earthhour.org

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