

Building Department of Canton Basel-City

Faktor 4 Festival on 15 June 2007; outlook for sun21

Speech by Councillor Barbara Schneider, Director of the Building Department of Basel-City

(the spoken text takes precedence)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

“Energy first!” Most important of all is energy consumption. This sun21 slogan has lost none of its relevance. And for me to stand here today and tell you how progressive our cantonal energy policy is would be tantamount to pouring water into the Rhine. Yet as the previous speaker said, it is salutary, sometimes, to remind ourselves of what the past can tell us about the future. The first energy conservation bill in Basel-City came into force in 1983, having grown out of opposition to the nuclear power plant then being planned in Kaiseraugst. This first law was superseded by the new energy act passed in 1999, which still provides the underpinning for the city’s energy policy today. The five supporting pillars of this legislation are as follows:

1. conventional statutory requirements
2. a sourcing charge
3. an emissions charge on electricity
4. a solar power exchange
5. collaboration with the ETH and the local university of applied sciences (the “2000-Watt Society”)

But you already know all this. All that I wish to add here is that the sourcing charge, in particular, gives us a scope for action that many other cantons envy. The annual campaigns financed by these revenues, some ten million francs in the course of the past four or five years, have triggered investments to the tune of some 75 million francs. Most of the associated contracts have gone to local businesses. The result is savings of, broadly estimated, more than 50 million KWh a year in energy consumption.

50 million KWh a year is equivalent to one percent of the total energy consumption of all the domestic households, commercial and industrial enterprises and transport providers in the canton. Yet as it is more than cancelled out by the annual rate of growth in energy consumption, it could indeed be said that as hard as we have tried, we have yet to find a way of exerting real leverage on consumption rates. Or to put it another way: As long as the impact of temperature fluctuations such as those we experienced last summer or in the winter months is several times greater than all our painstakingly achieved savings put together, then clearly, we must be doing something wrong.

While the pessimists among you will doubtless agree with this assessment, the optimists would probably now call on us to be patient. After all, getting a supertanker chugging along at full speed to make a U-turn takes time! There is no denying the truth of that; besides, throwing up our hands in horror would certainly not be the right response to the challenges posed by our own, seemingly insatiable, appetite for energy, the runaway economic growth in Asia, and climate change. But the fact is – and here I have to concur with the pessimists, albeit without counting myself among them – that the responses to these challenges we have come up with to date are all of them without exception too feeble.

Having listened attentively to what my colleague had to say, I found myself wondering whether the many shortcomings he listed could be interpreted as symptomatic of resignation. Actually, I think not – and for the same reasons as those which make me wish to set myself apart from the pessimists. Nevertheless, what we have accomplished so far is nowhere near enough. Climate change is a fact, no further proof is needed. Yet it is not so much climate change per se that is the problem, but rather the rapidity with which it is happening. Nothing we have done so far can be said to do justice to this.

“What Germany needs is an mighty jolt,” said German President Roman Herzog ten years ago. What he also said in that now famous speech could be paraphrased as follows: “The problem is not that we don’t know enough. The problem is that we are not doing enough.” How true that is! We actually know very well what has to be done, but are either not moving at all, or only at a painfully slow pace. It is as if we were all driving around with the handbrake on – to quote another memorable metaphor Christoph Eymann once used.

Yes, indeed, we could all do with an almighty jolt. We’ve done enough awareness-raising and enough networking; we have provided enough incentives and have staged enough Christmas and Easter campaigns; there is no need for us to distribute still more energy-saving light bulbs, water-saving cisterns and hot-water bottles. All of which was good and worthwhile and fun too! And as I myself would be the first to admit, it is largely as a result of campaigns such as these that energy conservation is now talked of as a matter of course – as if the Damocles sword of Kaiseraugst had never been dangling above us at all. Having said that, it is time to stop contenting ourselves with savings in the order of a few tenths of a percent or with slowing down the overall rate of increase in consumption. The time has come for us to venture boldly into the realm of double-digit savings.

When I was asked to speak here today, it was put to me that I could outline my own expectations of sun21 ten years from now. That task is actually a very simple one, for I myself would like to see sun21 disbanded within the next ten years – disbanded for having outlived its own usefulness. And why? Because by then we will have installed huge new power plants fuelled by biomass, because we will have invested in wind power on a grand scale, because only “Minergy-P” buildings will be given planning permission and because we will at last have a car tax that rewards those who find a half-tonne vehicle more than sufficient to their mobility needs; because thanks to sun21’s initiative, we will have a zero-emissions public administration building and by that time will at least be able to call ourselves a “3000-Watt Society”. To put it in a nutshell: because we will have remedied all those shortcomings that Christoph Eymann quite rightly listed in his speech. sun21 has made an invaluable contribution to the debate, to the definition of the problem, to the networking of the available resources and to the ultimate solution. I expect it to continue doing this, albeit with more support both from us, by which I mean the administration, and from local business and industry.

This is not the place to exchange ideas and concepts. But it certainly is the place to extend to you my thanks for all that you have so far achieved and to urge you to lay it on even more thickly in future. For that would then be the sixth supporting pillar of our energy policy and one that would complement perfectly the existing five.

Thank you very much.