

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
George P. Nassos

McMansions Should Go the Way of SUVs!

About four years ago, I wrote an article titled "Save Energy With Cars – Not SUVs" where I discussed why we should not be driving SUVs. Among the reasons were the obvious high gas consumption, the high center of gravity that makes them unsafe relative to guard rails, the classification of SUVs as trucks so that they don't count toward the manufacturer meeting the CAFÉ standards, and they are overpriced with high profit margins for the manufactures. I also noted that when you drive behind an SUV, it is like driving behind a moving wall – you can't see anything ahead of you.

Now four years later, visit almost any dealership and you will see the lots filled with unsold SUVs. If you own one, you can continue to pay \$80-100 to fill it up, don't drive it, or try to sell it or trade it in. But you won't get much for it. The Americans are finally feeling the pressure of this pending energy crisis, and they seem to be reacting accordingly.

As I said last month, the answer is not finding more oil but rather manufacturing automobiles that are less energy intensive. Look what happened after the 1973-74 Arab oil embargo which created an oil shortage. U.S. Congress implemented higher fuel economy requirements by establishing the Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards that required the gradual doubling of the efficiency of the cars within ten years. Between 1975 and 1985, the car mileage went from 13.5 miles per gallon to 27.5 miles per gallon and for the next ten to fifteen years there was a global oil glut. Unfortunately, the standard has remained there for over 20 years while the number of cars on the road has increased significantly. Just imagine how little oil we would use if these standards were increased, not necessarily another 14 miles per gallon, but just five miles per gallon.

Just as it was obvious that Americans were infatuated with the SUV in the early part of this decade, they are also infatuated with huge houses, also known as McMansions. In many of the suburbs of Chicago, every day you can see people buying 3,000 square foot houses, which were very large twenty to thirty years ago, knocking them down and building 6,000 square foot houses. And guess what? The size of the family is no larger. These houses not only consume much more energy and much more water, but now you have to purchase twice as much furniture that will be used half as much. Just because you may install furnaces, air conditioners and appliances that are twice as efficient, you haven't helped the situation by using twice as much. We are not going in the right direction.

The developing countries like China, India and Brazil will soon become developed countries and the people of these countries would like to have a standard of

living similar to the Americans'. In order to do so, they will have to consume more. And we are in no position to tell them they can't increase their consumption. Since the earth has limited resources, the only way it can happen will be if we Americans and others learn to consume less. However, it doesn't mean that we have to reduce our standard of living. We can maintain our standard of living while driving more fuel efficient automobiles and living in smaller houses – the 3,000 square foot ones.

So what do you think will happen? In ten to twenty years, people will not be able to afford to live in all of these McMansions and they will try to sell them. But there won't be many buyers, just as there are not many buyers today for SUVs.

What should we be doing? If someone really wants a large house, think about how to reduce energy consumption as close to zero as possible. One can start by installing photovoltaic solar panels for some or all of your energy needs and install LED lights that use a fraction of the energy of compact fluorescent bulbs and last about ten years. There are many other means of saving energy and water, and it is not difficult to identify them. One source is the Home Energy Briefs offered by Rocky Mountain Institute at www.rmi.org.