

Labels could put climate change message in your hands

by Ian Holroyd

Special to the Beaver

Putting the message about climate change in the palm of your hand.

That's what Robert Shirkey is trying to do as he lobbies to have climate change warning labels placed on gas pumps across Canada and around the world.

"The warning label on the gas pump nozzle, what it's intended to do quite simply is to cause a little bit of dissatisfaction with the status quo," Shirkey said. "It stimulates broader demand for alternatives and hastens that transition."

Shirkey, a Toronto-based lawyer and environmental activist, presented his initiative to an audience of 25 people last Thursday at Oakville Town Hall.

The hosts of the event were students of the Bronte Creek Project, an integrated environmental leadership program run through the Halton District School Board.

Pumping gas has become so normalized, Shirkey explained, and the link between the product and the consumer has become so disjointed, that his labels would connect the dots between gassing up and climate change.

"The problem is, I think there is a lot of systemic inertia to the status quo. We're just used to using this product and it's challenging to transition to something new," he said.

"The first step to addressing any problem is to honestly face it, if we are going to deal with



Members of the Bronte Creek Project hosted a free public lecture on climate change, featuring Robert Shirkey, a Toronto-based lawyer and founder of the environmental not-for-profit Our Horizon. He spoke about his organization's proposal to have municipalities require climate change information labels on gas pump nozzles. Here, Shirkey holds a gas pump nozzle with a mock-up of what one of the labels could look like. This one features a caribou and her offspring — animals facing extinction due to climate change.

| photo by Graham Paine – Oakville Beaver (Follow on Twitter @halton_photog or facebook.com/HaltonPhotog)

this problem called climate change," he added. "I think that's the first and almost necessary step to move forward in a meaningful way."

The proposed labels are stickers that feature eye-catching photographs with corresponding information below. They would be placed on

the top of the gas nozzle so the consumer can easily see them. One example shows a caribou and its calf walking across the Arctic tundra. Underneath reads: "Use of this fuel product contributes to climate change, which may put up to 30 per cent of species at a likely risk of extinction."

"We find ourselves at this point in times where fossil fuels have contributed so much to civilization," Shirkey said. "They've allowed us to live comfortably and do fantastic things, but we're learning more and more that it's coming at a great cost."

According to Shirkey, starting the conversation about climate change could stimulate demand for alternative fuels and incentivize markets to meet those demands.

"If an entire market place starts to say, 'What are we supposed to do? What are our options?' you've now changed the social environment in such a way that you'll see response from business and you'll see response from government," he said.

While his warning labels have yet to appear at the pumps, Shirkey has already caught the attention of a group of Oakville youth.

Anthony Dibiase, a Grade 11 student at Iroquois Ridge High School, and former student at the Bronte Creek Project, was instrumental in getting Shirkey to speak at the event.

"It's simple, it's effective and it's cost efficient," Dibiase said, advocating for the labeling system.

see Activist on p.10

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