



T&G Staff/JIM COLLINS

Roger B. Saillant, chief executive officer of Plug Power Inc. in Latham, N.Y., with Carl Mas, of the New York State Energy Research Development Authority, with a Honda hydrogen fuel cell car at WPI yesterday.

Making a difference

Power company CEO pushes conservation

By Bob Kievra
TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER — Making the future personal while redefining conservation and efficiency can temper global warming, a multi-generational problem moral people cannot avoid, the chief executive officer of a fuel cell company said yesterday.

While politicians and regulators debate broad policy efforts, such as higher fuel taxes, to combat carbon emissions, the small business owner and citizen can also make decisions that ease climate change, said Roger B. Saillant, chief executive officer of Plug Power Inc., a Latham, N.Y.-based company that develops hydrogen-based fuel cell systems.

Mr. Saillant, who last night delivered the keynote address at the William J. O'Brien Distinguished Lecture Series at the College of the Holy Cross, said in an interview yesterday that efficiency and conservation are wrongly labeled as inconvenient and painful when it comes to America's energy problems.

Broad proclamations that the lights will go out or the economy might falter if fuel efficiency standards are imposed or a power plant is canceled don't take the entire picture into account, said Mr. Saillant, an engineer who worked at the Ford Motor Co. for more than 30 years.

"No one steps forward and argues that the proposal is actually stealing from the future," Mr. Saillant said. "I see conservation and efficiency as virtuous and valuable. I'm a fiscal conservative and I don't want a balloon payment three generations from now."

While former Vice President Al Gore has garnered headlines in recent months with his book and documentary about global warming, Mr. Saillant said for 15 years he's been preaching the need to reduce carbon emissions. From buying more efficient light bulbs to driving hybrid automobiles, the solution can begin through small acts undertaken by large numbers of people, he said.

Making that happen requires a shift in think-

Clean energy's projected growth

(In U.S. billions)

| | 2005 | 2015 |
|--------------|---------------|----------------|
| Biofuels | \$15.7 | \$52.5 |
| Wind power | \$11.8 | \$48.5 |
| Solar power | \$11.2 | \$51.1 |
| Fuel cells | \$1.2 | \$15.1 |
| Total | \$39.9 | \$167.2 |

Source: Clean Edge Energy Trends 2006

T&G Staff/STACEY ARSENAULT

ing, one in which the general public comes to believe it has a stake in the future and becomes willing to expand the circles of personal responsibility, he said.

"It's looking at things in connected ways," he said. "It's telling people that if you drive a car in Massachusetts you might cause someone's aquifer in Nepal to dry out. I believe if we ask people to consider in a broader context what they will take responsibility for, great things can happen."

Mr. Saillant said Mr. O'Brien, the late chief executive officer of the Hanover Insurance Co., understood the value of being socially responsible.

Mr. O'Brien, who led the property and casualty insurer from 1979 to 1991, was an introspective executive who believed companies needed to discuss values and virtues. The mission of the lecture series is to bring value-guided leaders to Worcester.

No magic button exists to stem global warming but good things are starting to happen because of increased media scrutiny and pressure from insurers who want to safeguard against possible class action lawsuits, Mr. Saillant said. In addition, he said, the topic is being discussed at the elementary school level, which should result in subsequent generations bringing increased atten-

tion to the vexing problem.

Climate change will take decades to address but individuals shouldn't feel disconnected from possible solutions, he said.

From increased use of solar panels to wind turbine projects, the general public has the ability to alter its energy consumption patterns, he said.

Mr. Saillant's company is a development stage business that designs and develops on-site backup power systems. The company had third-quarter revenues of \$1.8 million and a net loss of \$11.9 million, or 14 cents per share. For the same period a year earlier, the company had revenues of \$3.9 million and a net loss of \$11.9 million, or 15 cents per share. In April, it received a \$217 million investment from a Russian hydrogen-power venture.

The current power distribution system, involving power plants, high-transmission lines and electrical wires to businesses and homes, is an inefficient, wasteful design, Mr. Saillant said.

That centralized system, with decentralized use, will remain for decades, but more attention must be paid to on-site generation, be it through solar panels, wind power or fuel cells, he said.

The average piece of food inside a refrigerator has traveled 2,000 miles, a system that adds costs and increases carbon emissions as products travel cross-country by truck, train or plane, he said. If consumers are willing to shop locally for their produce because it eases carbon emissions, they may also be willing to procure their own electricity, he said.

But too many elected leaders act to preserve the status quo rather than advocate for efficiencies, he said.

"We need to have a holistic understanding of what those choices really mean and what the real costs are," he said. "If you do something today and it turns out you're right, think of what you save."

Contact business reporter Bob Kievra by e-mail at rkievra@telegram.com.