

The Birmingham News

I'm dreaming of a green Christmas

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On the 12th day of Christmas, my true love gave to me ... a host of environmental problems.

Consider, for example, population pressure. With America's population slipping past 300 million in 2006, surely 12 drummers drumming is 11 too many.

Air quality? The air can be pretty thick after 10 perfumed, pantaloons-wearing lords finish leaping through it.

What about solid waste? There's more to that herd of cows than eight maids a-milking them.

Water quality? Do you really want to drink the water after seven swans and six geese have been in it?

Natural resource development? Five golden rings look great, but don't forget that EPA added South Carolina's Brewer Gold Mine to the Superfund's National Priority List last year. Think twice about fishing in the Lynches River.

And endangered species? Consider the Seychelles turtle dove - listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

So perhaps it is time to think outside of the proverbial box if we are hoping for a green Christmas next year. Obviously, we aren't going to get there with partridges or pear trees. Instead, what if the following twelve gifts were squeezed under our tree in 2007? What if:

Birmingham - and its surrounding communities - committed to investing in a regional mass transit system? Today, traffic congestion and limited public transportation are identified as the two most critical transportation problems in the Birmingham region, and the average commute is 20.75 miles - the vast majority of those miles traveled by single-vehicle drivers.

Birmingham, Jefferson County and other local governments finally followed through on the Olmstead brothers' century-old vision for the Birmingham area - a vision of open greenspace and public parks - and worked together to create Red Mountain Park as one of the largest urban parks in the country?

House Bill 5420, currently pending in Congress, passed? It would create a 20 percent income tax credit for owners of historic homes that undertake certified rehabilitations and help, in Birmingham's historic neighborhoods, create an incentive for something other than urban sprawl.

A vehicle emissions inspection/maintenance program was enacted that helped ensure Birmingham remained in attainment for ozone? Some estimates blame mobile sources such as cars for as much as 30 percent of urban air pollution.

People continue to purchase the "Protect Our Environment" license plate? Proceeds from the sales of the tags support environmental education programs coordinated by Legacy, Alabama's environmental education partnership. In 2006, the American Bar Association awarded Legacy its National Environmental Stewardship Award.

Local developers realized that existing brownfields tax abatements, coupled with Alabama's aggressive voluntary cleanup program, have the potential to turn Birmingham's brownfields into success stories like Atlanta's Atlantic Station?

The Renew Our Rivers campaign continues to succeed? From 2000 to 2006, this grass-roots effort, supported by thousands of local volunteers, pulled over 7 million pounds of trash from Alabama's rivers.

Businesses and industries used the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway and Alabama's other rivers to their full transportation potential? One gallon of fuel can move a ton 514 miles by barge compared to 202 miles by rail and 59 miles by truck.

The Department of Agriculture's Longleaf Pine Initiative succeeds? At one time, longleaf pines covered 60 million acres in the southeastern United States. Today, only a fraction of that habitat remains.

Forever Wild continues to acquire and preserve Alabama's great wild places for future generations of Alabamians? To date, 54 tracts, totaling some 118,584 acres, have been acquired, ranging from the Walls of Jericho in northern Alabama to the Mobile-Tensaw Delta in the south.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service declares the bald eagle to be no longer endangered? In 1963, there were only 487 active nests in the lower 48 states. Today, there are an estimated 7,066 breeding pairs - one of our generation's great conservation success stories.

Alabama and Georgia complete the Silver Comet "rails-to-trails" trail? The path will connect suburban Atlanta with Anniston and introduce hundreds of the states' citizens to the beauty of east Alabama.

So what do you think, Santa? What if? Jim Noles is a partner in the environmental and natural resources section of the law firm Balch & Bingham LLP. E-mail: jnoles@balch.com.

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