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City Activism: When foreign policy begins at home

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City activism

When foreign policy begins at home

IRVINE, CALIFORNIA

SO EXASPERATED was one city in southern California with the general lack of action to protect the ozone layer that it has passed its own law restricting the use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) within its 7,000-acre jurisdiction. From next summer on, businesses in Irvine that use ozone-depleting compounds must adapt their equipment to prevent the stuff from entering the atmosphere. Irvine is the first city to enact such a ban, though others, including Los Angeles, have placed restrictions on plastic food-packaging that contains CFCs. A mote in the global eye, maybe, but not unusual behaviour for Irvine.

A liberal island in Orange County's conservative sea, Irvine prides itself on its concern about national and international issues. It is home to the Centre for Innovative Diplomacy (CID), a five-year-old activist organisation that promotes local responses to non-local matters: world peace, apartheid, nuclear weapons, Central America. Irvine's mayor, Mr Larry Algran, is CID's executive secretary. Its president is Mr Michael Shuman, a Stanford University law graduate who used to run an international computer link called Peace-Net (and is now in Cambridge, Massachusetts, researching the legality of municipal activity in foreign-policy matters).

The organisation today has 4,000 members, nearly 1,000 of them mayors or other elected city officials. It publishes a quarterly *Bulletin of Municipal Foreign Policy*. Its activities have been known to irritate people in Washington who reckon that foreign policy is a presidential matter.

CID's message is one that appeals to hard-pressed city administrators, especially in the wake of the Reagan administration's cuts in federal grants. It argues that too much federal money is being spent on defence at the expense of inner-city afflictions such as drugs, homelessness, teenage pregnancy and school drop-outs. A predictable point of view; national security, CID argues, entails finding a solution to these urban troubles.

Where CID's approach is different is in its support for what it calls "innovative foreign policy strategies" by local people. Irvine's banning of CFCs is one example of an innovative strategy; sister-city links with foreign towns is another (see next story). Other examples of "citizen diplomacy" are the 900 resolutions passed in favour of a nuclear-weapons freeze and the 118 laws banning nuclear-weapons production in local jurisdictions.

More than 100 cities have ordered divestment of public money from firms doing business with South Africa. Others have declared themselves "sanctuaries" for refugees, often from El Salvador, that the administration refuses to accept. Seattle has a locally financed "Office of International Affairs". Last year 200 city officials got together with 100 Nicaraguan mayors in Managua to pledge their commitment to Nicaragua's stability.

But, for Irvine, pollution is the battle of the moment. The city is calling for an international gathering of mayors and city officials next year, perhaps under United Nations sponsorship, to address ozone depletion. It wants participants to sign a "stratospheric protection accord" which would set its sights at ridding the world of harmful chemicals. Irvine's anti-CFC ordinance is regarded as a model. Fifty cities have already asked for copies of it.