FOOTBALL'S FOOTPRINT: WILL UCONN OFFSET CARBON FROM FAR-FLUNG FOOTBALL PROGRAM?

Is UConn football part of UConn? One might wonder, given that the Husky home stadium is more than 20 miles from campus. One might wonder even more now that Husky "home" games will soon be played out of state.

Ironically, a recent climate change commitment by university and college presidents might yield an answer that can't be spun both ways.

On March 26, I witnessed university President Michael Hogan - accompanied by DEP Commissioner Gina McCarthy - bravely sign the American College & University Presidents Climate Commitment. Bravo! This document pledges UConn to create: "a comprehensive plan to achieve climate neutrality"; an "inventory of all greenhouse gas emissions . . . including commuting and air travel"; and "a policy of offsetting all greenhouse gas emissions generated by air travel paid for by our institution."

Does car commuting to home games in East Hartford apply? Does flying or busing to home games in New Jersey and Massachusetts apply? If the answer is yes, then football's carbon footprint must be offset from somewhere else within the 14 schools and colleges at 11 campuses serving UConn's mission to teach, perform research and do service to the state. If the answer is no, then this indicates to me that UConn football is not part of the institution.

Collegiate sports are great. I'm a letterman myself, in tennis. The UConn athletic program - notably women's and men's basketball under the leadership of coaches Geno Auriemma and Jim Calhoun - was partially responsible for bringing state infrastructure dollars our way. Academic leaders then leveraged those Husky dollars to even greater improvements.

Meanwhile, John Rowland and Robert Kraft cooked up a sweetheart deal to bring the New England Patriots to Hartford. Soon after this plan was aborted, the state decided to build Rentschler Stadium in East Hartford, allowing the Huskies to upgrade from NCAA Division 1-AA to 1-A. Coach Randy Edsall and behind-the-scenes movers and shakers took it from there, elevating UConn football to nearly the level of powerhouse Notre Dame.

To my mind, however, this decision failed on two principles. First, the students could no longer watch home games at home. Second, the global climate took an unnecessary hit when a 40,000-seat stadium was built in a place where public transportation is laughable.

So, what is football's carbon footprint? I offer the following estimate for home games alone, based on a series of iffy ifs. If the stadium is packed six times; if everyone drove an average of 20 miles one way, three to a car, in gas- or diesel-powered vehicles; and if vehicles below EPA average mileage (SUVs and light trucks) outnumbered more efficient vehicles, (do "real" hybrids even have a tailgate?), then nearly 200,000 gallons of gas will be used per season.

At nearly 500 metric tons, this is approximately 1/60th the total carbon footprint for the entire university. This does not count the diesel and aviation fuel used for away games or out-of-state home games (there's an oxymoron for you), which Hogan has pledged to offset.

The dilemma of the football footprint is a no-win situation. If the team is deemed not to be part of UConn for the purposes of carbon accounting, then the students will technically be without a team. If
it's deemed part of the university, then its fat carbon consumption must be offset by some other worthy UConn program in the coming years.

A final note. Calculating carbon emissions got me thinking about the Burton Family Football complex at Storrs. It's proudly touted as the first LEED-certified, i.e. "green," athletic training facility in the NCAA. That's great! But I wonder how many gasoline-fueled student trips to East Hartford does it take to offset the carbon savings of this laudable architectural achievement?