Oakland creates jobs by going green by Van Jones and Ben Wyskida

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out at the crowd, Dellums changed his mind. He knew people needed hope. He ran.

In his campaign, Dellums embraced big ideas and committed to making Oakland what he called a "model city": a place where visionary ideas like universal health care and education for all take hold, working on a local level and standing as a model of what is possible for the rest of the country.

Embracing ideas put forward by community leaders, including our organization, Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Dellums promised to make Oakland "a Silicon Valley" of green capital, pledging to make the growth of the green economy central to Oakland's comeback. The choice of a "green" economy isn't random—Oakland has some real advantages:

- Oakland is one of the sunniest, windiest cities in California, poised to be a leader in solar and wind power.
- The "green wave" of investment is hottest right here in the Bay Area.
- Settlement of an energy lawsuit left Oakland millions to spend on sustainability, and a bond issue left our community college system ready to invest heavily in a bold greening program.

Dellums was running against a pro-development, pro-gentrification bloc bent on making Oakland a bedroom community for San Francisco. More condos for the rich and more of the same for the hardest hit neighborhoods in Oakland.

But inspired by the "model city" vision, and Dellums himself, the people said "no" to more of the same.

On June 5, 2006, Dellums was elected mayor. He got just 126 votes more than he needed to avoid a runoff. Progressives and people of color, locked out for so long, now had a chance to lead.

A "Green Jobs, Go Local" Plan

At the same time Dellums was campaigning for office, the Ella Baker Center co-convened the Oakland Apollo Alliance. Connected to the National Apollo Alliance, an effort to create 3 million clean energy jobs in the next decade, the Oakland Apollo Alliance is one of the nation's first roundtables committed to job creation for low-income people and people of color in the green, sustainable economy.

Inspiring efforts were already taking place all over Oakland:

- A group called People's Grocery delivers fresh, organic food on a truck to low-income families.
- California Youth Energy Services trains and pays young adults to conduct energy audits.
- Developers connected to the Apollo Alliance are building Red Star Homes—green buildings constructed by formerly-incarcerated people on the site of a once-toxic brownfield.

Our challenge: After so many years of fighting reactive battles, we had a chance to be for something. The Oakland Apollo Alliance moved quickly, offering three big ideas to the Dellums administration:

1. Create the nation's first "Green Jobs Corps," a training pipeline and partnership between labor unions, the community college system, and the City to train and employ residents—particularly hard-to-employ constituencies—in the new green economy.
2. Declare "Green Enterprise Zones" in Oakland—areas where green businesses and green-collar employers are given incentives and benefits to locate and hire. This is part of a comprehensive "Green Economic Development Plan," a funded and staffed study to identify ways to make a better business climate for sustainable enterprise—provided it hires local residents as a way to keep benefits and money in town.
3. Green the Port, building on an inspiring success story in Los Angeles, where a healthy port program is dramatically reducing emissions. We want to turn one of Oakland's greatest public health threats into an international model for sustainability.

By their nature, green jobs are local jobs—and these ideas will have extra impact in Oakland because of the "multiplier effect" a town gets when money is spent on a local business instead of a chain or out-of-town company. Converting the Port to biodiesel creates demand for a fueling station and a manufacturing plant nearby. Businesses in the Green Enterprise Zones will need to hire Jobs Corps graduates.

Along with a host of other proposals, our larger vision is to turn Oakland into a "global green city," where the pathway out of poverty is the new green wave. The reality is that other market sectors and other types of business aren't coming to Oakland. If green isn't the answer, what is?

Six Months To Go

Now, something remarkable is happening in Oakland. Unlikely allies like labor, environmental, and social justice activists are working together. A coalition of nonprofit organizations is aligning strategic plans for the next six
months. Funders are pouring money into Oakland, inspired by the chance for a true progressive success story. Ordinary people, too, are getting involved in campaigns for things they'd never heard of six months ago, calling their councilmembers to demand "conservation retrofits" and "biodiesel at the Port."

On that third Thursday in September, we launched the "Apollo Challenge," our petition drive to encourage the City to adopt the green jobs platform. The first people to sign? An electrician, a poet, a city councilmember, an activist, and a job counselor. In coming months we will take to the streets—a multi-racial, multi-issue coalition demanding a green future for all of Oakland.

"We are the Heroes"

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a group of pioneering activists and dedicated citizens decided to focus their efforts on a couple of small Alabama towns in an effort to make change. They didn't worry whether their funders would ask if they were national or regional. They didn't wonder if what they were doing was too "local" to make a difference. The towns? Selma and Montgomery.

In 1999, citizens in a small town in Bolivia had growing concerns about a new plan to privatize their city's water supply. They went to community meetings. They formed working groups. They volunteered. When nobody listened, they took to the streets, surviving martial law and extreme violence at the hands of the military, and reclaimed their water. Their victory has catalyzed an international movement for change. Their town? Cochabamba.

Around our office, we've been wearing t-shirts that say, "We are the heroes we've been waiting for." We believe that our little local campaign to win green jobs for Oakland will echo. For us, "go local" isn't about going small scale or getting back to our roots. It's about winning a victory that will inspire debate and action in every struggling community in America.

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