

YES! Magazine Winter 2007: Go Local!

Green-Collar Jobs for Urban America

by Van Jones and Ben Wyskida

Oakland looks for a greener path toward prosperity

Union electricians hung out with Youth Against Youth Incarceration. A poet parsed words with a permaculturist. Two seniors and a spoken word artist debated the coming election. Community college students communed with a councilmember, while an architect broke bread with an immigration attorney.

On the third Thursday of September 2006, in a college auditorium in Oakland, California, 300 people came together to launch a new movement: a campaign for "green-collar jobs" as a path to economic and social recovery for low-income communities.

A "green-collar job" involves environment-friendly products or services. Construction work on a green building, organic farming, solar panel manufacturing, bicycle repair: all are "green jobs." The green-collar economy is big money, and it's booming. Including renewable energy and clean technology, "green" is the fifth largest market sector in the United States.

In the Bay Area, we have seen boom times before. The dot-com era rose and fell all around us, but for low-income people and people of color that wave didn't even register, boom or bust. The question we're asking here in Oakland—that 300 people turned out to answer—is, can the green wave lift all boats?

This question is not an abstraction, and the answer is non-negotiable. With murder rates soaring and employment rates plummeting, Oakland is in a literal do-or-die struggle to build a sustainable local living economy strong enough to lift people out of poverty.

If this movement succeeds, the effort in Oakland can point the way forward—to a new era of solution-based politics for cities across the United States. If this movement fails, a city with so much promise could fall further into despair. The stakes are high, and the next six months offer a once-in-a-generation opportunity to write a new story for Oakland.

The Murder Capital of California ...

Oakland is the working-class home to almost 500,000. One of the most racially and culturally diverse cities in America, Oakland boasts the nation's fourth largest port, and for decades was an industrial manufacturing hub.

The march of globalization and the changing world economy ended this prosperity. As small businesses shut down and good manufacturing jobs disappeared, there weren't many jobs left. The industries that stayed are largely pollution-based, feeding Oakland with one hand and poisoning it with the other.

In the poor parts of Oakland, neighborhoods of mostly black and Latino residents, 40 percent of young people suffer chronic respiratory ailments. There are no supermarkets. Ten thousand people on parole or probation lack opportunities for meaningful jobs.

Violence reached a boiling point on September 6 when Nicole Tucker, a 27-year old single mother with a beautiful four-year-old daughter, was shot to death in her car. Her family remembers her as a hardworking and loving parent who put herself through school and was saving to buy a house. The media cruelly remembered her as the one who broke the record: Nicole was the 95th homicide of 2006, passing Oakland's total for all of 2005 in just the first week of September.

Much of Oakland has been left behind, and it's falling deeper and deeper into despair.

...Or the Global Green City?

Against this backdrop, there is hope for a different Oakland.

In 2005, residents reached out to former Congressman Ron Dellums, a visionary black progressive who had retired from politics. They pleaded with him to run for mayor.

Dellums was done with politics, and he stood before a crowd of hundreds ready to say "thank you, but no." Looking



Photo by Andy Wright. www.flickr.com/photos/agentd

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-convoked 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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