One Stone?

Green-collar job programs aim to address two urban ills at once.

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SOLUTIONS

Merion Avenue, in West Philly, was once dubbed the dirtiest street in Philadelphia by the Streets Department. The stretch from 48th to 52nd streets, with vacant lots on one side, had been a regular dumping ground for worn tires, broken furniture and other people's trash.

But when Dennis Lee brought out his Project Neighborhood Environmental Action Team (NEAT), an outgrowth of the American Cities Foundation that employs part-timers with employment barriers (such as incarceration for victimless crimes or lengthy unemployment), the 4800 block of Merion began to change. Eighty thousand pounds of trash were removed, vacant lots were sealed, and cameras were installed to prevent future dumping.

When the team began planting trees, residents from across the street came out of their homes to feed them breakfast.

"We were doing debris removal and giving disenfranchised people a segue into the work force," explains Lee. "For those part-timers who really got involved, there was a sense of ownership and pride — they could do this for their own neighborhood."

Lee didn't realize it at the time, but what he had on his hands was Philly's first "green-collar" work force. Green-collar jobs, a term coined by Raquel Pinderhughes, professor of urban studies at San Francisco State University, are "manual-labor jobs in businesses whose products and services directly improve environmental quality."

According to Pinderhughes' 2007 Green Collar Jobs report, commissioned by Berkeley, Calif.'s Office of Energy and Sustainable Development, there are 22 green-collar sectors, including water conservation, hazardous material cleanup and sustainable urban landscaping.

Collectively, these sectors represent a new industry that has been gathering (bio-friendly) steam. President Bush recently signed the Federal Green Jobs Act of 2007, which allocates $125 million to green-collar worker-training programs, and places such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Cleveland and the South Bronx have been developing programs to support green jobs and businesses.

Now, Philly's looking to get on board. On May 5, City Council convened its first hearing on a resolution sponsored by Blondell Reynolds Brown to, as the resolution says, "help Philadelphia create a qualified, trained work force to support local green businesses and contractors."

Essentially, the city wants to create many more jobs like the ones Project NEAT provides.
Unlike the "sexy" green movement of celebrities and high-brow marketing schemes, the green-collar industry, Pinderhughes believes, is poised to expand because cities need it.

"Every single city in the world is facing a series of environmental challenges," she says, citing a lack of landfill space, rising energy costs, and air and water contamination. "The services and products that manage these urban problems are green businesses."

The fortunate thing, she says, is that this could be good for the "new urban economy."

"It's inherently a local phenomenon. You may have to import parts but the actual work has to be done locally; there is no way to outsource it."

Because many green-collar jobs have low barriers to employment, they are ideal for inner-city populations that have struggled to enter the work force.

"You want to link the opportunity to improve environmental quality to the opportunity to improve social inequality," Pinderhughes explains. "People in low-income communities recognize ... that their local environments have been degraded. To be paid a living wage for improving their community is very attractive."

Since 1969, Philadelphia has lost over 400,000 industrial jobs. And though it would be foolish to consider such a young idea a panacea, it would seem smart for us to try to encourage such development.

How do we do that?

The early national model for green workforce development appears to be Oakland's Green Jobs Corps: The founder of the program, Van Jones, has been interviewed by The New York Times, Los Angeles Times and Philadelphia Inquirer, and Oakland's example is cited in Reynolds Brown's resolution.

The Oakland Corps' model includes a training program for a green work force, based on Pinderhughes' design, which involves training for "soft skills" such as punctuality, basic math and literacy, and vocational training.

It also calls for cooperation with schools to implement green-collar programs, with unions to begin engaging green-collar work, and for the establishment of a Green Business Council to identify growing business sectors, so that training can be informed by demand.

In case the demand isn't there, though, Oakland's Corps is working to create it, by lobbying its local government to gear policy in the right direction: Certain kinds of legislation are instrumental in creating green jobs. The state of California, for instance, has earmarked $3.2 billion in solar subsidies and passed a law to reduce greenhouse gas emission by 25 percent by 2020. And in Washington, D.C., the Green Building Act of 2006 requires that all new large buildings be certified in Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED). In 2001, the state of California sued several energy companies after statewide outages. A portion of the settlement was allocated to energy conservation projects, giving Oakland Green Jobs Corps its $250,000 in seed money.

It all sounds good, and that's why it's gotten such good press — though there is reason to proceed slowly in using Oakland as a model. Its program hasn't actually happened yet. Starting late this summer, Green Jobs Corps plans to train 40 people with employment barriers to help fill an anticipated 125 local green-collar job slots.

If Philly does decide to join Oakland in experimentation with green jobs, it will have some obstacles to overcome: We have neither the funding nor the sweeping environmental legislation laying a foundation for the industry. We do, however, have a new mayoral administration that's identified environmental challenges as a priority — Mayor Nutter recently appointed Mark Allen Hughes as the city's new director of sustainability. And some money could materialize — there's a possibility that Philly could receive a portion of the $125 million from the Federal Green Jobs Act (to leverage Philadelphia's appeal for federal dollars, City Council has pressured the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce to create a green-job-force initiative). And a bill that recently passed in the state House and is now before the Senate would provide $850 million for statewide green-collar job development.

We also have two organizations — the American Cities Foundation and the Sustainable Business Network (SBN) — which have jumped out ahead of the government in promoting green development locally. SBN has already compiled a list of Delaware Valley green businesses and is working on establishing a Green Business Council that will predict which green jobs sectors will be growing. It's also created a Green Economy Committee, which includes an Employer Commitment Committee focused on getting green businesses to hire people with employment barriers, a Funding Committee, a Job...
Training Committee and a Policy Committee.

Basically, it's doing some things the city might do before the city does them, which could help our legislators overcome being late to the game.

"There's been examples of council members who've gotten excited about something and wrote legislation without being fully educated," warns SBN's executive director, Leanne Krueger-Braneky. "We are trying to stay ahead of them and say, 'Look, let us do the research.'"

Reynolds Brown says City Council will be relying on these organizations to inform its decision-making as it scrambles to get a plan in place by fall.

Meanwhile, the American Cities Foundation is looking to develop Project NEAT into a full-fledged green-collar training program. When the project began four years ago, to reduce the amount of dirty storm water flowing from the West Philly streets into the pipe system, no one except the Streets Department was paying much attention. Today, Project NEAT, which employs a work force of 80 percent ex-offenders, is training people in "rain barrel" installation, and has created an environmental stewardship program for residents of West and Southwest Philly. Pinderhughes has called it the first green-collar job development outfit in Philadelphia.

The funny thing about this is that Dennis Lee hadn't heard of Pinderhughes or green-collar jobs until relatively recently; it just turned out that his grassroots urban revitalization project loosely followed the Pinderhughes model. In this light, the transformation of Merion Avenue seems like more than just an early version of a new program. It seems like a natural movement, taking root.

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