

Philadelphians' efforts to create a green, sustainable city are beginning to bear fruit

By Raymond Simon I

On April 29, Mayor Michael Nutter released "Greenworks Philadelphia," his framework for transforming Philadelphia into America's greenest city. Then, on May 15, the Energy Coordinating Agency graduated its first class of low-skilled workers retrained for green-collar jobs.

Philadelphia's initial attempts to transform itself have been so successful that United States Representatives Robert Brady, Chaka Fattah and Allyson Schwartz would like them to serve as a model for towns and cities across America.

Consequently, they convened a congressional field hearing entitled "Vibrant Communities, Healthy Waters, and Job Opportunities" on Monday, May 18 at the Academy of Natural Sciences.

A congressional field hearing is loosely defined as any congressional committee meeting held outside of Washington D.C. Field hearings vary in tone and formality. At some, witnesses are sworn in, but Monday's meeting was relaxed and informal. Six local experts in greening, sustainability and energy conservation testified: Blaine Bonham, Paul Bonney, Elizabeth Garland, Howard Neukrug, Liz Robinson, and Susan Wachter.

The hearing's purpose was threefold: sharing information; publicizing Philadelphia's efforts in order to attract more funding to the region; and holding up Philadelphia as an example for the rest of the nation.

Congresswoman Schwartz chaired the morning's first panel discussion, which included testimony from Bonham, executive vice president of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society; Neukrug, director of the Philadelphia Office of Watersheds; and Wachter, a professor of real estate and finance at Penn's Wharton School of Business.

The panelists made it clear that the principal reason Philadelphia can serve as a model to follow is because individuals, civic organizations, and corporations have already begun educating the public about the importance of sustainability, creating the infrastructure necessary to pursue it and, most important, working together. "Philadelphia could be a template other cities can follow," Bonham said.

He pointed out how the PHS's initiatives to plant more trees and establish community gardens dovetail with the efforts of Neukrug and the Office of Watersheds to reduce storm water runoff. He also stated that Wharton professor Susan Wachter's research, which documented the boost in home values that comes from "place-based investments" like planting trees and gardens near homes, has aided greening efforts by providing lawmakers quantifiable results to bolster sustainability initiatives.

Congresswoman Schwartz knows firsthand how valuable Philadelphia's green infrastructure is: she recently drew on it while crafting a new bill known as the Green Communities Act (H. R. 2222). This bill, introduced on April 30, is intended to secure grant funding for local organizations pursuing green initiatives.

Greg Lewis, a policy analyst at the Northeast-Midwest Institute, a non-profit research organization working on behalf of rust belt states and a co-sponsor of Monday's field hearing, explained via e-mail that Congresswoman Schwartz had requested input about water quality from the NEMI while drafting her bill.

The NEMI was already working on water quality with Philadelphia's William Penn Foundation, which apprised the NEMI of grantees working on green issues. This contact among colleagues working on related issues provided important information to Congresswoman Schwartz for her bill and lead to Monday's congressional field hearing.

These networks, formal and informal, are integral to the green infrastructure. In this particular case, they lead to a concrete policy proposal. As the hearing's second panel featuring Bonney, Garland, and Robinson made clear, the hope is that they will also attract federal stimulus money and contribute to the economy's turnaround.

Robinson, executive director of the Energy Coordinating Agency, directly addressed the issue of green-collar jobs. In February, the Knight Foundation awarded the ECA, which works in low-income neighborhoods, \$1 million to train workers for jobs ranging from weatherization to installing solar panels.

She believes training low-skilled workers from these areas for green-collar jobs will not only enable them to enter the workforce, but will also offer opportunities for advancement.

She urged lawmakers, however, to standardize certification for these new green-collar jobs. In her opinion, certification will promote stability, enabling newly trained green-collar workers to find employment and spend money in their own communities rather than crisscrossing the country in search of work.

On May 15, Robinson noted, Mayor Nutter was on hand to applaud the 21 men and women who successfully completed the ECA's training.

Their accomplishment is just one example of how Philadelphia's nascent green infrastructure has been able to capitalize on recent developments nudging America towards a sustainable economy.

Perhaps as a result of this congressional field hearing, cities and towns across America will begin to learn from Philadelphia's example.

The Northeast-Midwest Institute will post a report on this congressional field hearing shortly at: www.nemw.org/smartgrowth.htm.

Information and updates about the Green Communities Act (H. R. 2222) can be found online at: thomas.loc.gov