

San Diego area poised to be a leader in building green economy, says national expert: area apt to get \$100 million in funds for going green

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By Miriam Raftery

“We are in a moment of historic change,” Phaedra Ellis-Lamkins, chief executive officer of Green for All, said in a program yesterday in San Diego titled “Green Jobs: Fighting Poverty and Pollution.” Sponsored by the Center for Policy Initiatives, the event drew a full house of community leaders, environmentalists and labor union members. “Do people know that there are trillions of dollars to be spent on a green economy?” she asked. “The reason I’m in San Diego is because San Diego is one of the places that is ripe for opportunity. . . Very few cities are ready for this money.”

The national green economy expert predicted, “We think San Diego is a place that should be a model for a green economy... A green economy can move us out of recession.” In addition, the transition to a green energy can create good-paying jobs and lift people out of poverty in San Diego County and the nation, Lamkins said.

“In the next year alone, four to five trillion dollars will be spent investing in a green economy,” she observed. “That’s more capital than it took to start Silicon Valley, Adobe, Apple Computer and many other high-tech companies combined.”

Just for weatherization, \$5 million will be spent here in the next nine months—at an average of \$6,500 a house in San Diego County, Lamkins said. Next up, the Obama administration wants Congress to pass an Energy bill by Memorial Day. A trillion dollars will be spent on the transition to green energy alone.

Lamkins’ predecessor as Green for All CEO, Van Jones, is now special advisor for green jobs in the Obama administration White House. Lamkins has previously been a leader of Working Partnerships USA and the South Bay AFL-CIO. She notes that when the U.S. transitioned from a manufacturing-based economy to an information-based economy during the Silicon Valley boom, many good-paying jobs for middle class Americans were lost—so she’s working on building a coalition to assure that a green economic boom will include opportunities not limited to high-tech fields, but instead, provide training and creation of green-collar jobs for working people, including workers without college degrees.

“It’s not a green job if you’re making minimum wage pushing a broom in a green business,” she said pointedly.

Green For All’s mission is to include working people, people of color and a social justice movement to the environmental movement “because the only way we win is to get a whole new group of people to come to the table,” Lamkins said. At the state and local level, that means asking, “How do you help make the green economy real?”

Jobs created will include construction as well as manufacturing solar panels, wind turbine parts, and more. Infrastructure and transportation projects will also provide jobs. But there are catches: projects must be shovel ready to receive federal stimulus funds. “If you can help mayors figure out how to spend this money, they get pretty excited,” she said.

“There is a huge opportunity. The administration believes in this economy. This isn’t the first black president,” she quipped. “This is the first green president.”

With MTV and rock stars such as USHER backing the movement, she observed, “It is hip to be green.” The “hip” factor is attracting a youth movement—something crucial in massive social reform movements of the past.

She added, “We’re in an economy that has only lifted yachts. We need to acknowledge global warming and lift all boats.”

Toward that end, the Climate Equity Alliance has been formed. Its members include the Council of Churches, labor groups such as Service Employees International Union (SEIU), building trades, and environmentalists.

Locally, a Green Energy/Green Jobs has formed as a coalition representing community. Environmental and labor groups working toward a “thriving local green economy” to reduce our carbon footprint, improve air and water quality, benefit neighborhoods and create family-supporting union jobs.

A recent action alert issued by Green Energy/Green Jobs seeks a “seat at the table” to develop a green recovery plan locally—specifically, how to spend \$12 million in energy efficiency and renewable energy stimulus dollars. “The Mayor is ready to spend our \$12 million in energy stimulus dollars without consulting the public!” a handout at the event stated. The group notes that the federal government will provide \$250,000 to create a strategic plan to implement those goals. Councilmembers Frye and Lightner support this approach, but five votes are needed. Supporters urge public support at a May 13th rules committee hearing at 9 a.m. in City Hall, 13th floor.

Some have objected to costs while shifting to a green economy, and concerns have been raised over the impact of potentially higher energy bills the poor. But many of those in poverty are also those most apt to live in areas where they may suffer the effects of pollution, such as asthma, she added. Improving the quality of air and water by converting to green energy will ultimately improve public health—and provide better paying jobs to lift many out of poverty, said Lamkins, adding, “We are advocates for the green users.”

Raised in poverty, Lamkins recalls the pride she felt when she no longer had to accept free lunches at school, because her mother got hired for a \$10 an hour job. “Every child deserves a better life,” she concluded to a standing ovation. “We will be judged by this moment in history, by how we do this now. How will you answer if someone asks you in twenty years, ‘Did you help stop global warming? Did you lift people out of poverty?’”