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Oakland's Green Jobs: The Gateway To a Greener Country

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INTRODUCTION

The city of Oakland has devoted millions of dollars and countless hours to providing an ecologically friendly community for all of its citizens. As a result of its effective planning, Oakland has been ranked among the nation's top ten greenest cities eight times in the past decade. The city is currently in phase one of its sustainability plan, mitigation, which involves developing and implementing basic strategies to minimize its carbon footprint.

Established in 1997, the Sustainable Oakland Program provided a systematic organization of the city's departments to work towards limiting poverty and achieving sustainability in all aspects of the built environment. Sustainable Oakland is developing the Energy and Climate Action Plan (ECAP), Oakland's first noteworthy layout to reach their goals. This plan aims to limit Oakland's greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption through a number of specific guidelines involving buildings, jobs, food, waste, and transportation. Moreover, the ECAP serves as a template for local communities to participate in more sustainable and efficient activities. Although Oakland is lacking in its ability to establish effective local food practices and sustainable businesses, it has an innovative plan to develop green jobs training initiatives all over California (City of Oakland 2011).

In this case study of Oakland, I will analyze the Energy and Climate Action Plan's strengths and weaknesses and then offer suggestions on how Oakland can refine its plan. It is imperative to grasp the basic ideas of the sustainability plan before choosing a best practice. After breaking down the city's proposal, I will then to explain why Oakland's unique approach to green jobs is a valuable model for other cities.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the ECAP

The first aspect of the Energy and Climate Action Plan is to achieve zero waste by 2020. In 2006, the Oakland City Council established a goal to reduce about 90% of the solid waste sent to landfills each year. Throughout the past four years, Oakland has already reduced approximately 100,000 tons of its solid waste disposal. In addition to the zero waste goal, the Bring Your Own Bag (BYOB) campaign has improved Oakland's waste management system. It has led to the distribution of efficient, reusable bags to replace single-use bags in grocery stores and other shops throughout the city. These bags minimize litter and reduce contamination to waterways and other resources that are crucial to our survival (City of Oakland 2009a).

Oakland's waste reduction efforts have also been successful on a residential scale. Initially, the municipal recycling program only served half the city, but within the past decade, the curbside recycling program has been expanded to all of Oakland, resulting in a considerable increase to its total recycling tonnage. In order to sustain the current progress, the Energy and Climate Action Plan designed a proposal to refine the waste management system. Under the new system, there will be economic incentives for

businesses and individuals to reduce their waste and modifications to the types of materials permitted to be recycled.

Oakland's measures to limit its waste production have been successful not only because the city council has increased the scope of the waste management system, but also because the legislative actions are pragmatic. As a result, the city's waste production has been declining exponentially for the past five years, and the city could achieve its goal of getting close to zero waste. Establishing incentives will inspire people to further engage in recycling practices, especially in our current economic recession.

Another category in which the ECAP excels is transportation. Public transportation is a leading source of carbon dioxide emissions. Limiting the use of fossil fuels in Oakland's municipal fleet would not only mitigate the depletion of the ozone layer in the atmosphere, but it would also decrease the instances of asthma and other illnesses. To lessen the negative effects and consumption of greenhouse gasses, the city government has advanced a variety of alternative energy fuels, including hydrogen and compressed natural gas (CNG). The enactment of the Green Fleet Resolution promotes the application of these sustainable fuels to Oakland's public transportation. Along with the Truck Replacement Project, which provides trucks the necessary funds to add a filter to their exhaust system, city officials hope to have created a completely "green fleet" of public vehicles in the long run. But achieving sustainability in public transportation is only half the battle; reducing the amount of cars on the road is also fundamental to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore, Oakland provides a free downtown shuttle to displace the number of people traveling via cars (City of Oakland 2009a).

Governmental officials are still in the course of discovering new, efficient methods of transportation. For example, they have been looking into Bus Rapid Transit “to make transit easier, faster, more reliable, and more convenient” (City of Oakland 2011) due to its favorability in other cities such as New York City. This systematic transportation network allocates specific lanes for buses to reduce traffic and improve punctuality. Even though segments of Oakland’s transportation proposal are still in their initial stages, the city is continuing to develop its transportation efforts to reduce its carbon footprint. Alternative fuel stations have been constructed throughout the city, and the comprehensive “green fleet” of public transportation stimulates excitement and attracts hundreds of car-owners to ride the buses each day. In short, it is difficult to spend a day in Oakland without observing its green modes of transportation.

Similar to Oakland’s measures to limit waste and practice green transportation is its focus on green buildings. The Civic Green Building Ordinance requires LEED silver certification for all buildings constructed after 2005 (City of Oakland 2009a). Moreover, “this ordinance further promotes green-building techniques such as the use of sustainable wood products, reduction, reuse, and recycling of waste” (Hess et al. 2010). Oakland is one of few cities that have passed legislation with respect to environmentally friendly buildings. In addition, the city has collaborated with QuEST, Community Energy Services Corporation, and PG&E to put the Oakland Shines Program in place. This program helps to retrofit buildings with modern appliances such as Energy Star heating, ventilation, and lighting systems. Companies are also provided with free energy audits to receive further assistance in retrofitting buildings. In an effort to expand these initiatives to the private sphere, the city passed the Weatherization and Energy Retrofit Loan

Program, which gives impoverished homeowners the ability to reduce their energy expenses and improve the efficiency of their appliances. Oakland has also incorporated solar energy to accompany retrofitting. Solar panels on top of the Municipal Services Center account for 2.3% of the city's municipal electric load and continue to provide energy for other facilities. Oakland's green buildings policies are exceptionally diverse largely in part due to the connection between governmental policies and citizen support of retrofit programs. The government has been actively involved in establishing up-to-date standards while it continues to form partnerships to regulate Oakland's public buildings (City of Oakland 2009a).

Despite the Energy and Climate Action Plan's many strong points, there are still some shortcomings in its local food policies. Oakland's approach to stimulating people to buy locally is undoubtedly less detailed compared to its focus on waste, transportation, and buildings. The plan calls for the development of regulations to enable urban agriculture and food production without any specific guidelines or goals. For instance the sustainability plan claims, "The City will study options to allow for...small scale forms, civic/community gardens, and industrial forms on urban land" (City of Oakland 2011). This vague wording provides deficient insight into where and how Oakland intends to institute its communal food projects. Furthermore, its sustainability plan aspires to "promote policies and programs that increase the consumption of food" but fails to recommend how the city will carry out these strategies (City of Oakland 2011). The Oakland Food Policy Council needs to describe explicit steps and instructions for urban farmers to follow in order to achieve progress parallel to that of the other aspects of Oakland's green plan.

It is equally important for Oakland to improve its green-business initiatives. The Oakland Shines and QuEST partnership provide resources and knowledge to business owners to jumpstart their sustainability initiatives. This partnership is well thought out and advantageous to retrofitting public buildings, but it will face problems when trying to influence business owners to participate in their program, because, “they still have businesses to run” and “spend very little time thinking about energy and energy efficiency” (Torres 2010). Oakland Shines is insistent upon achieving unattainable goals. For instance, officials have targeted a 120-block area to revitalize 300 to 400 business buildings. Tackling a vast region before attempting to effectuate its practices on a small scale is counterproductive. Oakland Shines should initially focus on a pilot program of retrofitting a few dozen businesses to learn what needs to be improved. Then, after more observation and research, the program can potentially be a leader in green business initiatives (Torres 2010).

The StopWaste partnership works side-by-side Oakland Shines to upgrade businesses. Its goal of stimulating the greening of businesses is more feasible than that of Oakland Shines, but it is not as extensive. Not all businesses are eligible to receive the benefits of StopWaste. For instance, a business must have at least two cubic yards of waste to receive grants, whereas K-12 schools are limited to general agency mini-grants under specific conditions. Even for businesses that do receive grants, the maximum award is \$5,000, which is relatively insignificant because waste reduction services and energy-efficient machinery are extremely expensive. Thus, small businesses do not always have the capability of matching the necessary funds to accelerate the process. Big companies such as the Ghirardelli chocolate company have made the most headway in

greening their business because they contain a prodigious quantity of employees and funds. If Oakland were to expand its partnerships to encompass locally owned businesses, then we could consider its green buildings initiatives among the foremost in the world (Alameda County Waste Management Authority 2011).

Green Jobs as a Best Practice

Oakland's city council has spearheaded green workforce training programs, which not only improve the city's sustainability efforts but also alleviate poverty and crime throughout destitute areas of the city. A paradigm of green jobs training, the Oakland Green Jobs Corps (OGJC), was founded in 2008 from a \$250,000 donation of the city council with help from the Oakland Apollo Alliance. Primarily based on their model of green-collar jobs, the OGJC functions to provide "green pathways out of poverty for low-income adults in Oakland" (Ella Baker Center 2011). Green jobs fortify a connection between Oakland's built environment—including buildings, municipal waste services, and transportation systems—and its citizens through employing the mentally handicapped, ex-felons, immigrants, and the uneducated. Van Jones' Green For All Program established the four goals of the OGJC to encompass helping young adults with career advice, restoring the environment through a knowledgeable labor force, supporting green business growth, and advancing Oakland as a world leader in economic and environmental sustainability.

In addition to securing the Oakland Green Job Corps' funding, the Apollo Alliance augmented the backbone to the OGJC's training model. After recruiting about forty individuals between the ages of 18 and 35, the OGJC operates in three phases

including hands-on training, environmental education, and internships. The first phase takes place over the course of three months and provides training in general life skills and supportive services like child and health care. Additionally, the OGJC helps the recruits to become fully literate, competent in math and English through a hands-on approach, and mentally ready to sustain a long-term job. During this stage, trainees are informed of the importance of labor unions and apprenticeship programs. The next phase proceeds with educating the trainees in four-week rotations about environmental terminology dealing with renewable energy and energy efficiency. The future OGJC graduates have the opportunity of earning \$9/hour and working up to twenty hours per week. In the final stage, trainees earn a living wage and participate in a six-month internship. Financial advisers assist the green jobholders to responsibly manage their money and ensure that they do not end up back on the streets. The Oakland Green Jobs Corps continues its managerial services for at least a year after the trainees graduate (Ella Baker Center 2011).

After completing training in the Oakland Green Jobs Corps, the employees continue to work in green projects throughout the city. They have helped to convert Oakland's Port to biodiesel, creating further demand for jobs because people are needed to construct fueling stations (Jones and Wsyskida 2006). They have also assembled solar panels on the city's ice rinks and other public facilities (City of Oakland 2009a). But most importantly, the OGJC gives people the chance to feel accomplished and productive because they contribute to the green-collar economy in Oakland. Olivia Caldwell, an Oakland Green Jobs Corps graduate, claimed that after the green jobs training she received, she felt she was able to provide for the future of her one-year-old daughter and

the future of her planet. Overall, green jobs are associated with safe working conditions, satisfactory pay, and good benefits. These incentives are key to the appeal of green jobs (Wilson 2009).

One of the major reasons for the Oakland Green Jobs Corps' success is the strong government subsidies behind it. The enactment of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided multiple grants, including a \$938,000 grant to the Peralta Community College District to promote job skills for the young people at risk (criminals, handicapped, or impoverished). Laney College also received \$1,000,000 to train unskilled workers in eco-literacy and sustainable building strategies. The Cypress Mandela Training Center was awarded \$500,000 to supplement environmental training programs and an additional \$55,000 to remediate highways and other transportation methods. On an individual level, these grants expand on-the-job training sites and allow for more stability in the green-collar economy. However, to see critical changes in the green-collar economy, politicians and business owners must work in unison to establish green policies (City of Oakland 2011).

Conclusion

The Energy and Climate Action Plan lays the groundwork for innovation and adaptation of greener techniques in the future. Compared to other cities, Oakland has a thorough sustainability plan comprising green buildings, local food production, green jobs, green businesses, transportation, and waste. However, with regards to local food production and businesses, its sustainability plan is vague and incomplete. In order to have a substantial impact on communities, Oakland should lay out deadlines and specific

goals to ensure that more farmers' markets and community gardens are established. With respect to green business, partnerships should put more emphasis on amplifying their resources to represent the needs of local businesses. As Oakland transitions into phase two of their sustainability plan, it is imperative that its citizens carry on their current sustainability practices.

Despite some of the ECAP's inadequacies, Oakland remains a world leader in green jobs training. Oakland's Green Jobs Corps is the archetypical model of green workforce training. Its practices are not only effective in transforming archaic technology to be modern and environmentally friendly, but they also serve as a successful method of alleviating unemployment. Oakland's green jobs practices could easily be implemented in other cities as long as regional governments publicize the availability of green jobs and provide extensive training for prospective employees. The city has also made progress in establishing partnerships with organizations to reduce the energy consumption of businesses, but forming these collaborations would be difficult in cities without strong incentives for businesses to become green. Therefore, adopting these policies would require additional legislation by the city government to establish those incentives. Regardless of some of the Energy and Climate Action Plan's shortcomings, Oakland will continue to be internationally acclaimed for its green jobs initiatives, especially as the unemployment issue remains on the top of our agenda.

President Obama promised to precipitate the growth of five million green jobs during his presidency (Kolbert 2009). In our current economic condition, finding such jobs poses a problem. . Bipartisanship in Congress is essential to advancing green

policies and even more, environmental sustainability should be a priority for every politician, no matter what their party affiliation is.

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