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Supplements

Opening the Gateway

State Program Will Plant the Seeds for Green Energy Jobs — and Careers

By *GEORGE O'BRIEN*



Larry Martin says the Gateway project is expected to lead to careers, not simply jobs.

It's called the Springfield-Holyoke 'Gateway to Green Jobs' initiative, a state-financed project that has a number of goals — from job creation to helping make the Commonwealth's homes and business more energy-efficient. The program will fund training that will enable individuals to enter a number of relatively new occupations, from 'energy auditor' to 'solar hot water heating system installer.' But ultimately, the Gateway initiative wants to place people into careers, not merely jobs.

Bill Ward calls it "low-hanging fruit."

That was his way of describing a Bay State initiative, funded by the Department of Energy and Environmental Affairs, that covers considerable ground in the areas of clean energy and workforce development, and holds great promise for creating some needed momentum in both realms.

It's called 'Springfield-Holyoke Gateway to Green Jobs,' a name that doesn't say it all, but comes very close, said Ward, executive director of the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County. 'Gateway,' in this case, has multiple connotations — it refers to the term 'gateway cities,' now being used by several state agencies to refer to older manufacturing centers in the Commonwealth that are struggling to find new economic identities; there are 11 of them, including Springfield and Holyoke. Meanwhile, the program provides an entry, or gateway, to employment for

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unemployed or underemployed individuals.

And 'green jobs,' in this case, refers to a growing list of occupations that have arisen out of regional, national, and even international efforts to make homes and commercial buildings more energy-efficient, thus reducing society's overall carbon footprint. These include 'weatherization technician,' 'energy auditor,' 'window insulation customer service/sales representative,' and even 'solar hot water heating system installer.' These would be considered mostly entry-level positions with fairly modest salaries, but they could lead to work higher up the ladder, said Ward.

The Springfield-Holyoke endeavor is part of a \$1 million statewide initiative that encompasses five separate projects, all involving Gateway cities. The local piece is the only one that involves a regional employment board, said Ward, and it will create 51 jobs in those areas described earlier, positions that area companies attempting to capitalize on the clean-energy movement report difficulty in filling.

But there are possibly more and greater opportunities for the long term, said Ward, noting that the program may help spark interest in this emerging sector, one that would appear to have strong growth potential. In the meantime, Springfield Technical Community College is bidding to become a regional center for programs to train individuals to enter clean-energy occupations, a distinction that would provide more opportunities for the region.

"There is a lot of talk about whether green energy is going to be an economic driver in this region," said Ward. "There are a number of factors that will go into determining whether it will, especially the level of private investment in new products and technology. But government investment will also be critical. The potential is definitely there for this to be an important part of the local economy."

The term 'low-hanging fruit' refers to the relatively simple way in which this program will go about addressing need for qualified workers, said Ward, and also help in the broad efforts to make buildings more energy-efficient in the state's older urban centers, where the need for such work is great. But the components of the project have the potential to bear more fruit down the road.

In this issue, BusinessWest looks at the Gateway to Green Jobs program and how it addresses two of the state's primary economic-development issues at the same time.

Windows of Opportunity

Larry Martin, Planning and Employer Services manager for the REB, said the training to be spawned by the Gateway program is employer-driven, and the need is apparently acute.


This was revealed at a recent focus group, or roundtable discussion, staged in Hatfield that involved 20 area businesses already in or looking to break into the emerging


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clean-energy sector. The session, similar to others conducted for other industry groups, including health care and precision manufacturing, was designed to gain a consensus on workforce needs and how to address them, he told BusinessWest.

"That consensus is that there is definitely going to be a need to expand the workforce in this clean-energy field for 2009, 2010, and moving forward from there," said Martin. "Areas identified included weatherization, insulation, energy auditing, customer sales and service of products, some manufacturing — generally across the board."

The Gateway program emerged in part to meet the need for skilled workers, said Ward, and in some respects the Bay State is taking the lead in such endeavors. Other cities or regions have programs — Chicago, New York, and some areas of Texas have launched initiatives, for example — but the Springfield-Holyoke project has the potential to become an effective model.

"This was a policy decision made by Gov. Patrick, and it arose out of the need to begin to address green-energy initiatives," said Ward. "It was determined that one of the easiest, low-hanging-fruit ways of getting out of the blocks was to create jobs in the urban areas for low-income people to do entry-level jobs with some level of training."

Such jobs would involve work with energy audits, conducted to identify ways to become more energy-efficient, he continued, but also in the manufacturing and installation of new products and technologies.

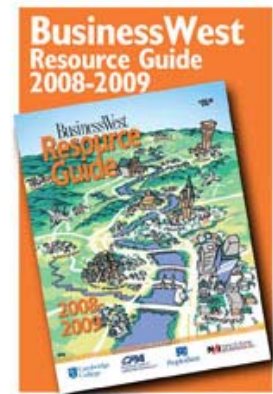
"So many of the older houses and apartments, as well as the Section 8 [subsidized] housing buildings, are not up to maximum efficiency by any stretch," said Ward. "These are properties that can, and should, be modernized and upgraded."

And there would be significant return on investment from such initiatives, he continued, noting lower energy bills for individuals and businesses, and, overall, less reliance on fossil fuels.

Elected officials have recognized the importance of such efforts, said Ward, and stimulus money should put more work in the pipeline. The challenge at hand is creation of a workforce that can handle such projects, and the Gateway initiative, described as a pilot program, addresses that concern, while also creating new career opportunities for several challenged constituencies.

Powerful Arguments

Indeed, Martin said the program will provide a pathway out of poverty for many individuals, and will do so by providing high-quality training in the occupations of solar-boiler installation, energy auditing, manufacturing of a new proprietary window-sealing product, and weatherization technician.



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This will be accomplished by creating career ladders and so-called "lattice-training structures," said Martin, adding that the ultimate goal is to elevate the work of the occupation from a simple job to a career, one with multiple points of entry and that holds opportunities for several constituencies, including women, youths, minorities, non-English-speaking individuals, and economically disadvantaged candidates.

Both Springfield and Holyoke have large populations of such individuals, said Ward, and the REB put both cities together its response to the state's request for proposals regarding the grant money, a bid that was ultimately chosen.

As with most REB initiatives, there were will be a number of players, or partners, in this initiative, said Martin.

They include Holyoke Community College, which will handle project coordination; other educational institutions and training providers, in this case, HolyokeWorks, Springfield Technical Community College, and the Mass. Career Development Institute; Career Point and FutureWorks, the region's two one-stop career centers, which will recruit potential candidates for the training; Nuestras Raices, a Holyoke-based community organization that will work to recruit young people for the youth component of the project, solar hot-water heating systems; and other groups such as as the Springfield and Holyoke housing authorities and YouthBuild programs in those two cities.

Another set of partners will be the employers that will hire the individuals to be trained. These include the Alliance to Develop Power, Alteris Renewables, the Center for Ecological Technology, Co-op Power, Greendustry Park (a green-business incubator), Environmental Compliance Services Inc., and others.

The Gateway project is expected to create more than 50 jobs over the next 16 months, including 12 weatherization technicians, 16 solar-boiler installers, eight window-treatment installers, five window-treatment assemblers, and one machinist. These positions will carry salaries averaging \$12 or \$13 per hour to start, but there will be opportunities to move up the ladder to better-paying jobs, such as energy auditor.

"People can establish their own businesses or become engineers, for example," said Martin. "There are places to go within this industry."

Clean Starts

Summing up the Gateway program, Ward described it as a common-sense initiative that could address several important needs simultaneously — especially the desire to make the state more energy-efficient and creation of a workforce that can handle that assignment.

If all goes as planned, the individuals who will eventually

take part won't have jobs, they'll have careers, he told BusinessWest, meaning that this ambitious project will truly provide windows of opportunity — on a number of levels.

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