



The Star-Ledger

County tries new board to attract green firms

Tuesday, October 28, 2008

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Middlesex County's commitment to green technology got stronger yesterday as a new advisory board was announced to study the value of "Green Economic Development Zones."

Freeholder H. James Polos, an advocate for environmentally friendly technology, said the idea is targeting the 27 million square feet of unused or vacant warehouse space in the county. The goal is "to turn gray fields into green fields," he said.

Faced with the vacancies and the latest state figures showing the unemployment rate rose to 5.6 percent, Polos and other officials want to develop programs that will attract green technology and light-assembly operations to these plants. State Sen. Robert Smith (D-Middlesex) is sponsoring legislation to establish Green Economic Development Zones, which would provide tax advantages and other incentives.

Smith, who chairs the Senate environmental committee, said his bill would extend the Urban Enterprise Zone to allow green areas, where the state sales tax would be lowered to 2 percent. Polos hopes to also create retail centers where the public could shop for the best deals on environmentally friendly building supplies or windows, for instance.

Jeanne Fox, president of the state Board of Public Utilities, was enthusiastic about the county's plans.

"Once again, Middlesex County is leading the way to our new energy future that is clean, reliable and affordable," Fox said.

Officials from the BPU, the state Economic Development Authority, the state department of Community Affairs and Labor, as well as Rutgers University, Middlesex County College, Middlesex County Vocational-Technical High Schools, county officials and corporate leaders are expected to participate in the new advisory board.

Polos said the schools are important because the county hopes to draft the curriculum that will ready the workforce for these new green development zones.

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