

Middlesex County leads push to attract green businesses

by [Tom Haydon](#)/The Star-Ledger

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Middlesex County has teamed up with state agencies and private companies to fill vacant warehouse space with high-tech green industries in a campaign aimed at bringing businesses and jobs to the county.

Members of the recently established county Green Economic Development Zone Committee initiated a broad-based effort -- including tax incentives and business development grants -- to attract companies and create a market for a work force with skills for the cutting-edge businesses.

County officials already initiated discussions with one company that produces lightweight solar film panels.

"Less than two months after our first meeting we're already talking to a company," said Middlesex County Freeholder H. James Polos, the driving force behind the creation of economic development zones for green technology.

Freeholders joined with representatives from Rutgers University, utility companies and state labor and economic agencies, as well as the mayors of five towns, to make plans for bringing companies to vacant warehouses, providing employment and retail opportunity in emerging markets.

"We have a lot of unemployment, and at some point, we have to take some things into our own hands," said Polos, who has been laying the groundwork for these development zones for a few years. Last year he proposed the freeholders establish a development zone committee.

As part of the multi-faceted effort, Polos said Democratic state Senators Robert Smith of Middlesex County and Ray Lesniak of Union County have introduced legislation for a 2-cent sales tax for green companies opening in the state's 10 largest municipalities, including Woodbridge, and in the urban enterprise zones in Carteret, New Brunswick and Perth Amboy.

Sales tax in those UEZ zones is 3 percent, which goes to community development, but the 2-cent sales tax would fund development of alternative energy sources and fuels, Polos said.

Administrators from the BPU, the state Department of Labor and the state Economic Development Authority are among the committee members Polos recruited.

"He's gotten a lot of people around the table," EDA senior vice president Maureen Hassett said of Polos. This is the first county-wide program Hassett has seen in the state.

"We were asked because we partner with the BPU to give incentive to clean, renewable energy manufacturing companies," Hassett said.

In addition to using the benefits of the existing urban enterprise zones, companies coming into the county may be eligible for other start-up grants, Hassett said.

Rutgers University also joined the committee, assisting in planning education programs to prepare and develop a workforce for green industries.

"My goal is to match up the technology resources available with people who have the business plans," said Kevin Lyons, director of procurement for the university and a member of the county green zone development committee.

Rutgers can also provide seminar courses for people planning to start businesses. Beyond that, there is a concern about providing a workforce for the high-tech companies.

"You still want to have the basic trades that can provide the services," Lyons said. "This seems like a great opportunity for a state university in any state," he said.

Polos, working with Freeholder Director Stephen "Pete" Dalina and Freeholder Ronald Rios, who also served on the committee, envisions filling warehouses with companies in alternative energy and energy conservation industries.

An advocate for environmentally friendly technology, Polos said the idea is targeting the 27 million square feet of unused or vacant warehouse space in the county.

One subcommittee will identify locations for the green development zones, If successful, Polos suggested residents would have access to green technology produced in the county, possibly at a discount.

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