



November 2, 2008

## "Green" zones fertile ground for growth

Middlesex County officials announced plans this week to launch what they have taken to calling "green" economic development zones, or GEDZs, areas of commerce where businesses and customers would be entitled to special tax breaks for creating or buying "green" technologies.

Bravo.

The initiative holds the promise of growing eco-friendly products and eco-friendly jobs through financial incentives that ought to successfully stimulate business, much like urban enterprise zones have achieved so well in pockets of New Jersey's cities.

The plan is forward-thinking, forward-reaching, and is elegantly constructed and conceived.

Plus, it is impeccably timed: Middlesex County's unemployment rate has gone from 3.9 percent in August 2007 to 5.5 percent in August of this year, while other signs of economic turmoil have likewise grown. This plan can help.

To begin with, it takes advantage of a weakness — Middlesex County's vacant warehouse and manufacturing space — and attempts to turn it into a strength. How? By matching that 27 million square feet of idle storage and production areas with manufacturers and retailers of environmentally friendly products and services, encouraging them to locate in the county.

And rather than simply going it on its own, Middlesex County has struck an agreement to enlist the ever-valuable aid of Rutgers University, Middlesex County College and the Middlesex County Vocational-Technical institute by creating a "green" curriculum at all three schools, preparing the area's work force to handle those new jobs.

The board of freeholders will create an advisory board to assess the plan, then move it forward. Along the way, the blueprint also calls for the county to sponsor green technology expos, not only venues where producers and buyers of green products will be able to gather under one roof, but the chance for the county to promote its program to the world.

Buy-in thus far from the Statehouse community has been overwhelmingly of the positive sort, with accolades from officials at the state Board of Public Utilities, state Department of Labor, New Jersey Economic Development Authority, and Department of Community Affairs. The private sector has chimed in, too, with warm embraces from the higher-ups at Verizon and Middlesex Water Co., to name but a few.

Much credit goes to the architects of the plan, chief among them Freeholder H. James Polos and state Sen. Robert G. Smith, D-Middlesex. Smith, in fact, will sponsor the enabling legislation in Trenton, calling for tax incentives such as a reduced sales tax rate of 2 percent for green technology sold in the zones, with the revenues to fund new energy-saving and alternative-fuel programs.

The economic potential of green products and green technologies isn't fully realized, but it's known to be huge; billions upon billions of dollars are already invested across the country, with billions more due to come. Middlesex County officials are smart to get themselves and their constituents into the game, instead of waiting for someone else from somewhere else to do it for them. Nice work.