

# THE Nation.

## Greening the Bronx, One Job at a Time

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On a dreary March morning, dozens of people crowded into the lobby of a former bank building in the Bronx now occupied by the [Osborne Association](#), a nonprofit organization that helps people with criminal histories find jobs. They had come to watch Osborne launch a Green Career Center. The tablecloths were green. The goody bags were green. Bronx Borough President [Ruben Diaz Jr.](#) took a three-foot pair of scissors to a green ribbon, but couldn't cut it. Only after repeated chops and a few more sets of hands was he able to slice the symbolic band in two.

Since then, thirtysix people have graduated from the career center, which will train about 400 people with criminal records to work in a greener marketplace over the program's eighteen months. The center is supported almost entirely by \$2 million in federal stimulus funds through the Department of Justice, and it's the latest addition to a borough-wide effort, led by nonprofits like [Sustainable South Bronx](#) and the borough president's office, to green the local economy, much as President Obama has promised to do across the country. The local [economic development corporation's](#) environment and energy initiative has funded the installation of thirteen green roofs and provides business loans of up to \$100,000 for energy efficiency measures. And a number of other local organizations have green job training programs as well. The Bronx is as good a place as any to start these projects. It's one of the poorest counties in the nation, with an unemployment rate of nearly 14 percent. The borough disproportionately bears the environmental burden of supporting a city of 8 million people, with a high concentration of waste transfer stations, heavy industry, crisscrossing highways and the truck traffic that follows.

Both in the Bronx and around the country, Obama's campaign promise to create millions of green jobs has collided with the reality of the recession. Some of the stimulus package that was meant to create green jobs—the [Recovery Act](#) slated more than \$70 billion for renewable energy, transportation and energy efficiency—is taking longer than expected to actually spend, in part because cash-strapped states with furloughed workers have been unable to implement many grants. Out of nearly \$5 billion allocated to fund weatherizing low-income people's homes, for instance, less than 8 percent had been spent by mid-February.

"We've all experienced a bit of 'hurry up and wait' with green jobs," said Jessica Rooks, director of the Green Career Center. "But there are also people looking to figure out ways to make themselves more marketable and grow their businesses and green is one of those ways."

Standing with the borough president that day were a host of examples. There was a representative from a [local union](#) devoted to weatherization and the owner of a [company](#) that manufactures green cleaning supplies and a solar-powered trashcan with a built-in compactor. There was Omar Freilla, who runs an

organization that helps start environmentally friendly, worker-owned businesses. Freilla started [Green Worker Cooperatives](#) seven years ago. Before that, he worked with [Sustainable South Bronx](#), an organization that runs its own green jobs training programs. “We like to think that we played a role in the fact that green-collar jobs is an established concept now,” he said of the Bronx movement. “Now people are seeing it as job opportunities and a way out of poverty.”

The first co-op his organization got off the ground, [ReBuilders Source](#) (also in attendance), collects used building materials slated for landfills and resells them. Freilla’s other projects include a company that will produce solar water heaters and cookers and a catering service. Rooks is working with Freilla and other potential employers in the Bronx to try to match their training with local labor needs. But by its nature, the program’s success depends on forces beyond its control. “If the businesses aren’t there, then the jobs aren’t going to be there,” Freilla said, adding that for now, demand for employees is not meeting the labor supply. For Rooks, that’s where working closely with Freilla and the neighborhood’s new businesses is so important. “We’re trying to make inroads with employers, many of whom have a social bent,” she said, but there’s no denying the effects of the recession. So she interprets the idea of green jobs and businesses broadly, as anything that supports an economically and environmentally sustainable community—a business’s practices are just as important as its product.

Nationally, green jobs continue to be one of the great hopes of the stimulus program. One estimate projects that the stimulus, together with the [climate legislation](#) that passed the House last year, could create 1.7 million green jobs. It was always clear much of the money would move slowly, said Robert Pollin, who runs the [Political Economy Research Institute](#) and consults with the Energy Department on green jobs. A [report he co-wrote](#) with the Center for American Progress—the same that projected 1.7 million jobs—also said that most of the stimulus program’s energy-related funds would take five years to spend, with only about 15 percent coming over the first two years. Now, just over a year into the stimulus program, things may finally be picking up. “We’re evaluating job creation quarter by quarter and you are seeing a big pick up,” he said. In April, the White House [announced](#) \$452 million in retrofit grants to local governments and nonprofits, with the money coming from the stimulus. And for energy and transportation in particular, a number of people say, the stimulus package’s effects will be long term.

Other state and federal programs could also help the market for green jobs continue to grow for years. The House recently passed a [\\$6 billion program](#) that would help people pay for energy-saving retrofits on their homes. The program would offer rebates directly to homeowners and therefore, its proponents argue, involve minimal bureaucracy. New York [recently passed](#) its own weatherization bill that will create a fund to handle up-front costs for retrofits in up to a million homes and businesses across the state, creating thousands of jobs in the process.

So even though it’s had a slow start, the green jobs economy is growing. Osborne’s training center is helping people who face barriers to employment enter a sector that will only get bigger. (Full disclosure: *Nation* editor Katrina vanden Heuvel is a board member at Osborne.) Meanwhile, Freilla, Rooks and many others in the Bronx are working to have this new economy grow from the bottom up. “We see community involvement as essential to the development of our program,” Rooks said. “Creating a good, green Bronx is what’s going to make our program succeed.”

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