

Creating Climate Prosperity



A handful of local governments are supplementing their climate protection plans with regional “climate prosperity” strategies. Two experts explain the power of this new paradigm. Part 1 in a series.

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ICLEI member local governments already get it. What they want everyone else to know is that climate protection measures not only lower greenhouse gas emissions, they save money, create green jobs, and improve quality of life in their communities. This good news just got easier to preach, because now it has a catchy name: climate prosperity.

As federal leaders discuss the extent of a "green" economic stimulus package, two experts argue that being green is the only way to revive and sustain our economy. The key, they say, is for local governments to build on their existing climate actions to develop broader climate prosperity strategies.

Dr. Marc A. Weiss, chairman and CEO of Global Urban Development and chairman of the Climate Prosperity Project, is an internationally known expert on economic development and urban policy. Dr. Weiss talks to ICLEI about why climate prosperity, a concept he developed, has so much appeal for local governments. Joining him is Michael Northrop, director of the Sustainable Development grant-making program at the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, which helps fund the Climate Prosperity Project.

ICLEI: Most local governments probably aren't familiar with the term "climate prosperity." Can you define it for them?

Marc A. Weiss: We spent a couple months coming up with a two-sentence definition that's on our website: "Climate prosperity generates substantial economic and employment growth and sustainable business and community development by demonstrating that innovation, efficiency, and conservation in the use and reuse of all resources is the best way to increase jobs, incomes, productivity, and competitiveness. In addition, climate prosperity is the most cost-effective method of promoting renewable energy and clean technologies, protecting the environment, and preventing harmful impacts from global warming."

Part 2: Climate Prosperity in Action

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ICLEI: Can you distill that definition even further?

Weiss: Well, as I like to say, in the 21st century you can only get richer by becoming greener. You can only earn more money by using less resources and reusing more.

ICLEI: So economic prosperity is a byproduct of climate protection.

Weiss: Actually, no. We've flipped the whole thing around. Our message isn't that we have to deal with climate change, and in the process of doing so we can create some green jobs. We're saying that the only way to have a decent economy is to become sustainable, and that if we do this, we can solve climate, environmental, and energy issues in the process. Being sustainable is the economic strategy.

ICLEI: But so many people perceive environmental initiatives as being fundamentally unfriendly to business and to economic growth.

Michael Northrop: The idea that if you address climate change it will ruin the economy and destroy America's way of life is nothing but a myth. If you're talking about creating the hydrogen economy, yes, that's expensive and the payback would take time. But we're talking instead about a revolution in building efficiency and public transit.

Let me give you an example. New York City has nearly one million buildings. If we picked a target to make these buildings, say, 30 percent more energy efficient, the actions to achieve that goal would be pretty basic: putting in higher-performance windows, appliances, insulation, and so forth. If we took on the challenge of doing this for one million buildings – over a 20-year period – we'd slash greenhouse gas emissions and reduce energy consumption enough to save tens of billions of dollars each year, which could be reinvested in the local economy. We'd also generate tens of thousands of new, green jobs. It would create a massive economic engine, and this engine could be replicated in every American city.

Weiss: What Michael described is, at heart, a very simple model that we took right from the way any business would operate – that to improve your economic outlook you have to reduce waste and cut costs, raise revenues and expand market share, and invest in your fundamental assets, including infrastructure, technology, and especially your workforce. We call these three areas Green Savings, Green Opportunities, and Green Talent, and they are the core elements of climate prosperity.

ICLEI: Many ICLEI members are already applying these elements.

Weiss: Yes! The things they're already doing to become more sustainable are a central part of a climate prosperity strategy, especially Green Savings, because that's really the low-hanging fruit.

Our goal is to get millions of people involved in this paradigm, and it has to start from the bottom up, at the local level. We're engaging cities, counties, metropolitan regions, and even states to go beyond their climate protection plans and to develop broader climate prosperity strategies. Right now we're working with seven pilots – Silicon Valley/San Jose, the State of Delaware, metropolitan Denver, metropolitan St. Louis, Southwest Florida, King County/Seattle, and Montgomery County, Maryland – to help them develop their strategies, and in 2009 we expect more than a dozen more places to launch climate prosperity strategies. This has caught on much faster than I ever imagined.

In Part 2 of this two-part series Dr. Weiss and Michael Northrop discuss why Portland, Oregon, exemplifies climate prosperity, and explain how local governments can begin crafting their own climate prosperity strategies.