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Manitoba Office

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Seeds Planted for Green Economy in Manitoba

Last week, I was in Winnipeg and elsewhere in southern Manitoba for a roundtable and a series of field visits. Representing the Green Economy Network [GEN] --- a national alliance of civil society organizations committed to transforming our economy in response to environmental challenges, notably climate change --- I was blown away by what I saw and experienced. Here's why.

At GEN, our prime focus is to develop public investments and strategies for transitioning from a fossil fuel dependent economy to a low carbon economy on three interrelated fronts --- developing our renewable energy capacities [e.g. solar, wind, geothermal]; retrofitting our building stock for energy efficiency [green buildings]; and expanding public transportation through urban transit and higher speed rail between urban centres in Canada.

Taken together, these three strategies are geared to open up new sectors of the economy to create hundreds of thousands of new jobs. Moreover, these are new kinds of jobs --- decent paying 'green jobs' or 'climate jobs' that directly contribute to the reduction of carbon emissions causing global warming. In so doing, the priority is on increasing social equity in our economy by providing jobs and training for marginalized peoples.

However, it took a visit to Winnipeg and other Manitoban communities to find out how these strategies could be put into concrete practice through community-based social enterprises.

Take, for example, renewable energy. A visit to the Peguis Nation north of Winnipeg revealed how Aki Energy is leading the way in developing the use of geothermal

energy from beneath the earth's surface [Aki is Ojibwa for earth] for the heating and cooling of homes and large scale buildings like hockey arenas in five First Nations communities.

The work is being done by First Nation social enterprises --- \$18 million worth over the next three years. Thanks to legislation passed by the Government of Manitoba the cost of this work is being paid out of the utility bill reductions. Families save money, Manitoba Hydro has more energy available to sell, and previously unemployed First Nations workers receive training and certification that will help them stay meaningfully employed in the new green economy.

Or take social enterprises such as BUILD [Building Urban Industry for Local Development] and Manitoba Green Retrofit. Both specialize in doing housing retrofits to make them more energy efficient for climates with extreme cold and heat. To date, most of the housing retrofits have been carried out in Winnipeg's low income neighbourhoods.

Both enterprises are geared to provide decent jobs for people who have previously been chronically unemployed in the city. What's more, both make use of Manitoba Hydro's pay-as-you-save financing through energy savings. And, by making public housing energy efficient, the government saves on its energy bills while reducing carbon emissions.

When it comes to changing Winnipeg's car culture, which bears huge responsibility for carbon emissions, the city appears to be making some headway through plans for improving and expanding public transit. The city already has in

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place a good plan for rapid and sustainable public transit which needs to be implemented.

As well, Winnipeg is the home of New Flyer which is one of the largest manufacturers of electric buses in North America. A consortium working on green vehicle technologies has also been formed between New Flyer, Red River College, and Mitsubishi plus the City of Winnipeg, Manitoba Hydro and the Province which will provide a base not only for greening the city's public transit system but also training workers and generating new jobs.

All of these social enterprises and related initiatives demonstrate that Winnipeg and Manitoba are on the cutting edge of transition strategies to a low carbon economy future. Moreover, additional initiatives are being undertaken here to build the infrastructure that will be needed to make the shift to a new economy.

Take the education hub we learned about on Selkirk Avenue, where a "North End Community Campus" is emerging. The combined efforts of the Universities of Manitoba and Winnipeg, Urban Circle Training Centre, and CEDA-Pathways to Education, among others, are providing educational opportunities to many Aboriginal second-chance learners in a culturally sensitive environment that instills cultural pride and healing while teaching life skills and academics.

This work will be considerably enhanced by the redevelopment of the old Merchants Hotel into Merchants Corner, with 30 units of housing for students with families, and the unique sharing of space by UW's Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies, and CEDA-Pathways, the North End high

school support program. The importance of these creative efforts for Winnipeg's growing Aboriginal population and Manitoba's labour market cannot be overemphasized.

Then there's Diversity Foods, another social enterprise and now official food supplier to UW campus, using locally produced foods purchased from 60 ecologically sustainable Manitoba farmers. Diversity Foods trains and employs inner city workers, providing decent employment to many who may otherwise have had difficulty finding work. Greenhouse gas emissions are once again lowered by reducing the distance food is transported and by supporting farmers who do not use fossil fuel-based fertilizers and pesticides, while re-energizing the local economy.

I left Manitoba energized and filled with hope. As I crisscross the country in the coming months, promoting the GEN's call for a national campaign to create one million climate jobs over the next 10 years, I'll be highlighting the cutting edge initiatives I saw here in Manitoba.

Tony Clarke is currently president of the Polaris Institute in Ottawa and national convener of the Green Economy Network. He has authored ten books including Tar Sands Showdown: Canada and the Politics of Oil in an Age of Climate Change.

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