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The Washington Connection

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Green Means Go (to Work): Green Initiatives Can Bring Back Jobs

The past year has taken its toll on our members. Many were laid off for a great length of time or faced a significant reduction in the amount of hours normally worked. Some regions of the country fared better than others, but overall it was a bleak year for the roofing industry.

In spite of all the negativity surrounding the current economy, there is new legislation on the table that illustrates the potential for economic turnaround, specifically in the construction industry. While stimulus money is providing only moderate relief in most areas of the country, initiatives are underway that hopefully, once passed and initiated, will assist in stimulating the industry for years to come while providing solid work opportunities for our members. Two of the more prominent projects we are working on are the Green Roof Energy Efficiency Tax Act (GREETA) and the Emerald Cities Initiative.

GREETA, or H.R. 426, was introduced by Representative Bill Pascrell (D-NJ) as a solution to a problem that restricts the movement towards “green” roofing products in the commercial sector. Currently, the Internal Revenue Code requires that commercial roofs be depreciated over a 39-year schedule, even though studies have shown that the average life span of a commercial roof is 17.5 years. This disparity is a major deterrent for building owners wanting to replace older, failing roofs with energy-efficient roof systems, especially when the economy is weak.

GREETA will allow building owners to use a 20-year depreciation schedule if the replacement roof system meets high-energy-efficiency standards, therefore accelerating the use of green roofs, including vegetative roofs.

If passed, it is estimated that GREETA will create 40,000 jobs in the roofing manufacturing and contracting industry. We, along with the National Roofing Contractors Association and several of our local unions, have been working passionately to see that this legislation passes, either as a stand-alone bill or part of a jobs stimulus package.

The Emerald Cities Initiative involves a national coalition of groups such as union business leaders, environmentalists, community organizations and public officials. Together these activists work closely with the Obama administration to assist in planning, launching and coordinating comprehensive projects to retrofit America’s buildings with the objective of increasing their energy efficiency. The three goals of the Emerald Cities coalition are as follows:

- ▶ **Green our Cities** to achieve a significant reduction in energy usage.
- ▶ **Build our Communities** to generate good jobs and lifetime construction careers and provide opportunities for the economically disadvantaged.
- ▶ **Strengthen our Democracy** to increase labor-community input in urban political decision making, promoting pro-working-families economic development strategies.

The Emerald Cities Initiative has the potential to secure jobs for union members and our signatory contractors, increase union membership and expand into new and emerging markets. Support for the initiative will also strengthen labor-community coalitions for pro-union public policies such as PLAs, and it will protect and raise labor standards.

There are currently ten Emerald Cities “target” cities: Atlanta, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, New York, Oakland, Portland, Providence, San Francisco and Seattle. Although Emerald Cities is still in the planning stage, business managers in those target cities have shown a great deal of support and participation. The ultimate success of this initiative, however, will be determined by the ability of all involved organizations to work as a cohesive group to achieve the above-referenced goals.

The Emerald Cities Initiative and GREETA legislation have the potential to provide a vital boost to our industry. However, each is in its planning stages at this point and cannot be relied on for the success of our future.

In the interim, we must continue our focus on issues we can directly control. Our top priority should be the protection of the historic work of our Union, especially while competing for a smaller market share. In addition, we need to expand our training programs to include green and solar photovoltaic roof systems to stay competitive in the market. Because if GREETA and Emerald Cities are any indication, the trend in our industry is energy-efficient roofs. ■