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Public-Private Initiative Seeks a Green Valley In Inland Empire

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By Paul Shigley

With an economy based on construction, shipping and warehousing, and heavy industry – and with some of the most conservative politics in the state – the Inland Empire would appear to be an unlikely place for a “green” movement. However, a public-private initiative is under way that seeks nothing less than a transformation of the region to one based on green technology and sustainable living.

The Green Valley Initiative was launched in 2007 by developer Ali Sahabi, president of SE Corporation. Best known as the developer of Dos Lagos in Corona, a mixed-use project that has won American Planning Association and Building Industry Association awards, Sahabi established the nonprofit Green Institute for Village Empowerment last year. That organization has been the key sponsor of the Green Valley Initiative (GVI), which has since attracted endorsements from more than 25 public agencies and private entities and attracted more than 500 people to various gatherings.

“It’s really about taking a long-term, holistic, sustainable view of how you change the economy,” explained Daniel Cozad, GVI’s program director. “I don’t think anybody else is attempting to do this on such a grand scale.”

Doug Henton, chairman and CEO of Collaborative Economics, which has provided research and guidance to the GVI, called the project “more systematic and comprehensive” than green technology and development efforts in Silicon Valley, Sacramento and the San Diego region.

“What’s intrigued me is that it has brought together the two counties and the business sector,” Henton said of the GVI.

Still, the San Bernardino and Riverside counties region has a long ways to go before it might be considered a paragon of green virtue. The two counties have grown rapidly to a combined population of 4.1 million people living primarily in low-density, automobile-oriented housing tracts. Green building practices are extremely rare. Trucking, warehousing and railroad companies – which are heavily dependent on burning diesel fuel – employ about 117,000 people in the two counties. Monitoring stations in Perris, Banning and the San Bernardino Mountains report some of the most polluted air in the country. Plus, as Cozad acknowledged, “This is a conservative area – a red portion of a blue state.”

Although GVI boosters have been attracting supporters, not everyone is rushing toward the bandwagon. As one of the bigger GVI proponents, San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors Chairman Paul Biane has urged all 24 cities in the county to approve a GVI resolution that promises the city will “participate in the development and implementation

of sustainable model standards, policies and programs to benefit the Inland Empire region.” Thus far, only seven cities in the county have signed on, although more are scheduled to consider the resolution.

Biane spokesman Scott Vanhorne called the cities a “mixed bag.” “It’s a pretty broad concept. Some of them haven’t really wanted to bite,” he said.

“These are business-oriented, conservative cities,” added Cozad. “But we have a number of them that see the economic benefits and the quality of life benefits of the green economy.”

Cozad said the GVI has had to confront confusion and misunderstanding more than skepticism. Some people initially thought the project was an anti-development effort, while others complained the GVI was simply a “greenwashing” of existing practices. The GVI is neither, he said.

So what exactly what is the Green Valley Initiative? Organizers offer up this statement: “The Green Valley Initiative reflects a new vision for the Inland Empire, combining sustainable green practices and technology with an economic development plan being developed by major stakeholders from throughout the Inland Empire. It integrates social, economic and environmental forces to bring new jobs, greater opportunities and a higher quality of life to the region.”

The problem to confront, according to the GVI, is that Riverside and San Bernardino counties lack both enough jobs and the right kinds of jobs. The result is that 30% of region’s workforce, including some of the most-educated workers, commute to Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties for employment.

For San Bernardino County, one big attraction is the development of alternative energy. Kramer Junction Solar Farms, located west of Barstow, is already one of the world’s largest solar facilities, and Palm Springs Wind Farms is one of the largest wind energy facilities, noted Vanhorne. Both counties have the natural resources — sun, wind and relatively inexpensive land – to accommodate many more facilities, Cozad added.

But the possibilities are almost endless. Southern California Edison, for example, is talking about installing solar panels on top of millions of square feet of warehouse rooftops in the region. Officials overseeing conversion of three large military bases in the region are also quite interested in the effort. This month, GVI representatives are scheduled to meet with leaders of the local shipping, distribution and warehousing industry to talk about greening the distribution system. Although that might seem far-fetched, “green logistics” is the name of the game because of AB 32 mandates for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and because energy efficiency is crucial to reducing costs, Henton said.

And there is no reason why new homes in the region should not have green aspects included, such as solar panels and technologically sophisticated utility controls that

minimize energy and water consumptions, Henton said.

The idea is to build bridges between the public and private sectors, and between different public agencies, Cozad said. In the past, local governments have fought to protect their turf. Those battles have not all ended, but GVI is trying to get cities and counties to share because they are all part of one region. The sharing may be as simple as promoting common water recycling and drought-tolerant landscaping standards among the cities and two counties.

“You wouldn’t think of this area of California as being green – on the political side or physically, given the amount of rainfall we receive every year,” Cozad said. That’s where public education and outreach can be useful in convincing people that changing business as usual is beneficial both environmentally and economically.

“I don’t know if it’s going to be a tough sell,” added Vanhorne. “People are seeing what’s happened with the price of oil. I think the public’s mindset is going to be determined by the market.”

The GVI in October qualified for federal Economic Development Administration funding. Green Valley Initiative boosters intend to fill out a board of directors and name an executive director in preparation of a “second launch” of the initiative in early 2009.

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