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Posted on Fri, Jul. 31, 2009

Leaders hope green jobs will help heal employment void

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Inquirer Staff Writers

When Ronald Tucker, a sheet-metal worker who had bounced among at least five South Jersey companies over 20 years, was laid off again in March, he decided it was time to trade a job surrounded by silver for one based on green.

Instead of looking for jobs making animal cages or ticket dispensers for Skee-Ball machines, the 41-year-old Tucker enrolled in the first class of green-jobs training at the Hispanic Family Center in Camden. The Burlington Township father of one learned how to test home insulation.

After graduating July 1, he landed a job with New Jersey utility giant Public Service Electric & Gas Co. He starts in September.

Tucker's "green job" success story is one New Jersey hopes will be replicated many times over, bolstered by approval this week of PSE&G's \$515 million project to install solar panels across the state.

With traditional manufacturing dwindling in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, leaders in both states have turned to "green jobs" to fill at least some of the void.

They have been cheered on by business, labor, and environmentalists alike.

"In light of the very serious unemployment problem we have, we need to quickly ramp up the scale of these new investments, so we get our factories working again, so we get our workers up off the bench and working again," said David Foster, executive director of

the Blue Green Alliance, a collaboration formed by the steel workers and Sierra Club. The alliance, since expanded to other unions, promotes the idea of creating jobs through environmentally friendly investments.

For the newly approved PSE&G project, for example, the utility will hire nearly 100 workers in the first year to begin installing solar modules on 200,000 utility poles. An additional 100 are expected to be added by Petra Solar Inc., a South Plainfield, N.J., company that will build the units.

Alfredo Matos, PSE&G's vice president of renewables and energy solutions, sees many avenues of green growth. Since December, the utility has been approved for roughly \$240 million in energy-efficiency projects, including the kind of testing Tucker was hired for. Among other plans, PSE&G also expects to add 600 people to install new energy-efficient street lights.

"What's driving it is a conscious decision by society, by our customers, that they want to have clean air, they want to have a better environment, they want to have a positive effect on climate change," Matos said. "All that translates into providing the products and services that our customers are demanding."

Pennsylvania environmental advocates are promoting a similar idea.

Gov. Rendell scored a coup when he enticed Spain's Gamesa Corporacio Tecnologica, a world leader in wind energy, to plant its U.S. headquarters in Philadelphia and invest heavily in factories elsewhere in Pennsylvania.

Nathan Willcox, the energy and clean-air advocate for PennEnvironment, cited a 2007 Pew Charitable Trusts study that put the number of Pennsylvania "clean jobs" at 39,000, a small portion of the overall picture but a good start, he said.

"For a state that was decimated in the steel industry and losses in the mining industries, green businesses have offered a definite ray of sunshine in the state's economic forecast," Willcox said.

And it's not just environmentalists on board.

Ed Gant, business manager for Local 351 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, said he had never seen this much momentum behind solar. The union has been teaching solar installation to apprentices for four years.

"We're very much a part of this," Gant said.

In New Jersey, a recently signed law would require projects that benefit from Board of Public Utilities funding to pay prevailing union wages.

Rutgers University economist James W. Hughes said green industries "could be a significant source of growth."

Hughes, however, said such jobs would never replace the more than 600,000 manufacturing jobs New Jersey has lost from its peak.

While installation and maintenance work will provide some economic benefit, Hughes said, manufacturing - building the solar panels or wind turbines and selling them to the world - holds the greatest potential to create significant wealth.

New Jersey, he said, trails Pennsylvania in this respect and faces obstacles because of its high costs.

At Petra, the outfit hired to build the modules for PSE&G's project, chief executive Shihab Kuran said his company's new plant signaled a shift. After years of outsourcing solar manufacturing, Kuran said, that taxpayer money will be kept in-state.

New Jersey has gained a reputation as one of the national leaders on solar energy, thanks largely to policy in Trenton, according to Monique Hanis, a spokeswoman for the Solar Energy Industry Association.

"Having incentives that they have had in place on the state level has really spurred the development," she said.

In addition, the federal stimulus package gave New Jersey and Pennsylvania hundreds of millions of dollars each for energy-efficiency projects. Hanis also pointed to a recent federal change that lets utilities take advantage of a tax break for solar-powered projects.

PSE&G spokesman Paul Rosengren said the change was vital to its new project.

Gov. Corzine has heavily promoted clean energy. He included money for green jobs in his state-level economic recovery package and set ambitious energy-efficiency goals for 2020. And the state has played on all sides of the labor market: paying for training, giving incentives to companies for hiring, and giving enticements - such as coupons - to customers to take advantage of green services.

The state Labor Department recently put \$1.7 million into the training program that helped Tucker. Companies such as PSE&G got incentives to create jobs and snap up some of the graduates, said spokeswoman Marcela Maziarz.

The program, called the Center for Energy and Environmental Training, began in Trenton in January and expanded to Camden, Newark, and Somerset.

Its head, Jeanne Oswald, said it has trained more than 100 people already. After starting with energy-efficiency training, the center is soon going to teach solar installations, Oswald said.

"There's an opportunity for a whole lot of jobs coming down the pike, and we want to make sure people who are underserved are getting an opportunity," Oswald said.

Tucker is seeing that opportunity, and hopes at some point to learn to install solar panels.


He took a pay cut to start at PSE&G, but he said the chance to latch onto an expanding industry was worth it.

"I'm looking long-term," he said.

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