

The Stimulus and Poverty: Using the Stimulus to Reduce Poverty and Improve the Environment

The Kansas City Example

Over the coming weeks, Spotlight is running a special series that examines how the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act affects low-income Americans.

Kansas City, here we come? When it comes to stimulus spending, I sure hope so. KC is showing it really knows how to bring an economy back to life and build a stronger one for the future. In an effort partly coordinated by PolicyLink, the city has decided to invest \$200 million of its stimulus cash into revamping and "greening" a single 150-block section of the city this is mostly black and low-income.

This "Green Impact Zone," as the project is known, would improve public transit, provide job training, weatherize houses, and build a "green sewer" demonstration project, all in an effort to make this low-income section of the city a beacon for smart, green, sustainable economic growth.

Backed by U.S. Rep. Emmanuel Cleaver, Mayor Mark Funkhouser, and a unanimous city council, the idea is generating buzz across the nation. The Mid-America Regional Council convened community leaders and residents on the front end and asked a question policymakers ask far too infrequently: "what do you think would help your community the most?"

The answer was rich, deep, and multidisciplinary—precisely the kind of broad approach to poverty alleviation and economic development that PolicyLink and our partners have been advocating for years. To see it on the cusp of really happening on such a large scale is inspiring and will point the way forward for communities across the country. It should also provide policymakers with more of a map of how to make green become a reality, particularly in low-income communities of color that are so in need of new investment and new opportunities.

Though the specifics of the project are still being worked out, here are some highlights of what we should expect once it gets off the ground:

- **Conduct energy audits on homes and apartments.**

This will keep families' heating and cooling bills in check and cut down on unnecessary energy consumption. Some folks have heating bills of up to \$800 a month—eating up nearly all the take-home pay of many residents, who only have a \$22,000 median annual income to begin with.

- **Tap community residents for "green job skill" training.**

People who live in this high-unemployment zone should get first crack at learning new and long-term green skills, like weatherizing buildings. The zone has some of the highest unemployment rates in the state, with some sections reaching 55 percent unemployment.

- **Boost transit, especially bus rapid transit.**

Officials are already targeting the money to rebuild the Troost Bridge over Brush Creek and build a bus rapid transit system on Troost. This will better connect residents with economic and other

opportunities throughout the region. In some of these neighborhoods, more than one-third of residents don't own cars and are entirely reliant on public transit.

· **Plant vegetation for a “green sewer” project**

This part may not sound enticing, but KC has already had success planting vegetation elsewhere in the city to soak up storm water and keep it out of the city's sewer system. A similar project in the Green Impact Zone would help ease an overburdened sewer system and beautify the neighborhood.

Few, if any, of these ideas are revolutionary on their own. Most cities are doing some version of one or more of these ideas. But the strength of this idea lies with Kansas City's deliberateness in approach—the decision to target these once-in-a-generation stimulus funds on the neighborhoods that most need the help.

By investing laser-like in these communities, the hope and expectation is that they can be helped past a “tipping point” that will break the cycle of poverty and usher in a new, revitalized model for other communities in the region.

Sadly, this kind of stimulus-fueled “big idea” is proving to be the exception, rather than the rule, with states and localities' uses of stimulus-related funds.

The \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act was intended not only to jolt our economy back to life, but to lay the foundation for stronger, more equitable communities for years to come. Much of the money spent so far has been pushed out through the same old programs and isn't seeding new, innovative opportunities for those who need it most.

The stimulus presented a near-limitless opportunity to invest in ways that lift up all people and help even out the entrenched inequities of American life. We could invest in public transit, urban parks, water systems that serve everyone—even outside-the-box ideas like supermarkets and housing near transit hubs.

It's projects like the Green Impact Zone in Kansas City, though, that make me smile. The easy route would have been for city leaders to take the stimulus money and just spend it in the same old ways—to not take chances, to be conservative. But the political and community leaders in Kansas City decided the same old way just wasn't good enough this time. For the past several years, political leaders had been working closely with community groups like the Front Porch Alliance and the Community Christian Church to revive and beautify this area of city. By laying the cooperative groundwork early on, implementing such a wonderfully audacious plan was possible.

As *Kansas City Star* columnist Lewis Diuguid wrote, “The Green Impact Zone is Kansas City's 21st century version of the New Deal.” It will probably be a year or more until we can really start to see whether the Green Impact Zone has the New Deal's transformative powers. But for now, it is offering an extraordinary model for any city or state looking to use the stimulus money to create strong, equitable, and sustainable communities.

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