



## Economy

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# State officials, business leaders discuss ways to boost R.I.'s green economy

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Sara-Beth Sidla of the Rhode Island Economic Development Council staff holds up an idea for discussion at the Green Economy Roundtable Friday at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Warwick.

The Providence Journal / Bob Thayer

WARWICK — For months now, state policymakers, academics and business leaders have talked of the potential for the “green” economy to pull Rhode Island out of recession.

At a conference Friday, they started discussing ways to stimulate an emerging industry that includes energy efficiency, wastewater technology and renewable power in order to make that happen.

The 120 participants — who included Lt. Gov. Elizabeth H. Roberts and General Treasurer Frank Caprio — at the half-day event sponsored by the state Economic Development Corporation identified several general initiatives that Rhode Island must pursue to compete for the valuable green-collar jobs that have been promoted repeatedly by the Obama administration and government officials throughout the country.

Among them is a plan to set up a “green policy council” to serve a role analogous to what the EDC’s Science and Technology Advisory Council plays in regard to the so-called knowledge economy centered around the state’s hospitals and universities.

The state must also promote research and connect entrepreneurs with universities, according to attendees. J. Michael Saul, interim executive director of the EDC, said his agency will look at expanding programs through the Slater Technology Fund and working through the newly created Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Brown University.

“Clearly we need to broaden what we’re doing there,” Saul said.

Rhode Island’s manufacturing industry must also adapt, participants said. Although an over-reliance on that lagging industry has been blamed in part for the depth of the recession in the state, speakers at the conference said there’s hope. They said that local companies could successfully move into clean energy by retrofitting their factories to produce components for, say, wind turbines or solar systems.

Phyl Speser, chief executive officer of Foresight Science and Technology, an intellectual-property management company, said Rhode Island can make a name for itself in the manufacture of high-quality green-tech products.

“Just like 100 years ago when people thought of jewelry, they thought of Rhode Island,” he said.

The two sectors of the green economy that Rhode Island is said to be positioned well to develop are wind power and energy efficiency — the former because of the offshore wind farms proposed by Deepwater Wind and the latter because of the large amount of older buildings in the state in need of updating.

Blake Henderson, CEO of the construction management company SGE, said the state should start retraining workers for companies that make buildings more energy efficient. He likened it to his firm’s efforts to educate civil engineers in wind-power engineering and homebuilders in turbine construction.

“We’re saving jobs through renewable energy,” he said.

The EDC plans to develop a strategic plan for the green economy based on ideas generated at the conference, Saul said. The plan, he said, will be presented at a similar event in the fall.

“This is the beginning,” he said at the close of the meeting. “It’s not going to end here.”

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