Local and State Policies Pioneer the Green Economy in CA: According to experts, peak oil is upon us. While there is still oil available, it's difficult and expensive to reach, making energy in the future far more costly. Experts also agree that global climate change has already begun and is bringing with it a multitude of changes, none of them very desirable.

Peak oil and global climate change represent huge challenges to the health of our cities and state. On the bright side, measures that address these challenges are stimulating many new businesses with employment opportunities, ranging from blue-collar jobs to positions for CEOs capable of running cutting-edge, start-up companies.

History has taught us that local and state governments can play a critically important role in driving this transition. Almost 30 years ago, in response to the energy crisis of the late seventies and early eighties, California cities and counties began to implement green energy policies. We can now look back to trace the impressive results.

The story begins with the establishment of the Local Government Commission by Governor's Executive Order in 1979. The purpose was to engage local government leaders in identifying and implementing local conservation and renewable energy strategies. Mayors, city councilmembers and county supervisors appointed to the Commission responded with enthusiasm, spearheading a multitude of local, alternative energy and energy conservation measures throughout the state. Among them was the enactment of city and county energy conservation building standards.

The City of Davis was the first to adopt energy standards, followed by a few others. By demonstrating the viability of this conservation measure, local actions paved the way for the adoption of Title 24, energy conservation building standards by the State.

Today, the overwhelming benefits of Title 24 building efficiency standards are very clear. Since the standards were first adopted, Title 24 has continued to be upgraded, with standards for buildings, appliances, pool heaters and almost anything else that needs juice. The result — California’s per capita energy use has remained stable, at the same time that per capita energy use nationwide has grown by 50%. According to TIME magazine, this has saved California residents and businesses an estimated $56 billion in energy costs and avoided the costly construction of 24 new gas-fired power plants.

Besides saving money and energy, state and local energy efficiency and alternative energy policies have created a demand for more energy-conserving building products, resulting in many new jobs in research, business development, manufacturing and installation of new energy-efficient and renewable energy products.

These policies continue to gain traction and, as a result, green energy jobs are growing faster than the overall economy at a time when employment continues to fall. A 2009 study by the Pew Charitable Trusts listed California as the nation’s leading state in clean energy with 10,209 related businesses and 125,390 clean energy jobs, as of 2008.

Rooftop solar installations have doubled for two years in a row, to 50,000 annually, contributing to the State goal of 1 million by 2017. Northern and Central California now have 40% of the nation’s solar roofs. SunPower, located in the Bay Area, has more than 5,000 employees building massive power plants for utilities, as well as roof panels for big-box stores, complete subdivisions and individual homes. Photovoltaic prices are plummeting, and competition is fierce, most of it from California firms like BrightSource, Solar City, eSolar, Nanosolar and Solyndra.

California boasts 5 of the top 10 cities for clean tech investment: San Jose, Berkeley, Pasadena, San Francisco and San Diego. And from 2006 to 2008, we attracted $3 of every $5 invested in U.S. clean tech — five times as much as the No. 2 state. We are by far the national leader in green jobs, green patents, energy supplies from renewable sources and savings from efficiency. We are also leading the way toward electric cars, zero net energy homes, advanced biofuels and a smarter grid. We’re even changing the rules of development. The movement toward more resource-efficient Smart Growth — pioneered by cities and counties and now supported by SB 375 — has led to new policies at the national level.

According to Mark Muro of the Brookings Institution’s metropolitan-policy program, the next economy is already in place in California, and “it’s amazing.”

Leadership for a Green CA Economy Brings Attention and New Challenges: The important role of California’s state and local government in creating a green economy has stimulated national and international interest. A recent issue of TIME magazine featured California as the cover story titled, “Why California is America’s future.”

Statements made by Governor Schwarzenegger at the December Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen were repeated on television and in printed media throughout the world: “We in California do not wait for Washington or Beijing or Kyoto...the world’s governments alone cannot make the kind of progress needed on global climate change..., they need the cities, the states, the provinces and the regions.”
While this should make California leaders feel very proud, calling attention to our inordinate influence as a bellwether state has some disadvantages. Many interests invested in the current economy would rather “fight than switch” and have identified the State as the driver of unwanted change.

Earlier this month, it was reported unlikely that a statewide initiative to block the implementation of AB 32, California’s greenhouse gas reduction law, would gain enough signatures to get on the ballot. However, reports this past week indicate that certain outside interests are now poised to get involved.

Even our own League of California Cities is not immune. An initiative to take a position against the implementation of AB 32 and possibly against SB 375 has been brought to the League’s Board and will be considered in April. Neither of these laws places specific requirements on cities to do anything, but they are indirectly leading to a proliferation of local climate action plans and local policies. Thus it appears that local governments have also become a target of those who would rather fight than switch.

Participants at this year’s World Economic Forum see the race to develop greener, cleaner technology as one of the critical factors in reshaping the world economy. Analysts estimate that the energy conservation sector, along with the deployment of new technologies like wind and solar power, have the potential to support 20 million jobs by 2030 and trillions of dollars in revenue.

In response, Republican Senator Lindsay Graham, a participant at the forum, stated, “China has made a long-term strategic decision and they are going gang-busters (to develop a green economy).” Christine Lagarde, the French finance minister agreed. “It’s a race and whoever wins the race will dominate economic development.”

Californians are very important to the outcome of the race toward a green economy. This year’s annual Ahwahnee conference, to be held March 18 – 21, will address how city and county elected officials can continue to play a role by implementing specific policies that both support and drive innovation in our local communities.

Our work is important to the quality of life in our communities at the same time as it is important to our nation. According to TIME magazine, “When it comes to energy, California is not just ahead of the game; it’s playing a different game.”

**Transportation Infrastructure Heads Back To The Future:** A few cities are taking innovative steps toward a less costly transportation infrastructure that is somewhat nostalgic of the communities where our grandparents lived.

High costs and tight budgets have prompted communities in Maine, Michigan, Indiana, Pennsylvania and Vermont to convert or consider converting cracked asphalt roads back to gravel to cut maintenance costs, their state officials say.

New technology allows asphalt to be recycled into a durable gravel-like surface that is cheaper to maintain and adequately prevents potholes and mud, according to David Creamer, a field operations specialist at the Center for Dirt and Gravel Road Studies at Pennsylvania State University.

Thirty-eight counties in Michigan replaced more than 100 miles of road with gravel between 2008 and 2009, and more are planned. Gravel roads will lead to cars driving at slower speeds, making roads safer for pedestrians and cars alike. We’ve not been able to ascertain how this works for bicyclists, however.

In New York City, unused parking meters are being turned into hitching posts for bikes. As they are in many cities, New York is switching to communal meters where drivers can use cash or a credit card to pay for parking rather than feeding individual parking meters. Under the city’s latest green transportation plan, about 225 parking meters across the city will have their heads hacked off, be stripped for parts, and then used for scrap metal.

Meanwhile, a string of headless meter poles will remain on the street, where they will be transformed into hitching posts for bikes. Specially-designed bike racks, consisting of two curved half circles of iron, will be attached to either side of the parking meter pole. Each rack can hold two or three bikes at a time.

The new bike racks will replace every third or fourth parking meter, depending on the street, according to the City’s Transportation Commissioner. The new racks will cost $300 each to install, but will save the city the $200 cost of removing the entire meter and then repairing the ripped-up sidewalk.

Bicycling is booming in New York City, with a 26% increase in 2009 alone. However, the City currently has only one bike rack for every 30 cyclists. The time is ripe for the City to recycle the infrastructure originally meant to serve the car and invest in parking spaces for bikes.