The Role of Cities in the Clean Tech Revolution: California clean tech jobs increased by 36% from 1995 to 2008, expanding almost three times faster than all other California jobs. While total employment has fallen during the recession, green jobs have continued to grow. Modesto’s Mayor Jim Ridenour, President of the League of CA Cities, has observed, “This (clean tech) is the future and we can’t stop it.”

Ridenour made this comment at an LGC-sponsored dinner forum titled “Expanding Innovation,” held November 10th in Modesto. The forum was one of five being organized by the LGC, bringing local elected officials and clean tech businesses together to determine what local governments can do to support the growth of clean tech industries in California communities.

Conversation at the Modesto dinner forum was lively as participants explored actions that could be taken by local governments to address stumbling blocks faced by growing clean tech businesses. The group also looked at what could be done to encourage traditional businesses to implement green business practices. Suggestions included long-term policies as well as measures that might stimulate job creation immediately; and they examined the importance of assembling as a region to take advantage of emerging market trends that will be the “job creators” over the next 20 years.

Stimulating Jobs in Energy Conservation and Solar: Thomas Friedman (author of Hot, Flat, and Crowded) emphasizes that all levels of government need to develop a coordinated set of policies, tax incentives and disincentives, and regulations to stimulate the marketplace for clean tech.

Action at the State level has already attracted new businesses to California. At the dinner, Frank Ferrall of the Stockton Chamber of Commerce noted that Electric Vehicles International moved to Stockton from Arizona solely because of California’s supportive policies.

Business leaders at the Modesto event suggested that local governments could be taking action immediately by providing incentives for energy conservation and solar features in new buildings as well as energy retrofits of existing homes and offices.

The City of Solana Beach is providing expedited permit processing for green buildings that meet LEED Silver standards (commercial) or Build It Green (residential). This service can save applicants anywhere from 30 to 40% of overall permit processing time. The City also provides a permit fee reimbursement incentive and keeps green building certification on hand so that potential buyers and real estate agents can quickly find out if properties have green certification on file with the City through the property record.

Mayor Ridenour stressed the importance of cities working together to adopt similar policies region-wide. This would address a common problem in the industry when permitting requirements for solar installations differ dramatically from city to city.

The Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD) has promoted adoption of standardized permit requirements for residential solar photovoltaic installations on existing homes. Many local governments have already adopted SMUD’s model policies, which include a standardized application and fee waivers.

Government Purchasing Policies: Local government purchasing policies can also help establish markets for new, clean tech products.

The Ventura County Board of Supervisors has a Green Procurement policy to help expand markets for the use of recovered materials by establishing greater government preferences for products made with such materials.

Green purchasing policies have far greater ability to stimulate the market when they are adopted by an entire region instead of just one city. Mayor Ridenour suggested that his tradition of holding monthly dinner meetings for every mayor in his county could become a vehicle for stimulating coordinated city policies such as green purchasing.

Educating Businesses and the Public: Business leaders and elected officials also felt local governments could play a strong role in providing education to their residents about the importance of clean tech businesses to the future economic health of the community.

The City of Fresno held an informational briefing in September about green jobs and technology in the Central Valley. For the past four years, the Kern County Economic Development Corporation has held an energy summit to bring together businesses to hear about recent energy developments throughout the state, local “green projects” permitting, renewable energy financing and green energy education.
Providing the Setting for Innovation: Experts agree that business innovation is critical to the evolution of clean technologies. One strong local government strategy that is often overlooked but equally important for assisting the development of cutting edge businesses is the creation of places where innovation can occur. Over a decade ago, researcher Doug Henton and Kim Walsh (now chief strategist for the City of San Jose) pointed to the original Ahwahnee Principles as a recipe for providing the perfect setting for new ideas to be generated.

Mixed-use, walkable downtowns with inviting public spaces located near transit facilitate accidental encounters in casual settings where creative minds can be stimulated and new ideas formed, shared, and expanded. The ability of vibrant and walkable communities to attract businesses is gaining credibility as we continue to see results from cities that have implemented this vision. According to the Wall Street Journal, many Silicon Valley start-ups are now moving to downtown locations and avoiding the office parks of their predecessors.

Redwood City has worked to open up the downtown courthouse square area and changed zoning to allow more office space, among other things. Their Mayor calculates that 300 new jobs have moved into downtown Redwood City just this year. Mt. View, Menlo Park, and Palo Alto are among other nearby communities experiencing similar growth of start-ups in their downtowns. The businesses located in these downtowns report that they want to be within walking distance of “more restaurants and bars” and have better access to public transportation.

LGC Boardmember and Riverbank Mayor Virginia Madueño summed up the importance of the discussion in Modesto, “We are so fixed on the current fiscal crisis that we are not paying attention to the larger picture and what the future holds. If we don’t pay attention to this kind of technology (clean tech), we are missing the mark.”

Registration Now Available For the New Partners for Smart Growth Conference!

The conference will be held February 3-5 in Charlotte, NC. While it is a bit of a trip to North Carolina, this event promises to be worth the trip. Every year, the LGC works with experts throughout the United States to identify the cutting edge in local government policies. Because this is an interdisciplinary conference that brings together the multiple professions that care about Smart Growth, we have put together 100 diverse sessions to offer something for everyone.

Those who wish to come early can attend a daylong session titled, “Achieving Equitable Development.” This special event will focus on how to empower neighborhood and community-based organizations to engage in community planning issues. Also covered will be equitable development policy, issues facing small towns and rural areas, financing equitable development, and how community groups can work with local, state and federal government agencies.

The full conference begins on February 3 with 40 conference sessions and nine tours of local model projects. The day is capped with an evening plenary that will focus on financing smart growth development now and in the future. U.S. EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson (invited) will share her perspectives on the millions of dollars of coordinated federal investments that EPA, HUD, and DOT have made during the past year to assist sustainable development; and Henry Cisneros, former HUD Secretary and current Executive Chairman of CityView, will share his perspectives on the important role that the private sector can play in supporting more sustainable communities.

A response panel will feature experts from the real estate, development, and financial sectors who will share their perspectives on the role of financial investment and dedicated public and private sector leadership in making smart growth a success.

Friday will begin with a plenary focused on Smart Growth and Rural America. U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack has been invited to talk about how smart growth is fostering sustainable communities and economic development opportunities in rural communities nationwide. His talk will be followed by a response panel of rural development experts and small town community leaders. The day will continue with your choice of 35 breakout sessions and workshops along with facilitated opportunities for networking.

On Saturday, we saved the best for last! The day begins with a very timely plenary titled, “Smart Growth and the New Green Economy” that describes the critical role of smart growth approaches to housing, transportation and energy and how they will help build our green economy, provide green jobs, foster equity, and address local budget problems. The day continues with 25 more opportunities to learn and network, a keynote luncheon, and closing plenary.

Of course, you need not rush out on Saturday. There are more fascinating places to go and things to see, as the program continues with more tours of model projects.

For more details on the conference program, tours, accreditation, and other special features—and to REGISTER NOW—visit the conference web site at www.NewPartners.org.