

SAINT PAUL

A Case Study of an Equity-Centered, Union-Driven, High-Road Approach to Climate Resilience

Background

In early 2020, Russ Stark, chief resilience officer for the Saint Paul, Minnesota, Mayor’s Office, with help from American Cities Climate Challenge partner Inclusive Economics, brought together a group of key stakeholders to help achieve the city’s climate, workforce, equity, and racial justice goals.

This group became Building Green Saint Paul, a cross-sector collaboration involving industry, labor, government, and community-based organizations committed to climate resilience, equity, and workforce development in the construction and energy industries. Building Green Saint Paul works to support the city’s larger goals of carbon neutrality by 2050 achieved in a way that benefits marginalized and frontline communities.

The Context

All climate policies have an economic impact. Low job quality and barriers to access and advancement can have political ramifications for community buy-in to climate strategies. Well-paying jobs for community members can build support for climate action.

Many good, family-sustaining jobs are in the unionized construction sector and can be accessed through union apprenticeship programs. Union apprenticeships are a form of “high road” workforce development in that they offer earn-as-you-learn opportunities to build broad occupational skills and pursue a career with family-sustaining wages and benefits. While union apprenticeship programs create pathways to quality jobs, they can be difficult to access with rigorous prerequisites. In addition, women and BIPOC

MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

Building Green Saint Paul is a diverse stakeholder group interested in climate, equity, and workforce goals.

- City of Saint Paul Mayor’s Office
- Center for Energy and the Environment
- Construction Careers Foundation
- Ramsey County
- Ryan Companies
- Saint Paul Building and Construction Trades Council
- Saint Paul Area Chamber of Commerce
- Ujamaa Place
- Xcel Energy

communities may view the building and construction unions as exclusionary and inaccessible. Adding to the challenges, many clean energy jobs, like those in the rooftop solar industry, are often lower-skilled, lower-paid jobs than the energy and construction jobs they are replacing. In addition, “green jobs” can be volatile when they are in industries dependent on public policy and financial incentives, and “green job training” doesn’t provide workers with a broad enough skill set to navigate that volatility.

In this context, climate and clean energy policies can be seen as a threat to stable, family-sustaining union careers. This was the context in Saint Paul when the city began thinking about how to implement equity-centered, high-road climate actions. The Building Green Saint Paul partnership’s challenge

was to figure out how to align climate, equity, and job-quality goals, despite these tensions.

The Partnership

Shortly after the formation of Building Green Saint Paul, a local workforce organization known as Construction Careers Foundation hired a partnership facilitator who spent time speaking with each partner to surface their concerns as well as what they hoped to gain. From those conversations, the facilitator developed a set of challenges and key questions and reframed them as opportunities.

Early in the process, the group discussed these challenges and aligned around the key opportunities. This is the chart that was presented at the meeting:


CHALLENGES & KEY QUESTIONS	KEY OPPORTUNITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will equity and climate be tangibly and effectively addressed in the trades? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a holistic model that addresses these issues and acknowledges historic tensions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can nonunion entities serve union pipelines when ultimately the goal is high-road union pathways? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address a legacy of tension and see non-union entities as part of the pathway, not the end goal.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we train people during a pandemic when most training has historically been in-person and hands-on? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a self-paced, online, virtual training program, ensure that people have access to computers and the internet, and provide hands-on training in small groups using COVID-safe protocol.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we address the historic under-representation of BIPOC- and women-identifying people in the clean energy and construction sectors? What can we learn from their experiences? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create the opportunity to learn from BIPOC- and women-identifying people who work or have worked in the industry, and let their experiences inform the solutions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we address resource gaps and employment barriers? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design programs that acknowledge these issues and provide the resources to address them.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we create family-sustaining jobs and reduce emissions? How do we drive demand for the workers we train? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work as a group to identify the policy levers that can drive demand for climate interventions and creation of quality, family-sustaining jobs.

Building Green Saint Paul members understood that despite these significant challenges, there was a real opportunity with the right stakeholders at the table to create a “high road” inclusive workforce development strategy in the clean energy and construction sectors for the city of Saint Paul. The Building Green Saint Paul partners committed to the long-term investment of time and effort to create systemic change in their city and region.

An Opportunity

Through the Climate Challenge, the City of Saint Paul was investing in large green redevelopment projects, like the 100 percent renewable electricity project under construction at the site of a former Ford Motor Company facility. Ryan Companies, one of Building Green Saint Paul’s members, is the lead developer for the project and is partnering with Xcel Energy, another Building Green Saint Paul member, to provide renewable energy for the site. Inclusive Economics and the City of Saint Paul identified the Ford site redevelopment as the key project not only to revitalize the city and make it more climate resilient, but also to provide opportunities for people from frontline communities to access good-quality union jobs in the climate sector. To realize this opportunity, the Saint Paul Building and Construction Trades Council would be a key partner and co-lead Building Green Saint Paul. In order for that to happen, Building Green Saint Paul members needed to commit to the goal of creating union jobs as the vehicle to achieve the broader objectives. At first some members were hesitant to support union apprenticeships as the workforce development pathway, given negative stories about the experiences of women and BIPOC workers in the building trades. The partnership had to engage in difficult conversations about the historic lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) in the building trades and be open to hearing about the efforts the building trades have been making to correct historic inequities and create more inclusive and supportive training and work environments.¹

Not all parties saw eye to eye on this issue, but by airing different perceptions and biases in a transparent and respectful manner, every member of Building Green Saint Paul committed to increasing DE&I for women and BIPOC workers in the trades. Every member also came to acknowledge the benefits of union jobs in providing pathways out of poverty and into the middle class. The partnership’s trust building and alignment around supporting and



“This bold initiative is critical to our city’s climate and resilience work, but most important, it will ensure we are building a prosperous, healthy, and livable city for everyone.”

—Melvin Carter,
Saint Paul Mayor



¹It is important to note that the unionized construction trades are actually slightly more racially and ethnically diverse, with considerably higher participation of women, than both the construction industry generally and the clean energy sector specifically. In addition, wage disparities are negligible in the unionized construction trades, whereas they are large in the clean energy industry, with few women and BIPOC workers attaining positions in management.

promoting union jobs in the climate sector was the first big accomplishment of Building Green Saint Paul. While this may seem minor, building new relationships between partners with different perspectives, approaches, and world views requires time, commitment, and excellent facilitation. There are no shortcuts, and it is a victory (and a testament to their commitment) that the partners stuck with the process throughout this period.


The next challenge will be to provide access and retention support for women and BIPOC workers in union construction jobs. This requires working with community-based organizations on the front end to provide outreach, recruitment, wraparound services, and training that offers career exposure and access to apprenticeships and helps remove barriers to employment. It also entails working with the trades and contractors on creating inclusive workplaces where everyone, regardless of race, gender, and sexual orientation, can thrive.

Once the group aligned around the union pathway, Donald Mullin, executive secretary of the Saint Paul Building and Construction Trades Council, became a co-leader within the group and a champion of this effort. Don's union leadership was crucial in getting the trade affiliates on board and creating equitable access to apprenticeships. It will also be critical to use policy levers to both ensure that clean energy jobs are good-quality jobs and to develop solutions to avoid worker displacement due to climate efforts. The building trades have been central to Building Green Saint Paul from its inception and will be critical to the overall success of the partnership.

The Building Green Saint Paul partnership has since transitioned to become the Committee of the Ramsey County Workforce Innovation Board. Ramsey County has identified construction/green jobs as one of its high-priority sectors for building workforce development programs that help under-resourced residents gain access to well-paying jobs. What's key about this is that Ramsey County is taking on the function of staffing and building on this work to support inclusive workplaces and good-quality jobs in the long term.

Helpful Lessons Learned Along the Way

- **Building an effective cross-sector stakeholder collaboration takes time.** It requires growing trust, building a common vision and goals, aligning stakeholder interests, and making a commitment of time to a sometimes ambiguous process.
- **Make sure that the right people are at the table.** Saint Paul made sure to invite key city organizations and agencies, including



“Addressing climate change requires skilled workers in all of the building trades, and we want to utilize our apprenticeship programs to build toward this effort. Also, we want to continue to improve our diversity and inclusion, making sure these middle-working-class jobs are accessible to everyone.”

—Don Mullin, Executive Secretary of the Saint Paul Building and Construction Trades Council



employers, relevant labor unions, training providers, and local government staff leading workforce development and equity work. Over time, additional groups were brought in, including a clean energy organization, a community-based organization, and the local energy utility.


- **Equity must be a key part of any city's climate workforce and economic development strategy.**

Income inequality along socioeconomic and racial lines is widening while front-line communities continue to face disproportionate negative impacts of climate change. Defining what equity means is essential for shared understanding. It is important to contend with the historical realities for BIPOC- and women-identifying people in the clean energy and construction sectors, and to develop measures to correct for historic under-representation, discrimination, and lack of inclusion. In addition to inclusive access to training and job opportunities, such opportunities must support upward economic mobility. You can't achieve equity without attention to job quality.

- **Create something tangible.** Building Green Saint Paul's ultimate objective was to convene a strong, aligned, cross-sector stakeholder collaboration that will result in transformational, long-term, systemic change in the clean energy and construction sectors. This overarching goal can feel nebulous and intangible, difficult to anchor the group's work in and challenging to align the partners around. Therefore, having tangible interim goals that produce concrete results is critical to keeping partners engaged, moving the partnership forward, and fostering alignment. Early on, Building Green Saint Paul developed a grant proposal for a CARES Act-funded workforce initiative, and while the proposal was unsuccessful, it helped the group identify tangible steps toward the broader goal. An initial pilot apprenticeship-readiness program, led by community organization partner Ujaama Place, took place in the fall of 2021, and the plan is to improve on the pilot with additional training cohorts in 2022.

- **Unionized construction trades can successfully integrate stronger DE&I initiatives with adequate engagement, collaboration, and commitment.**

The building trades unions have made significant progress in recent years in addressing issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, as evidenced by the growing diversity of apprentices. Across the country building trades unions are partnering with community groups to improve access to union jobs for women and BIPOC workers. The fact that the unionized construction trades have built-in pay equity standards, where compensation is tied to years of experience and type of work, enables the partnership to focus on recruitment and retention of under-represented workers.



“We want to be a major contributor to climate solutions that are inclusive and lift everyone up. Here is an opportunity for us to realize this vision for the city of Saint Paul.”

—Russ Stark, Saint Paul Chief Resilience Officer

