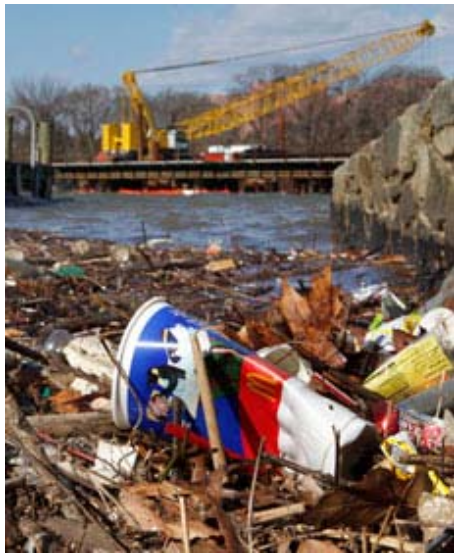




Something in the Water

D.C.'s Anacostia neighborhood struggles with the double burden of high unemployment rates and environmental degradation. Can green stimulus efforts offer lasting change?

BRENTIN MOCK | December 18, 2009 | web only



Trash piles up on the Anacostia River in Washington. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin)

Jackie Ward of the Ward 8 Environmental Council in D.C. once did "something crazy" for the Anacostia neighborhood. With the help of colleagues, co-workers, and friends, Ward convinced the District of Columbia Public Schools to release the most troublesome 7- to 9-year-old students from Southeast D.C.'s poor, black community, for a weekend of camping and learning about their outdoor environment. The outing was near Marvin Gaye Park, an area that was once a haven for junkies until community volunteers cleared it of thousands of hypodermic needles.

Ward calls it "something crazy" because no one there had thought environmental issues were that important. She suspects that many who endure financial hardship today in Ward 8 may find it difficult to latch onto new "green" economic policies being implemented in their neighborhoods without having had environmental education early in their life.

From D.C. Councilmember Marion Barry's community relations office on Martin Luther King Boulevard, Anacostia's main drag, Ward frequently fields phonecalls from developers and trainers looking to cash in on the new green workforce-development grants and contracts slated to reach these communities. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act stimulus package provides \$7.22 billion for environmental improvement projects administered by the Environmental Protection Agency, the bulk of which -- \$6 billion -- is going toward assisting communities with water-quality and wastewater infrastructure needs. The EPA had awarded just over \$43 million to D.C. as of the first week of December, according to OMB Watch, which tracks ARRA spending. An additional \$36.7 billion in ARRA funds is available for green-energy programs, about \$32 million of which had been awarded to D.C. as of the beginning of December as well.

But throwing money at problems won't be entirely sufficient for some who represent the needs and interests of Anacostia. The larger issue, Ward says, is assurance that those who've been unemployed since long before the recession will receive adequate training for jobs that will continue even once green-energy programs fade. This is partially why Ward helped start the camping program for kids -- to prepare them for jobs, even careers, in environmental fields later in life. But Ward also wants to be sure the federal and local governments are thoroughly invested in the economic and environmental revitalization of Anacostia in Ward 8, and for the right reasons.

"The last big infusion of money for job training here, there were no jobs to place the trainees in after it was finished," Ward says. "I know a young man whose wall in his bedroom is filled with diplomas from various job-training programs. Ask him how many jobs he got from them -- zero."

For decades, the Anacostia neighborhood seemed cut off from economic opportunities. The Anacostia River, which flows south from Maryland's Prince George's and Montgomery counties to connect with the Potomac River just below the Capitol, has served as an unofficial scission separating the eastern, mostly impoverished and working-class Ward 8 neighborhoods from the rest of the District. The unemployment rate ran upward of 11 percent in Ward 8 this summer -- the highest it's been since 1983. The health of these "east of the river" neighborhoods -- some of the oldest African American communities in the country -- mirrors the river's conditions: neglected and degraded.

Some 20,000 tons of trash enter the river annually. Even deeper problems lie below the surface, in the destructive organic chemicals and compounds (PCBs, PAHs, chlordane) stored in the sediment stacked on the river floor. Much of that sediment, and the contaminants buried with it, are the legacy of federal facilities such as the Navy Yard, and fossil-fuel-burning plants like the Pepco Generating Station and the Washington Gas East Station, which all lie west of the river. Other harmful chemicals and metals in the river come from storm runoff, partially from residential areas in the District but mostly from upstream Prince George's and Montgomery counties. Investigations by the Anacostia Watershed Society recently revealed that poor de-sedimentation practices by companies contracting with Prince George's county have polluted the river, in some places turning the waters brown and

orange.

The Anacostia neighborhood suffers in other ways as well. St. Elizabeth Hospital, which sits in the heart of the community's residential area, has been in "significant noncompliance" violation of the EPA's Resource Conservation and Recovery Act on hazardous waste for most of last year and up until May of this year. More than 39 percent of people residing within a mile of that facility live below poverty, and 20 percent of households receive public assistance. Heart disease, cancer, and HIV/AIDS are the top causes of death. Of babies born there, 78.4 percent had single mothers, as opposed to 56 percent for the District, while 13.8 percent had a low birth rate.

Communities around the country in cities like Chicago, Pittsburgh, New Orleans, and Kansas City are facing similar challenges, trying to reverse decades of disinvestment and economic disenfranchisement while cleaning up the polluted -- often toxic -- conditions of the land, lakes, and rivers that worsen their quality of life. Communities that suffered from economic and environmental distress before the recession's darkest months are hoping the federal stimulus investments will finally lift them out of misery.

Right now, it doesn't appear that the stimulus money is reaching the neighborhoods needing it most. The Congressional Black Caucus released a press statement on December 8 in response to President Barack Obama's speech on jobs reminding him that African Americans are 55 percent more likely to be unemployed than other Americans right now, and therefore deserve targeted attention. Obama said it would be a "mistake" to focus on the jobs problems of black communities, as opposed to all Americans.

Anacostia may be faring better than most neighborhoods with stimulus money. The Department of Transportation's Urban Forestry Administration is partnering with Washington Parks & People for the D.C. Green Corps program made possible by a \$2.8 million ARRA award. The program will offer career-track jobs in urban forestry and watershed restoration fields. The Corps' offices will be based at the new Marvin Gaye Community Greening Center not far from where Ward took the Anacostia youth camping.

Also made available through ARRA is \$8.1 million from the Department of Energy's Weatherization Assistance Program for improving extreme-weather resiliency in 785 homes of low-income families. The D.C. Water and Sewer Authority (WASA) will receive \$19 million to improve wastewater management, along with a special allocation of \$194,300 for water-quality planning, which includes developing the much-needed total maximum daily load standards for water pollutants. TMDL reports establish thresholds for pollutants a waterbody can sustain and still meet quality standards. Many cities and counties don't establish these standards, and hence, communities are unaware of what the safety levels are when toxic metals and compounds are found in their water supply. Another \$14 million is planned to finance hundreds of river-restoration and cleanup projects in D.C., much of which is targeted for the Anacostia River. These millions should translate to hundreds of new jobs over the next few years -- thousands if you count the jobs created from the spending of those elevated from unemployed to working- and middle-class status.

Judging by the White House's ARRA stimulus funds and jobs-tracking map on their recovery.gov Web site, of the millions of dollars already spoken for in Southeast D.C., very few jobs have been created thus far. The map lists 19 recipients in D.C.'s southeast quadrant. Most of the recipients are D.C. agencies, namely the Housing Authority, Public Schools, WASA, and the city government itself -- about \$42.4 million collectively. A few nongovernment entities received job-training grants, most notably the Sasha Bruce Youthwork, which received \$1.1 million for training at-risk youth, and ARCH, which received about \$750,000 in grants for the same.

What sounds most promising, though, is the money dedicated to the Housing Authority for drastic green improvements on public housing. The Highland Dwellings housing projects -- once a concentrated center of poverty and crime -- will enjoy a \$7.3 million upgrade including new low-flow water fixtures, landscaping features for water conservation and storm-water management, covered gutters connecting to underground cisterns for irrigation, drought-tolerant plantings to replace asphalt, pervious paving to replace existing walkways, and other mechanisms that will prevent storm runoff from further polluting the Anacostia River.

Most of this money, though, has not been used yet. When it is, it should translate into jobs for community residents. However, in wide-scale urban renewal schemes, as New Orleans learned after Hurricane Katrina, out-of-town workers are often brought in by the out-of-town firms that get the recovery contracts. And some of the recipient firms in Southeast D.C. are from outside the District: Chiarmonte Construction out of McLean, Virginia; Clark Design/Build LLC out of Bethesda, Maryland; and Chugach Government Services out of Alaska.

George Hawkins, director of D.C.'s Water and Sewer Authority and former director of D.C.'s Department of the Environment, says stimulus dollars do not neatly translate into new jobs. "When we talk to contractors, one comment we often get is that there is so much unemployment that they are hiring people that they just recently let go," Hawkins says. "So a lot of this will be rehiring people who they worked with in the past. We fund efforts to train at vocational schools, but we don't check every employee. We want to make sure this new work is connected to District people, particularly in neighborhoods where residents haven't been connected to job opportunities in the past."

Kari Fulton, a director of the Environmental Justice Climate Change Initiative, worries that the jobs and resources that do come to Anacostia may arrive with a gentrification agenda. D.C. government planners want to develop the Anacostia riverfront with condominiums and tourist amenities. Jackie Ward and Fulton both say the "unspoken fear" of the neighborhood is that workers might work themselves out of their own communities, especially if the jobs don't pay enough for them to remain once neighborhoods are renewed. A lack of engagement with the new work force can cause job plans to go awry.

This is why Ward wants assurance that Anacostia communities are being engaged in meaningful ways and that the new jobs come with living wages, life-skills training, and environmental education alongside technical training. Without all of that, the stimulus, even when tied to environmental

remediation, is just another phase of employment that will come and go, leaving Anacostia residents further distressed. Clear rules from the federal funding sources down to the local contractors would be effective in ensuring dedicated financing for sustainable jobs in economically marginalized communities.

In mid-November, the EPA announced \$1 million would be spread across 10 environmental-justice "showcase communities," one of which was Washington, D.C. While the EPA has signaled it will prioritize environmental justice, \$100,000 grants for 10 areas is paltry considering the dozens of environmental-justice communities nationwide that each need millions for the kind of cleanup and green-jobs programs required to show real impact. D.C.'s \$100,000 grant will be at the disposal of EPA's partners in the District's departments of Environment and Health, both of which have fielded numerous workforce-program proposals that will cost millions to implement.

"I'm of the generation that's seen these programs come and go," Ward says. "I need to make sure that when these programs come, it's something that five to 10 years down the line [neighborhood residents] will still be working instead of walking down the street dejected and unemployed. I don't want to be part of that legacy."



Brentin Mock is a New Orleans-based reporter working with The Lens, a project of the Open Society Institute. His work can also be found in *The American Prospect*, *The Root*, *The Griot*, *GOOD*, and *The Daily Beast*.