

San Jose makes progress on mayor's ambitious green vision

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One year ago, Chuck Reed unveiled one of his boldest initiatives as San Jose mayor, a "green vision" to turn the city into "the center of innovation in clean technology."

Environmentalists praised him and politicians near and far took notice — most notably Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who dubbed Reed "the green mayor." He even earned the backing of some of his toughest critics at City Hall.

A year later, there are early signs of success. The city already can point to measurable progress in attracting "clean tech" jobs, promoting renewable energy and making buildings more efficient — including a new mandate for private developers that will be voted on Tuesday.

But there's still a long way to go, and it remains to be seen whether many of the 10 ambitious goals, such as powering the entire city with renewable energy, diverting all waste from the landfill and reusing all wastewater, can be achieved in the 15-year time frame that Reed mapped out.

"I think they're making some pretty aggressive efforts toward meeting the goals of the green vision," said David Marsland of the Sierra Club's Loma Prieta chapter. "Those are particularly ambitious goals, no doubt about that. I don't know if the goals are unreachable, but they're certainly working toward them."

Reed admits he's set a high bar, but he insists San Jose can rise to the challenge.

"We've got some pretty good progress in a year," Reed said. "They're tough goals, not impossible."

Notable progress toward the green vision over the past year includes:

- Doubling the number of "clean tech" jobs in San Jose to more than 3,000. Renewable energy companies, notably SunPower and Nanosolar, added 1,500 positions to their payrolls. If that pace continues, San Jose will add 22,500 clean-tech jobs in 15 years, just shy of the 25,000 goal. On Tuesday, the city council is expected to approve a hard-fought land deal to bring Tesla Motors to San Jose, a move expected to add at least 1,000 more jobs producing electric cars.
- Adding 159,000 square feet of "green buildings" meeting high-energy efficiency and sustainable materials standards, including a 96,000-square-foot central service yard and a 63,000-square-foot affordable-housing project. That puts San Jose on pace to have 2.4 million square feet of new or retrofitted green buildings in 15 years, far short of the 50-million-square-foot goal. But the city council Tuesday is expected to approve a green-building requirement for private development that could greatly increase the totals in coming years.

Green vision is Reed's most popular initiative since taking office in 2007. And although Reed has clashed with council members over how to go about eliminating the city's chronic budget deficits, he has won unanimous backing on the environmental agenda.

Councilwoman Nora Campos, who has challenged Reed to devote more resources toward crime-fighting, lauded the mayor for efforts to ensure that his environmental initiatives reach out to include residents of modest means.

She noted his insistence earlier this year that solar power companies offer their systems to residents at no up-front cost. In June, five local solar companies announced they would do so by offering leases or purchase agreements that are paid for with the savings from consumers' monthly energy bills.

"Though I support the mayor's green vision, I have always been concerned that it would become an ideal that most of our hard-working residents cannot afford," Campos said. "I am pleased that the mayor has addressed many of the affordability issues that I have raised."

Yet it also could be argued that, in a state where environmentalism is popular, San Jose is in some ways running with the pack.

The green-building requirements for private development that the council is expected to approve Tuesday will surely put San Jose on the leading edge of environmental construction standards. But several other cities have already adopted similar policies this year, including San Francisco, Los Angeles and Palo Alto.

Still, environmentalists say San Jose's ambitious pursuit of leading-edge environmental policy under Reed's leadership has laid a foundation for substantial progress.

Marsland noted that Reed was successful in winning support for the private-sector green building policy from key business groups, including housing developers and architects. Pat Dando, president of the San Jose Silicon Valley Chamber of Commerce, said Reed has taken business leaders' considerable concerns about new regulations into account in pursuing the green goals. She cited, for example, a phased implementation of the proposed green building policy.

"All the goals the mayor set out in the green vision plan are laudable; we all want to work toward them," Dando said. "This mayor is a business-friendly mayor and he understands the value of a healthy economy. I don't believe he'll do anything to cause more challenges for businesses today."

Celia Canfield, director of development for West Coast Green, which promotes environmentally sensitive building products and featured Reed at its convention in San Jose last month, said she's "not hearing any cynicism" among green activists about Reed's ability to deliver on his environmental goals.

"When you have somebody like a Chuck Reed who says 'I'll clear the roadblocks to make that happen,' " she said, "it can happen."

Green report card

San Jose's green vision: 10 goals by 2022

GOAL 1: Create 25,000 "clean tech" jobs.

SO FAR: San Jose has added more than 1,500 in the past year, mostly at solar power companies.

GOAL 2: Reduce per-capita energy use 50 percent.

SO FAR: San Jose used a total of 5 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity in 2007 and would have to reduce that to 2.5 billion kWh in 15 years. Figures for 2008 are not yet available. In the last seven years, city operations have reduced energy use 21 percent.

GOAL 3: Receive 100 percent of electrical power from clean, renewable resources.

SO FAR: San Jose received 13 percent of its electricity from renewable sources in October 2007. Since then, solar systems producing a total of 6,700 kilowatts worth of power have been installed, notably a 650 kw system at eBay and systems totaling 5,000 kw at San Jose Unified School District. It's unclear to what extent that changes the percentage.

GOAL 4: Build or retrofit 50 million square feet of green buildings.

SO FAR: San Jose has added 159,000 square feet in the past year.

GOAL 5: Divert 100 percent of waste from landfill and convert to energy.

SO FAR: San Jose in October 2007 recycled 62 percent of municipal waste. Since then, a change in recycling at apartments and condominiums has doubled multifamily recycling rates from 35 percent to 75 percent. Technology to convert food waste and sewage sludge to energy is being studied.

GOAL 6: Recycle or reuse 100 percent of wastewater.

SO FAR: The city a year ago recycled 10.2 million gallons a day out of its 100 mgd of wastewater; about 10 percent. The city recycles or reuses 11 mgd today.

GOAL 7: Adopt a general plan with measurable standards for sustainable development.

SO FAR: San Jose is in the midst of a general plan update.

GOAL 8: Ensure 100 percent of city fleet vehicles run on alternative fuels.

SO FAR: San Jose a year ago had 972 out of 2,700 city vehicles on alternative fuels. Today the city is exploring electric car partnerships with manufacturers.

GOAL 9: Plant 100,000 new trees and replace 100 percent of streetlights with zero-emission lighting.

SO FAR: San Jose has planted 2,023 new trees over the past year and is exploring replacement of sodium-vapor street lighting with energy-saving LED technology.

GOAL 10: Create 100 miles of interconnected trails.

SO FAR: San Jose had 40 miles of trails a year ago, not necessarily interconnected, and now has about 51.

Source: City of San Jose

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