

[Green Empowerment Zone positions Contra Costa County for clean energy investment - San Francisco Business Times](#)



By Aaron Welch

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Contra Costa County has long been a hub of heavy industrial activity, most visible in the petroleum refineries that dot the county's northern waterfront.

The area's many deep-water ports can accommodate heavy oil tankers delivering crude oil. For added logistical ease, these ports link up with robust road and rail infrastructure. These strengths, along with a highly skilled workforce, have made Contra Costa County attractive to the fossil fuel industry for more than a century.

But how relevant is all that in an economy that's transitioning to clean technologies and renewable energy sources?

At a recent conference hosted by TeamCalifornia, a nonprofit that helps bring business investment to communities throughout the state, local labor and education leaders put forward a strong case for Contra Costa County's leading role in the energy economy of the future.

"Simply put, Contra Costa County has been the industrial backbone of the entire Bay Area for over a century," Tim Sbranti, executive director of the Contra Costa Building Trades

Council, told conference attendees. “Since 1902, we’ve been providing the skilled workers for Bay Area industry, and we are now diversifying.”

Sbranti’s presentation at the conference focused on the county’s Green Empowerment Zone (GEZ), an economic development initiative established by a 2021 California Assembly bill that aims to bring clean energy investment to Contra Costa County’s Northern Waterfront. The GEZ seeks to harness existing strengths to make Contra Costa County a leader in the clean energy transition.

“We still have an industrial base, but we are moving more into the clean energy sector,” said Sbranti, who also serves as a member of the GEZ board of directors. “The California Legislature in 2021 approved this Green Empowerment Zone designation because of the potential, the opportunity, that the Legislature recognized for this area.”

The GEZ’s participating cities and unincorporated communities extend from El Cerrito in the west to Byron Airport in the east. The zone traces the water all the way from northern San Francisco Bay through San Pablo and Suisun Bays to the mouth of the San Joaquin River. It also includes the cities of Benicia and Vallejo in Solano County.

Recent legislation extends the GEZ’s authorization until 2040, expands its inclusion to four additional cities, and adds 7 director seats for community and environmental justice representatives.

More than just infrastructure tailored to heavy industry, Contra Costa County has thousands of skilled, motivated workers ready to transition to the clean energy industry, Sbranti observed.

“We have some of the best training centers that you can find anywhere,” he said. “And what’s unique about our training centers is we will absolutely work with employers. Our union programs will work with employers. You tell us what you need. You tell us exactly what that looks like. We’ll embed those skills within our training and we’ll make sure those workers meet those needs.”

Kelly Schelin, executive vice chancellor of education and technology at Contra Costa County Community College District and a GEZ board member, said her institution is positioning itself as a place for existing energy workers to gain the formal bona fides to show they’re ready for a second career in clean energy.

“You have an entire population of highly skilled workers who don’t necessarily have credentials to demonstrate their competencies and their abilities,” Schelin said. “It’s hard for them to transition to other sectors and other jobs. They need few more steps in terms of their skills to be highly competitive in this other industry.”

As refineries like Valero in Benicia wind down operations, Schelin is confident that the county can place former fossil fuel energy workers in green energy jobs through strategic upskilling.

But for there to be jobs to place them into, they'll need to entice businesses to invest in Contra Costa County. That's where tax incentives and regulatory streamlining could come into play, Schelin said.

"We've engaged with some consultants to help us think through some of the possibilities," she shared. "Certainly, tax incentives have been described. Also, thinking about how to ensure that site selection and permitting is easier than it is currently to try to accelerate the process. And ensuring that the workforce that's there has actually been trained appropriately for the new businesses that may be coming in."

Schelin said the GEZ's goal is both to attract new green companies and to hold onto existing petrochemical company presences as these companies go through the transition themselves. As the board irons out the details, their goal in the meantime is education, she said.

"There's been progress made in terms of having joint marketing and communication, reaching out to businesses and actually saying, 'Hey, this zone exists, and this is what it is,'" she said.

Meanwhile, Sbranti's optimism in his comments about the GEZ — grounded in learnings from other regions that have gone through significant economic transitions — was contagious.

"We have a collaborative approach that has federal officials, state officials, county officials, city officials, private sector leaders all working together on an array of incentives and packages specifically tailored to this unique region," he said. "If you think about everything that Contra Costa has, this Green Empowerment Zone, this is a recipe for success and growth everywhere in the world."