

This is a story about a low-income community whose situation repeats itself in city after city, economy after economy—including economies making a purposeful transition to sustainability. It is also a story about connecting this community to the economic benefits of environmental protection

The Hacienda Community Development Corporation is a nonprofit provider of affordable housing, sponsoring 321 units in the Cully neighborhood of Portland. The housing is available to households earning at or below 60% median area income, and is occupied mostly by recent immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries.

Many Hacienda CDC residents work hard jobs: jobs that are unhealthy, low-paying, and offer little opportunity to build a career or develop new skills. Residents are economically marginalized and disconnected from the Portland region's broader economic opportunities—including opportunities driven by environmental policies.

The Verde Native Plant Nursery makes a deep investment in each employee by paying good wages with benefits, employing them year-round, and providing free, accessible training. Nursery employees share in the Nursery's revenues, and will have the chance to become entrepreneurs through Nursery support to establish their own landscaping and/or nursery businesses.

The Nursery is part of Verde's environmental participation strategy: address the community's economic needs through environmental job and business opportunities, opportunities driven by environmental policies, and provide a more direct connection between the community and environmental protection. Thus, Verde will sponsor more environmental businesses after the Nursery is sustainably-established. The Nursery is also a model project. By drawing tighter the connections between environmental protection and economic opportunity, Verde provides a road map for other community groups working to create new economic opportunities in other disadvantaged communities.

## the low-income household and sustainability

Alan Hipólito

*Jose Luis Velasco of the Verde Native Plant Nursery maintaining a bioswale at Glencoe Middle School, in partnership with the City of Portland.*



At the same time, Portland fosters an environmental economy—an emerging economic development effort prioritized not solely by tree huggers or policy wonks, but by government economic development agencies, chambers of commerce, and other groups whose green interests tend more toward the dollar than the earth.


Unfortunately, Hacienda CDC residents are largely absent from these growing, sustainable opportunities, and in response, Hacienda CDC began its sustainable development program, a disciplined effort to identify an environmental business opportunity appropriate for its resident community.

Beginning with a cursory, Ecotrust-generated list of 20+ environmental business opportunities, the program analyzed each opportunity based on market demand, capital need and availability, training need and availability, and existing community capacity. A combined material-services native plant nursery—one which could meet a growing demand for skilled labor and native plant material for Portland-area wetland restoration, streamside revegetation and stormwater management projects was selected, and a Business Plan was developed.

In late 2005, Hacienda CDC established Verde, a wholly independent, tax-exempt organization to house the Nursery project and future environmental job training, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for Hacienda CDC residents and other disadvantaged communities.

Unfortunately, ours is largely an isolated story, even in the sustainability community. Often, sustainability is described in terms of "the three Es"—Environment, Economy, and Equity, but all of us know the truth: the sustainability movement produces environmental results and economic results, but not much equity.

Think about it: conscientious sustainability advocates decry the movement's homogeneous demographic, and its lack of steady and viable partnerships with low-income communities and people of color. The green building community, the biofuels community, and other sustainability sectors have so far failed to address—and devoted little attention to—the daily concern of a low-income household: a good job to provide for a family's needs.

Maybe you just have not thought about this. Maybe nobody brought it to your attention. Well, here's your chance to do the right thing, to put the equity leg on the sustainability stool, the chance to put your knowledge at the service of those trying to create job and business opportunities for low-income and people of color communities. 

*Alan Hipólito is Executive Director of Verde. The mission of Verde is to improve the economic health of disadvantaged communities by creating environmental job training, employment, and entrepreneurial opportunities, fostering the connection between economic vitality and environmental protection and restoration.*

