How President Clinton Lifted Green Building onto the National Agenda

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Forging green building market solutions and partnerships that save energy, save money and create jobs

The opportunity available in green building is like its own annual stimulus package. But instead of seizing the opportunity, we're losing $130 billion a year from inefficient buildings, according to McKinsey & Co. The culprit, also according to McKinsey in their influential study, was sundry barriers – micro and macro and in broad categories like finance and behavior – that were often grimly described as intractable and pervasive.

But what a difference a president can make.

In 2007, President Clinton launched – what we can now say as we look back – one of the industry's most prescient and effective programs: the Energy Efficiency Building Retrofit Program. The program, helped launched in partnership with USGBC and several other key stakeholders including cities, energy service companies and key players from the financial sector, took a creative and market-based approach designed to leverage collaboration (btw, does anyone do that better than President Clinton?) to tear down the stubborn barriers to retrofitting our existing building stock.

The program has spurred thousands of retrofit projects around the world and worked effectively to institutionalize and multiply its impact by creating the standardization models – for things like procurement, contracting and financing – that make the process easier for each subsequent retrofit project. Most importantly, President Clinton showed the power of leadership. He used his unparalleled post-presidency bully pulpit and his organizational capacity at the Clinton Foundation to shine a light on the tremendous opportunity in energy efficient buildings. (For example, in addition to the opportunity to save $130 billion a year, we could also create nearly a million jobs from a robust retrofit industry).

For us, it's no coincidence that since President Clinton and our President and CEO and President Rick Fedrizzi began working together five years ago, USGBC is now certifying more LEED existing building space than new construction, and, more importantly, that the total square footage of LEED-certified existing buildings exceeds the total certified space of new construction projects. Their leadership significantly contributed to a more universal focus on unlocking the efficiency potential in our existing buildings. This heightened focus yielded the certification of more LEED for Existing Buildings projects in 2010 than in the six previous years combined. Even more convincingly, existing buildings now account for nearly half of the more than 1.5 million square feet of LEED projects that are certified every day.

To put a finer lens on the work the President is doing in this area, note his recent Time Magazine article where he summarizes 14 of his job creation ideas. Four of them are green building related. One is simply titled, "Copy the Empire State Building." Not a bad example. The signature project, a partnership of the Clinton Climate Initiative, Jones Lang LaSalle, Johnson Controls, Rocky Mountain Institute and Nyserda, cost about $20 million, has a just a 3-year payback, reduces energy by 38 percent, saves $4.4 million annually, and created more than 250 jobs.

Further, President Clinton's work and message have helped seed the substantive and significant policy and program ideas for President Obama's Better Buildings Initiative (BBI), which was launched this past February. In fact, President Clinton was asked by President Obama to lead the efforts on energy innovation in the important work the President's Council on Jobs and Competitiveness is doing to stimulate job creation.

And today during the Clinton Global Initiative America (CGIA) conference, President Clinton is doing it again. To spark jobs in the US, the President is convening leaders from across the country to explore solutions and make commitments that will create jobs and get America working again. Because the President sees such opportunity in green building, it will be one of ten major working areas. As a topic facilitator for the Green Building working group at CGIA, I'm helping organize the session and I'll also be reporting on both the discussions and the exciting green building related commitments.

Again, at this next inflection moment for green building, President Clinton is showing the way and fostering the type of partnerships that will inspire new thinking and spur new investment, innovation and action - ultimately accelerating the movement and our transition to sustainable built environment.

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