

TEN WAYS TO SOLVE THE JOBS PROBLEM¹

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As the midterm political season heats up, one word on every politician's lips is "jobs." And for good reason. People are hurting—they can't pay their mortgages, send their kids to college, pay their dental bills. Young people are wondering if they have a place in the work world. So the economic pundits cheer when car sales go up, housing starts rise, consumer confidence strengthens. But as the oily ooze in the Gulf tars yet another beach, we all sense something is terribly wrong. We can't keep tearing up the planet to keep ourselves employed. There must be another way.

So—imagine a no-holds-barred "summit" that comes up with ideas to solve both our job and environmental problems. What might it come up with? Here is my starter list.

- (1) **More farms, less agribusiness.** Agribusiness substitutes chemicals and machinery for labor and employs remarkably few people. Small organic farms are far more productive per acre and bring the people back.
- (2) **More repair, fewer products.** Instead of tossing those shoes, that toaster, that computer, let's fix them—and employ repair people in the process.
- (3) **More recycling, less mining.** Ray Anderson of the Interface flooring company says we already have enough nylon to meet the world's carpet needs forever. The same may be true for aluminum, steel, copper, and other easily recyclable materials. We just need good systems for recovering them. What if we stopped subsidizing advertising with tax breaks and focused on educating people to lead satisfying lives?
- (4) **More renovations, less construction.** Our nation has 129 million housing units. We build new ones and let old ones deteriorate. How about renovating what we have and in-filling our cities to use existing sidewalks, gas pipes, water mains, and roads?
- (5) **More restoration, less destruction.** Whether it's forests, Superfund sites, or oil-laced wetlands, it's time to restore. Some restoration can even pay for itself, as in restoration forestry where folks make products from the fire-prone, small-diameter trees normally considered too small to market.
- (6) **More bike paths, fewer highways.** They both cost money, but one is good for our health and good for the planet. What's not to like?
- (7) **More local businesses, fewer megastores.** Locally owned stores employ more people per goods sold and you can often talk to a decision-maker about your purchase.
- (8) **More dishwashing, fewer throw-aways.** What if we got rid of all the disposable containers in fast food restaurants? At my friend Ron Sher's Crossroads Shopping Center

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near Seattle, the food court vendors share a common crockery supply. No trees needed. It works.

- (9) More education, less advertising.** Let's face it. Advertising is about making us feel inadequate for something we don't yet have. What if we stopped subsidizing advertising with tax breaks and focused on educating people to lead satisfying lives?
- (10) More clean energy, less fossil fuel.** Here we do need new stuff—wind turbines, solar panels, insulation, passenger trains. Politicians are providing some—though not enough—funding for these sources of “green jobs.” It's the other items on this list they're not even talking about—but need to.

You may be thinking that my list isn't realistic because these options cost more or depend on government funding. But that's partly because governments subsidize oil, agribusiness, nuclear plants, ports, highways, advertising, and other unhealthy choices. So the next time you hear a politician talk about jobs, try comparing the solutions offered to this list. By breaking out of the narrow range of options that keeps policy discussions stuck, we can create jobs that not only sustain families, but also build community and restore the living systems of our planet.