

■ spotlight



It isn't easy being green

Bringing real environmental change takes more than a sexy slogan

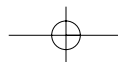
When Corona developer Ali Sahabi launched his Green Valley Initiative in 2007, the response was muted. Publicly people were supportive, but in private there was skepticism. Branding the Inland Empire — a region known nationally for its smog — as a center for green business seemed Quixotic at best.

But the GVI has matured. The group still hopes to brand the Inland Empire as a center for greenness, but is spending most of its resources on the blocking-and-tackling of building a legitimate green reputation:

Helping building owners install solar panels, bring jobs to the region and capture some federal stimulus money. It's not nearly as sexy as a national branding campaign with ads in *Forbes* and on CNBC, but doubtless a lot more productive.

And in the most recent sign of maturity, the GVI appointed its first full-time executive director, Craig Keys, a longtime Los Angeles-area expert in environmentally friendly real estate and development.

"We've been very busy since I came aboard," says Keys. "A significant



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amount of work had already been done with regard to convallescening the cities and the various constituencies, and we distilled a lot of the goals into concrete programs to implement."

Sahabi's goals are ultimately to make the Inland Empire a green economic powerhouse, much as Silicon Valley is for information technology. Not only would that drive development in the area — supporting his massive but stalled Dos Lagos project in Corona — it would help make the entire region more attractive to companies that might consider moving to the IE if the region had a better reputation.

"We have to build quality of life," Sahabi recently told a group of business leaders. "These companies are smart. They know that they have to offer their employees a better quality of life. They won't simply move because we have cheap dirt."

Under Keys, the GVI's strategy centers on making the IE a big user of renewable energy and then attracting the companies that supply it. Keys is working with the cities of the IE to help them set up loan programs to fund solar panel installation by collateralizing them with property taxes, a process made possible by AB811, a bill passed by the state legislature last year.



**Craig Keys, Executive Director
Green Valley Initiative**
Education: BS, Cal-Berkeley Urban
Studies ('90); JD-MBA Columbia,
Cal-Berkeley and UCLA ('96)

The notion behind the bill is that energy generated by solar panels pay for the panels over time and

ultimately earn a positive return on investment, but many business don't have the initial capital to install the equipment. AB811 allows cities and counties to make low-interest loans to property owners to make the installation, and those loans are ultimately secured by a lien on the property.

Keys' role is to facilitate adoption of the program by serving

as a clearinghouse for communication and best practices. "We want to get as many solar panels installed as possible and generate energy," says Keys. "That will create jobs (immediately) with people installing and repairing them. Ultimately, I believe we will be able to attract solar manufacturers to the region because we will have created the demand. If you become a consumption center for these resources you become a magnet for the industry."

Part of Keys' challenge is to make green initiatives regional. In the past, the dozens of municipalities have marketed to new business by enacting their own rules, often in conflict with each other. The GVI, Keys says, "is looking for regional solutions to problems." He is working to get the loan programs established with a model ordinance, which would bring consistency to the efforts and effectively make it a regional program, he says. Some cities, such as Palm Desert, are well into their loan programs while others are just getting started.

Keys is also working to bring federal stimulus money to the Inland Empire, part of which may be used to expand the renewable energy loan program. The GVI was endorsed last year by the U.S. Department of Commerce,

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which helps bring credibility to the group's efforts. And the corporate sponsors, such as Edison and Bank of America, who are so far footing the bill for GVI also help.

"We have a great many supporting partners," says Keys, who is housed in Sahabi's SE Corp. offices in Corona. "Our strength is in our numbers. When you can speak for both Riverside and San Bernardino counties, you get the state's attention, and you get the federal government's attention."

All in all, it's good news to see the GVI focused on practical and substantive projects rather than sexy but ultimately empty PR campaigns. "What we are focused on is beyond public awareness," says Keys. "We are focused on practical solutions that can be implemented on a regional basis."

Or, as Sahabi says, "We want to turn the Inland Empire into the center for clean and green technologies. I am a businessman. I'm interested in results. I want change." ■



Ali Sahabi