

Jobama Forum

Locals give Obama an earful on job creation

By Betsy Yagla

How can President Obama jump-start jobs in New Haven? That's the question the White House asked in December after holding its own Jobs and Economic Growth Forum. Actually, Obama asked that local communities create their own job growth forums and then share those ideas with him by Jan. 7.

On the day before the deadline, a group of about 20 residents shared their experiences, frustrations and suggestions for the local economy at the New Haven library.

Those involved included activists, the unemployed, non-profit directors and City Hall staff.

Ideas on job creation were tossed around in the library's program room, in front of a mural created under the Works Projects Administration — the New Deal program that put Americans to work during the Great Depression.

Notes from the meeting were e-mailed to the White House. Ideas from across the country will be compiled into a report and sent to the Oval Office (it will also be available online at whitehouse.gov/blog); some ideas may turn into public policy.

The country needs all the help it can get: Nationally, another 85,000 jobs were lost in December. At a news conference on the job loss, Obama announced \$2.3 billion in tax credits to stimulate clean energy manufacturing jobs.

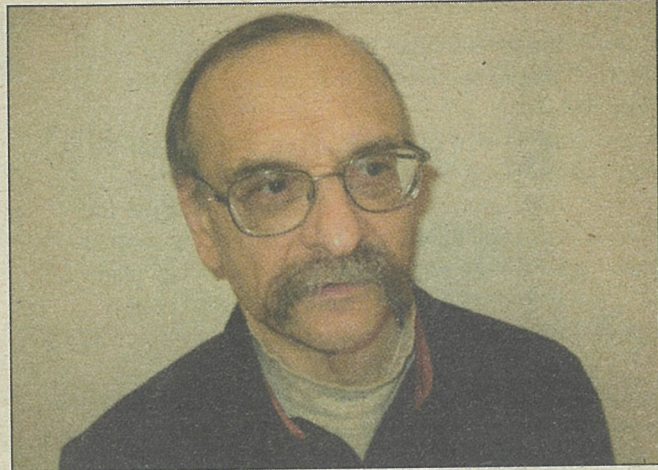
At the same press conference Obama said "we have to continue to work every single day to get our economy moving again. For most Americans, and for me, that means jobs."

Here are some exchanges and ideas from New Haven's economic-minded leaders at the meeting:

- "A major obstacle is felons," says Kevin Ewing, president of the West River Neighborhood Services Corporation. "As soon as they mention their record, they're dismissed [from the job interview]. I talk to a lot of guys standing on the street corner and after I get them to put out their joints, they can come up with 10 business ideas in just half an hour. They say, 'Somebody should do this.' Or 'Why hasn't anyone thought of that?' But you know what, this kid has bad credit and a criminal record."

Clay Williams, small business development officer for New Haven, piggy backed off that idea: "When I ran the small business loan program, I ran the most flexible loan program in the state. I was helping Kevin's kinda guy, but the funding ran out. If [the federal government] took some of this money that they gave to the banks and gave it to programs like mine, we could start a lot of new businesses."

- Jackie Solimini, business and community liaison for the New Haven Job Corps Center: "What about temporary workers? I had that idea for our students, because its beneficial to both the student and employer. If it's not a good fit then they're not beholden to them. We're working on doing that."



BETSY YAGLA PHOTO

Art Perlo: Obama should bail out cities and states to prevent further job cuts and a decline in services

- Another suggestion was to grant tax credits to small businesses that hire more staff.

But Brian Roccapriore, director of the job readiness program STRIVE New Haven, says tax credits won't work.

"If we walk in the door and say we have great candidates for your business, people are scared of that," he said in an interview after the forum. "It's a turnoff: It's like, 'Why does this person need a program?' and then they'll think 'What's wrong with this person that they need a tax credit?'"

Roccapriore doesn't think change at the federal level, like tax credits, could help: "It needs to happen at the hyper-local level. The people in Newhallville can work on Newhallville, the people in West River should work on West River. They can work on their problems and then get people who need jobs into programs like ours."

- Should the federal government bail out cities?, asked moderator (and *New Haven Independent* scribe) Melissa Bailey.

No, says Solimini.

"Isn't this bailout thing overblown?" she says. "You have no business being in business if you can't provide quality services."

Yes, says Art Perlo, an unemployed activist and occasional economic commentator for the *People's World*.

After the meeting, he elaborated.

"I don't view bailing out the cities as the same as bailing out Wall Street banks. When you're bailing out cities, you're talking about working-class taxpayers," he says.

The state's budget crisis is prompting major cuts to vital social services and Perlo thinks an extended stimulus package could help.

"These programs aren't fat. Every time you lay off a school nurse or get rid of a school athletic program or increase class size, you are increasing the drop out rate, and you're further undermining the future of our country."