

Equity Factor

Green Jobs Program Took This Philadelphian From City Statistic to College

BY MALCOLM BURNLEY | OCTOBER 1, 2015



After participating in the PowerCorps PHL workforce development program, Paul Johnson is pursuing an environmental engineering degree. (Photo by Malcolm Burnley)

Paul Johnson was in his early 20s when he was slapped with a DUI charge and ushered into the Philadelphia Youth Violence Reduction Partnership. The arrest made him a **statistic** — one of the 100,000 disconnected youth in Philadelphia, the majority of whom are black or Latino. Although he'd held various jobs up to that point, nothing stuck as a career; he had no post-secondary education to fall back on.

Entering YVRP was a wakeup call. Johnson spent time thumbing through various pamphlets on workforce development programs and apprenticeships. About his fourth visit to the employment office, someone pointed out a brochure for a brand-new AmeriCorps opportunity.

“They mentioned a program in which I might be able to attain a city job,” Johnson says. “I didn’t know the name at the time, but I said ‘sign me up.’” Aside from the solid pay scale and government benefits, Johnson believed this could be his second chance. “You can start from the bottom in a city job and end up as commissioner.”

The program was **PowerCorps PHL**, which began in 2013 as a way to address two disparate issues in the city: disconnected youth and how to maintain the **expansive green agenda** of Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter. Each year, roughly 130 18- to 26-year-olds collectively work on anything from cleaning up public watersheds to pruning vegetation around stormwater infrastructure. The experience is designed to activate a civic streak in participants and foster employable skills.

“I never knew what I wanted to do with my life but I knew that I wanted to be the creator of something, especially something that people can use that helps out everybody,” Johnson says. He was in the original cohort of PowerCorps PHL and used a \$2,800 education award from AmeriCorps to enroll at the Community College of Philadelphia. Now, he’s on his way to an environmental engineering degree. Currently, he works as a part-time green infrastructure landscape maintenance technician for a big stormwater management city contractor. In his free time, he’s building a green infrastructure project in his back yard: an environmentally friendly doghouse with lights on it that’s powered by rainwater. “I really fell in love with this stuff,” he says.

With the City of Philadelphia committing more than \$1 billion over the course of a **25-year-plan called Green City, Clean Waters** to convert 4,000 acres of impervious area into green stormwater infrastructure, the industry is ready to boom. GSI Partners, a division of the Sustainable Business Network of Greater Philadelphia, conducted a survey of 40 of its members last year, and estimated there was a 14 percent increase in revenue between 2013 and 2014, and there was a 20 percent increase in temporary or seasonal jobs among those members. And that’s just a drop in the bucket compared to the **SBN projections** at the start of Green City, Clean Waters, which anticipated 8,600 jobs being created in the area over the project’s lifespan.

As with any emerging industry, of course, standards need to be established. Right now, there are longtime landscapers trying to adjust to the nuances of vegetated green stormwater infrastructure maintenance, without adequate professional development bringing them up to speed.

“We continue to see operations and maintenance as key to the long-term success of the plan, but there’s a knowledge gap,” admits Anna Shipp, project manager of GSI Partners. And in order to keep the jobs local, that gap must be filled, which is why GSI Partners spent a year and a half developing the region’s first green infrastructure operations and maintenance course taught by industry professionals. The three-day, \$350 course sold out to 40 participants in its first run this summer. (The GSI Partners initiative is made possible in part with funds from the Surdna Foundation, a sponsor of the Equity

Factor.)

“We’re hoping that the operations and maintenance course that we put together becomes the credentialing program for the industry,” Shipp says. Granted, for the foreseeable future, the course is not designed for newcomers to landscaping, but rather, existing professionals who want to transition to the green approach. “We’re not taking people cold who have no landscape background and then promising that they’ll have a clear understanding of landscape management and green infrastructure maintenance.”

Right now, that role is left to just a few programs like PowerCorps PHL and the Water Department’s apprenticeship program. But the enthusiasm of individuals like Paul — and 10 other alumni of the same program who’re working in the field currently — have definitely rubbed off on higher-ups in PWD, like Water Department Deputy Commissioner Chris Crockett. “Paul was the first person to wake people up to the potential of what an untapped resource we had in our own front yard, but without the right conveyor belts to bring these people in,” he says. “There should be no barrier as to why Paul can’t get to my job.”

The Equity Factor is made possible with the support of the [Surdna Foundation](#).

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Malcolm was a Next City 2015 equitable cities fellow. He has contributed writing and research for The Atlantic and Philadelphia magazine, among other publications. He’s appeared on NPR’s “On The Media” and “All Things Considered.” He lives in Philadelphia.

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TAGS: PHILADELPHIA, JOBS

The  Works

Montreal Business Corridor Has a Plan for Surviving

Torn-Up Streets

BY EMMA JACOBS | OCTOBER 1, 2015



(Photo by Eric Bolté)

“P as mal,” observes architect Jean Beaudoin. *Not bad.*

The assessment is of a bench, newly installed, in the shape of letter spelling out the name of the street on which he stands. Rue Saint-Denis, a major avenue through Montreal, has become the setting of an experiment in how to help a business corridor survive major construction projects.

Construction has caused more disruption than usual in the last few years in Montreal, where long-delayed work on aging infrastructure has piled up. As cities in the U.S. and around the world begin to tackle such **widespread deferred maintenance**, tearing up streets and sidewalks will be a strain on entrepreneurs who rely on foot traffic. Many municipalities are finding relief in the creative. Last year, in St. Paul, Minnesota, **artists worked with business owners affected by a light-rail project**. Everything from murals to live music shows telegraphed to customers that stores and restaurants were open amid the chaos.

The year of roadwork planned for Saint-Denis won't begin until February or March. However, in preparation, Beaudoin designed something that takes “**Park(ing) Day**” to a new level: Red pallets,

installed last month, take up the right-most lane of traffic for an entire kilometer (six-tenths of a mile), making up a “grande terrasse,” aka the red boardwalk.

“The idea is to make an evolving public space,” Beaudoin says, with a before, during and after.

In the pre-construction period, Beaudoin wants to attract more people to spend time on the street. He says that, in total, the boardwalk has 1,000 “stopping areas” (three people to a bench, one to a folding chair, hammocks, et cetera). Festive, lettered banners hang across the road, the same type of construction used to suspend signs behind a plane. (Beaudoin actually ended up hiring the operator of a plane he spotted overhead to create them.)

“You don’t want to invite people to your house when it’s messy,” says Olivier Gougeon. Gougeon works for a publisher of French language travel guides called Ulysses, which has its headquarters and a bookshop on Saint-Denis. He helps run the local business association.

By raising the visibility of the corridor before construction, he hopes more visitors will stick with the merchants through next year. “The new term is ‘retail-tainment.’”

During construction, pallets will be rearranged into platforms at either side of the roadwork with a view over the work site, and art installations will brighten up the barriers. In the final post-construction phase in 2017, the boardwalk will return to the restored street.

Stores on Saint-Denis, as everywhere, were losing sales to online shopping long before the announced plans to tear up half a kilometer for two years. The young business association for the corridor leapt into action. First they convinced the city to coordinate construction among different agencies; that got the original length of time down to a year. They also secured \$2 million from the city to mitigate the losses to stores and restaurants.

Materials for the red boardwalk, which is 80 percent recyclable, cost \$640,000.

During construction, there will also be a permanent liaison so that merchants have someone to call when they arrive one morning to find that, say, access to their business has been blocked.

Coordination is a big concern for organizers of the boardwalk. Not long after checking in on the new bench, Beaudoin spots the spray-painted symbols on the sidewalk indicating plans for excavations. The architect snaps a photo with his phone to follow up.



Some business owners have said they would rather receive a check for a percentage of that \$2 million dollars, but others are supportive.

(Photo by Eric Bolté)

David Tran, owner and chef at Bao Boys, a trendy new Vietnamese restaurant, says busy weekends have made for more business. Events are planned on the boardwalk Thursday to Sunday. In early September, the street was turned into an “apple orchard.” Stores offered bowls of free apples, and amateurs struggled to get a series of vintage barrel cider presses operational.

Whatever lessons are learned along Rue Saint-Denis, the City of Montreal would like to apply them at other sites. A design contest will solicit plans for managing the renovation of another major avenue downtown. Work on Sainte Catherine, a popular commercial boulevard, could begin in 2017, with segments staggered over five years.

“It’s not thought of, the horrible economic impact,” Marie-Josée Lacroix of the city’s Bureau of Design says of the status quo. She and her colleagues are watching work on Saint-Denis closely.

Lacroix calls these spaces “labs for designers,” but it’s very difficult to scientifically assess what the overall impact has been on the business corridor. Gougeon says merchants have not wanted to share their sales numbers. The one tool the business association plans to use is to compare pedestrian counts taken last year with numbers gathered on an upcoming weekend to quantify how much activity has grown.

“Is it going to help business?” Gougeon poses the question himself. He thinks the answer is yes. “Enough? It’s too early to say.”

The Works is made possible with the support of the [Surdna Foundation](#).

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