

Job Corps and job creation

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This past weekend the national media was fixated on Hurricane Irene, a bit too much so in my opinion, but when the cities it threatened are the ones where so many cable television stations are based I suppose it's no wonder they would pay attention to the trees falling in their own front yards.

Indeed, when I was reporting here the first time around, we had our own windstorm a few years back that I'm sure many of you remember knocking down more than its fair share of timber, and we covered that quite extensively ourselves.

So why bring up that old news in connection with news from the other side of the country? Well, between the hurricane coverage and Senator Jon Tester's visit to Anaconda Job Corps on Friday, I was reminded of all the work Job Corps students and staff did in the aftermath of our own storm, assisting the Anaconda-Deer Lodge County road department in clearing the right-of-way of trees and debris. A much more recent example would of course be filling and placing sandbags for late spring's flooding of Warm Springs Creek, or the crews toiling on the fire lines around the state and the region, but the storm is still what sticks in my mind the most.

These examples of cooperation between Job Corps and public works and public safety departments make me wonder if there should be a more direct relationship between the workforce education program and the public sector at least in terms of hiring. Tester's main focus in his remarks was on filling private sector jobs with Job Corps grads, and that's understandable given that ultimately is where the economic recovery will have to come from. And even if the House of Representatives hadn't made significant cuts to the program's budget, direct government hire still would be an impractical solution to the unemployment problem (officially it's around 9 percent, but many sources are saying it's closer to 17 percent) since roughly 60,000 graduates per year are not going to bring us back to full employment.

That said, we do have public infrastructure needs that have to be met in order for the economy

to function in cost-efficient ways. There's the constant need for road and bridge maintenance to keep business flowing – one of our two seasons in Montana isn't called "road construction" for nothing. Water and sewer line replacement projects continue to be major needs, especially if those water mains are a hundred years old. Same thing goes for masonry projects at



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public buildings like schools and courthouses that are 50 to 100 years old and yet still in use. Those needs aren't going to go away, whether we want to spend the money on them or not.

Machine operators and mechanics, bricklayers, carpenters, pipe fitters and welders are the bedrock of the construction industry that built this country to a scale not seen since Roman times. That industry took a severe beating three years ago and it will need to recover for a more widespread economic recovery to take place. I don't expect we'll ever again see the like of a Works Progress Administration hiring millions of people and building thousands of sites like our own Mitchell Stadium, but with Job Corps we have a well-established program in place where skilled tradesmen and women could just as easily be hired directly by state or local transportation or water departments as by private contractors.

At Tuesday's "National Job Corps Commencement Day" ceremony (see page 9), I spoke with one graduate who worked 100-hour weeks to get his GED and high school diploma, certification in two trades and a full-time, work-based learning job. And here I was whining about having to pull a 50-hour week to get our "Back to School" issue out! I've got nothing on Cody. I think that level of dedication is exactly what we should want from our public works employees, so if a Job Corps grad should want to take that pathway instead of the private sector, I think we should encourage that not only with words but with public policy.