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Historic challenges, historic opportunities

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Facing the darkest economic crisis since the Great Depression at home and momentous challenges abroad, President-elect Barack Obama certainly has his work cut out for him.

But those historic challenges also present the new president with historic opportunities. The timing has never been better to push for an economic stimulus package that will grow a green economy, create jobs and rein in rising energy costs.

With the economy in shambles, there's no time to waste. We need to forge a new path for the nation's energy policy. Fortunately, the roadmap is already on hand:

Go beyond a bright idea. Use of energy-saving Compact Fluorescent Light bulbs has skyrocketed recently and that's a good thing. Now, we need to take energy savings to the next level. States need help from the federal government to develop and fund innovative, low-cost ways to promote other energy-efficiency and "green" initiatives that reduce energy prices by lowering overall demand. These programs will strengthen the economy and our national security by helping the country rely less on shaky foreign resources and create jobs in a "green" economy.

Get "smart." The economy can't pull itself out of a 21st century mess using 19th century technology. For cutting-edge energy-saving programs to work, we need to upgrade the electric grid. President-elect Obama favors development of a "smart grid," but big questions remain about how it gets built and who foots the bill. The big utilities are all-too-eager to slap consumers with the costs before we see any of the energy-saving improvements. We're fighting them on that front but need federal policies to help protect consumers.

Give the fox his pink slip. The country's still feeling the hangover from Enron's party, which left us with lightly regulated energy markets that put the fox in charge of the hen house and eventually slammed us with big electric and natural gas bills. Now, hard-working people who fuel the economy are often forced to choose between heating and eating and businesses can't expand when the bosses are paying too much for electricity. We need more oversight of energy markets to stop the bleeding.

Get consumers in the groove. The mortgage crisis shows that consumers can't make good choices if they're not given good information. We see proof of this at CUB "phone-bill clinics," where consumers walk out smiling, armed with good advice and concrete steps to save hundreds of dollars a year on their phone bills. There's a dire need for more consumer-education programs that give solid, nonpartisan information about a wide range of topics, from navigating the health-care system to making homes more energy efficient.

Setting a new course for the country's energy future won't be easy. To make it work, the new president will need some of Lincoln's wisdom and the Roosevelts' courage, and against those energy-industry lobbyists a bit of Brian Urlacher's Chicago-style toughness wouldn't hurt either.

Citizens Utility Board executive director David Kolata writes a column each month. To reach CUB, call (800) 669-5556 or e-mail info@citizensutilityboard.org.

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