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The ditch Nestor Campos stands in is deep, but he's far from stuck. In fact, the 41-year-old Venezuela native is digging ditches deep enough to irrigate land --and his own economic prospects.

Campos is part of the Verde Project, which this fall undertook storm-water projects at three sites in Northeast. The year-old nonprofit pairs jobs for low-income and minority Portlanders with environmental improvement.

"It offers me the opportunity to develop my skills," says Campos, an 18-month Portland resident and father of one. "It supports the environment, and it improves the Latino people and their economic situations."

A spinoff of the Hacienda Community Development Corp., a nonprofit affordable-housing organization in Northeast, Verde provides landscaping services and job training. Workers make \$12 an hour, plus benefits after two months and a possible salary bump after six.

"In a town like Portland, there are economic opportunities in environmental protection," says Alan Hipolito, executive director. "But many environmental groups don't connect their work to the daily needs of low-income communities."

Verde is funded by a series of one- and two-year grants, including the city's Community Watershed Stewardship Program. As part of that, Verde workers installed native plants such as ferns, sedges and rushes to filter storm-water runoff at three Hacienda sites on Northeast Killingsworth Street --two housing properties and a community center.

The crew --consisting mainly of three full-time employees, a part-timer and Hipolito --had to tear out existing landscaping, grade the soil and upgrade the irrigation system. After adding compost, the crew installs native plants.

"We tried to incorporate sustainable elements that are visible," says Jason King, a landscape architect with GreenWorks who volunteered his time planning designs. "We wanted an example where (people) can touch and watch the materials grow so they can understand why we're doing this."

The projects are just the beginning for Verde. The organization plans to develop a nursery where it can produce and sell plants.

And eventually, Verde hopes to become a competitive bidder for city storm-water and revegetation contracts, says Andi Gresh, who is the city's revegetation program manager and serves on Verde's advisory committee.

"These are folks who are really engaged and wanting to understand how these systems function," Gresh says.

Hipolito has wetlands-restoration projects lined up and hopes to hire more crew members. And that means more work for people such as Campos.

"Verde helps through providing work, studying and developing skills," he says. "And those are what you need to compete in the world."

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