

Program encourages energy-efficient home improvements

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Blaine and Birch Bay residents can take part in a countywide energy efficiency program that has helped county residents save hundreds of dollars per year on energy bills.

Bellingham-based Sustainable Connections is once again teaming up with the Opportunity Council to run the Community Energy Challenge for Whatcom County residents. The challenge encourages county homeowners to save energy via low-cost home energy assessments, said Alex Ramel, the energy and policy manager for Sustainable Connections.

The first step to participate in the challenge is to sign up with Opportunity Council for a home energy use assessment, which costs \$195, Ramel explained. The homeowner can then choose to proceed with energy efficiency suggestions, which can include improved insulation, furnace and water heater replacements, or solar panel installation. The Opportunity Council can help connect homeowners with cash incentives and low-interest loans to aid in funding the improvements, Ramel said.

For a limited time, residents of the county's small cities and unincorporated areas, including Blaine and Birch Bay, can use the \$195 assessment fee to help offset the cost of efficiency improvements, Ramel said.

Homeowners who made energy efficiency improvements through the program saved between \$200 and \$400 on their annual energy bills, he added.

“We really want this program to reach the whole community,” Ramel said.

The Opportunity Council has completed 48 home energy assessments in the 98230 area code, said Shawn Collins, the Opportunity Council community energy challenge manager. Of that number, about 16 homeowners have decided to complete energy efficiency improvements.

Since the program's inception in 2010, 625 households countywide have completed home energy assessments, Ramel said. Of those households, more than 400 have completed energy efficiency projects.

To date, the community energy challenge has also helped create 84 local jobs, 25 of which were created in the last quarter of 2011 alone, Collins said. The program has helped to generate more

than \$2.5 million worth of local residential construction contracts since its inception in July 2010.

To learn more about the program and to sign up, call 360/976-6099 or email communityenergychallenge@oppco.org.