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Whatcom County gets \$1.5M for green jobs, energy conservation

KIE RELYEA - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

A little more than \$1.5 million in federal stimulus funds have been allocated to governments in Whatcom County for projects to improve energy efficiency and conservation, as well as to create jobs.

The money is part of the estimated \$56 million available to Washington state through block grants. It comes on top of a separate \$120 million in stimulus dollars going to the state for weatherization and energy projects.

Local agencies eligible for the latest round of funding and the amounts they could get, as announced by the U.S. Department of Energy, are:

- City of Bellingham, \$780,100.
- Whatcom County, \$470,000.
- Lummi Tribe, \$238,300.
- Nooksack Tribe, \$62,900.

Allocations through the new Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant Program were based on formulas that took into account population and energy use. The money also can be used for projects that reduce emissions from fossil fuel.

"We were pleasantly surprised at the amount because we thought it was going to be much lower than that," said David Webster, chief administrative officer for the city of Bellingham.

Webster said a portion of the city's share could be used on city-owned buildings that need to be more energy efficient.

Another part could be used as seed money to establish a revolving loan fund with local, private lenders for energy-efficiency projects, according to Webster and Alex Ramel, energy and policy manager with Sustainable Connections.

"The idea is that this would leverage significant private investment in energy efficiency," Ramel said.

"There are also significant job opportunities in energy efficiency," Ramel said. "Many of our members are interested in doing that work."

Based in Bellingham, the nonprofit membership organization of some 600 Northwest Washington business and community leaders is working on an economy built on sustainable practices.

Ramel said Sustainable Connections had talked to Whatcom County leaders about a revolving loan fund as well as local lenders and the state Community, Trade & Economic Development.

A revolving loan fund for energy efficiency could help the community save energy by making money available for such projects.

"Access to affordable financing to make energy efficiency improvement is one of the biggest barriers to doing that," Ramel explained.

Whatcom County officials are still deciding how they would use money they're eligible to receive. Officials at the Lummi and Nooksack tribes did not return calls Monday.

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