

Sustainable Industries



Students being trained by the Building Performance Center to diagnose heat loss in homes.

Bellingham joins list of energy retrofit programs

by Dana Sagona - 11.20.09

BELLINGHAM, WASH .

[Opportunity Council](#), a Bellingham-based nonprofit serving homeless and low-income people, and [Sustainable Connections](#), a nonprofit member organization of business owners and community leaders focused on sustainable practices, recently received a \$2.8 million grant through the U.S. State Department of Energy and the [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act](#).

Known as the Community Energy Challenge, the two-year pilot program would provide technical assistance as well as loans to aid people in retrofitting their home or business. Opportunity Council, which operates the [Building Performance Center](#), will be handling the residential program and contractor training, says Alex Ramel, policy and energy manager for Sustainable Connections. Sustainable Connections will be heading the commercial portion of the program, as well as marketing, says Ramel.

"The stimulus funding helps develop the project and motivates contractors to get involved in doing energy efficiency work," Ramel says. "It also motivates property owners, both commercial and residential, to do comprehensive weatherization work rather than one-off projects." The groups administering the Community Energy Challenge have to match the \$2.8 million federal grant. Puget Sound Energy and Cascade Natural Gas already provide rebates for certain energy-efficient installations.

The city of Bellingham, Whatcom County and all six of the smaller cities in Whatcom County are providing match funding through the energy efficiency conservation block grant program, according to Ramel. The program is supported by a mix of both grants and loans, and in most cases the property owner will be expected to pay about half the total cost, according to Ramel. For homes, the "one stop shop" would begin with a subsidized audit. Normally costing about \$600, the homeowner would have to pay only \$100.

Based on the audit results, Community Energy Challenge would help identify federal tax credits and energy efficiency rebates from utilities. Home and business owners would be eligible for a low-interest loan from Community Energy Challenge. "The next two years will be proving that people are interested in this and proving the business model is sustainable," Ramel says. "The issue with stimulus money is: How do we make energy efficiency programs like these sustainable? I believe we have a good business model that has the capacity to perpetuate itself over time. It can work exclusively on participant fees and utility rebates."

The grant was one of eight [Community Energy Efficiency Pilot Program](#) grants awarded through the Washington State University Energy Extension Program. The Community Energy Challenge is scheduled to begin in January 2010. The estimated savings from the retrofit projects is about \$400,000. It is expected to create about 35 jobs.