

Lightbulb: Businesses cut costs, increase energy efficiency

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Mark Barrett, front, replaces an exit sign at Christ the Servant Lutheran church, while Martin Selch, back, determines the energy efficiency of the sign. Selch is the commercial conservation specialist with Sustainable Connections, which is offering energy assessments and helping implement improvements for \$65. Courtesy photo

By Ryan Wynne

At a time when most businesses are trying to cut costs, it may not seem feasible for them to implement changes to reduce energy use, but just the opposite could be true.

Whatcom Educational Credit Union (WECU) recently made some energy efficiency upgrades to its Birchwood Avenue location. Reid Frederick, social responsibility representative at WECU, said that for less than \$1,000, improvements were made to the facility that will not only take some stress off of the natural environment, but will also save an estimated \$1,000 per year in energy costs. While \$1,000 may not seem like a large sum of money, Frederick said it's definitely nothing to scoff at.

"One thousand dollars annually, at a time like now when people are trying to watch their costs, is pretty significant," Frederick said.

Improvements at WECU wouldn't have been nearly as accessible without the Community Energy Challenge.

"They have a lot of grants, so you would pay significantly more for a company to come in and provide you with the same expertise," Frederick said.

Community Energy Challenge

The Community Energy Challenge is available to businesses and individuals who want to reduce energy use. The challenge is a program funded by approximately \$4 million in grants, most of which come from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

It is available to all businesses in Whatcom County with 500 or fewer employees and who don't qualify for Puget Sound Energy's Resource Conservation Manager program. For the first year, participants pay \$65 for energy assessments and step-by-step assistance for following through with assessment recommendations.

Energy assessments may not sound exciting, but the extra cash they leave business with probably does.

Alex Ramel is the policy and energy manager with Sustainable Connections. While not alone in the challenge, Sustainable Connections is heading the commercial end of the project. Ramel said businesses that have taken advantage of the challenge so far have seen an average energy savings of 5 percent, which translates into an average annual savings of \$1,000 per business.

"The businesses we are getting to are saving energy. There is no question about that," Ramel said.

Businesses willing to make larger, capital improvements are expected to save even more. Ramel said the target is an energy reduction of 15 percent for customers who implement both large and small improvements. While reductions of 15 percent would save a businesses more money, larger projects are also more expensive projects, which likely explains why only one or two businesses have undertaken big projects.

Participation on that scale could soon change. In late May, a low-interest loan became available to businesses wanting to make energy-saving capital improvements. Banner Bank, in partnership with the project leaders, is offering a loan with an interest rate 2 to 3 percent below market rate, Ramel said.

Since the pilot last spring, approximately 20 assessments have been done and there are 10 more in the queue, Ramel said, but the goal is much greater. He said the Community Energy Challenge wants to work with 150 businesses and 900 homeowners, which is projected to create 35 jobs and trigger \$10 million in economic activity.

WECU will likely boost project numbers. Frederick said the Fountain District branch is already in line for improvements. That could mean another \$1,000 in savings. He said WECU hopes to improve most if not all of its older buildings — newer buildings are LEED certified. WECU is even considering taking on capital projects.

And the process itself hasn't been painful. Frederick said Sustainable Connections has been easy to work with and understanding of financial limitations.

"They will cater to what you can do not what they want you to do," Frederick said. In addition to assessments, the Community Energy Challenge offers incentives of \$500 to \$1,500 for qualifying projects.

The federal government isn't the only entity offering assistance for energy efficiency measures. Utility companies such as Puget Sound Energy and Cascade Natural Gas are doing the same.

Grants and rebates

PSE offers grants, rebates and free online tools customers can use to track their energy use, a service paid for by PSE customer fees.

David Landers, PSE's interim manager of business energy management said the utility will cover up to 70 percent of energy saving projects and that PSE has grants from \$100 to hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"We do any size project," Landers said.

He said PSE will provide grants to most commercial and industrial customers doing energy saving projects that have measurable results. For non-lighting projects, such as heating, PSE offers up to 30 cents per kilowatt hour of annual energy savings and up to 70 percent of measured installation costs.

For lighting projects, PSE offers as much as 20 cents per kilowatt of energy savings and up to 50 percent of measured project costs, Landers said.

For businesses with less money to invest in energy savings, there are other options. On the lower end of the cost spectrum, PSE offers rebates such as \$3 to \$12 per compact fluorescent lamps, \$40 to \$80 for automatic lighting controls, such as timers and motion sensors, and \$50 for seven-day programmable thermostats. PSE also has a free online tool that graphs energy use and bill trends of small-business customers, which are most commercial business customers, Landers said.

Many rebates and all grants require pre-approval, and Landers said customers can find more information on rebates on PSE's website www.pse.com or they can call the energy adviser hotline at (800) 562-1482.