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Community Energy Challenge Helping Small Businesses, Homeowners in Whatcom County, Wash.

By Kie Relyea, The Bellingham Herald, Wash.

Sept. 26--Russ Thompson already had signed up with Puget Sound Energy to buy renewable energy through the utility's Green Power Program for his Lummi Island household.

But Thompson wanted to do more for energy efficiency, so he signed up with a new effort called the Community Energy Challenge. The challenge's crew would assess his home's energy use, give him a plan for improvements, oversee a \$9,500 remodeling project, and find \$1,500 in government and utility rebates for the conservation job.

"It was a win because we received all the rebates possible (and) the crew received prevailing wages for the work," Thompson said. "Now we use less energy and our costs for it are at least 40 percent less annually."

A partnership of Bellingham-based nonprofits Opportunity Council and Sustainable Connections, the challenge aims to reduce the amount of electricity and natural gas used by Whatcom County households and small businesses by making energy-efficiency efforts easier from beginning to end, and affordable.

It was launched this spring with \$4 million, the majority of it from federal Recovery Act funding. It was part of nearly \$2.7 billion in clean energy projects that have been funded through the Recovery Act in Washington state, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

Other funding sources for the Community Energy Challenge included the Environmental Protection Agency and utilities.

Shawn Collins, manager for the challenge, said crews and the five contractors working with the countywide effort are busy with more than 30 projects.

"We're booked out two months. We've completed over a hundred home energy assessments to date," Collins said.

Seven homes have had energy-efficiency improvements done through the challenge so far.

"We have also provided 33 assessment for local businesses," Collins said. "These business have seen an average saving of \$1,000 from implementing the recommendations made through the program."

One of the first businesses to sign up for the program was Samuel's Furniture in Ferndale.

"We've always been focused on trying to keep our business as energy-efficient as possible," owner Elie Samuel said.

Still, Saumuel said, "there were ideas that we wouldn't have thought of without them."

The business received an assessment of its energy consumption, from small details like how the thermostat was set, to larger things like the type of lighting used and how well the building's shell was insulated.

Then a detailed plan was drawn up with recommendations for improvements, including one that could save the business \$21,000 a year in energy costs if the more than 1,050 incandescent light bulbs used in the furniture store's overhead track lights are swapped out for LED bulbs.

The Community Energy Challenge, which wants to save more than \$1 million in energy costs by 2012, has a number of pieces that include:

-- Setting up a one-stop shop to serve homeowners of all income levels and small businesses. The shop will offer help with energy information, audits that show how buildings are using energy, no-cost and quick-fix steps for saving energy, retrofits to buildings and equipment to make them more energy-efficient, utility rebates, tax credits, contractor services, and financing through a new revolving loan program.

-- Providing energy audits to 1,800 residences and 150 businesses to gauge how they can reduce their use of electricity and natural gas.

Of that total, the goal over the next two years is to help 900 homeowners with energy-efficiency improvements to cut the amount of energy their homes use by up to 30 percent, and all the businesses to reduce energy use by at least 5 to 15 percent.

-- Creating a revolving loan fund totaling \$1.25 million -- to which the city of Bellingham, Whatcom County and all six small cities in the county have contributed their federal stimulus dollars -- to finance conservation projects that will grow out of the energy audits.

The government loan fund is being used to partially back low-interest loans provided by Banner Bank.

Called a loan loss reserve program, it provides the bank with limited protection from the first losses on a portfolio of energy-efficiency loans. When started here by the Community Energy Challenge, the loan program was the first of its kind in the state and among the first in the nation to use stimulus money to encourage private investments.

Banner Bank made the first loan under the program Aug. 4 to a homeowner in Ferndale. It totaled \$7,200.

Bellingham construction firm Azimuth Integral Homes completed the Ferndale home's energy-efficiency project, which included air sealing, installing insulation and providing proper ventilation. As a result, the homeowner is expected to save more than \$700 a year.

-- Spurring economic development by creating 35 local jobs and generating more than \$10 million in construction activity. Through mid-summer, the program had created the equivalent of six full-time jobs.

The focus includes training contractors who want to be certified in retrofit work aimed at weatherization and energy efficiency.

-- Cutting the amount of carbon emissions by more than 7,000 tons a year, which is akin to eliminating the use of nearly 800,000 gallons of gasoline.

Collins hopes to see the program spread, along with new green jobs.

"As the number of households we serve grows and the number of jobs created expands, we hope to see a thriving new industry focused on realizing the potential for energy savings -- one house and one neighborhood at a time."

The Opportunity Council is a social service agency that helps low-income residents in Whatcom, Island and San Juan counties, including a program that has weatherized more than 5,000 low-income homes.

Sustainable Connections is a membership organization of about 650 northwest Washington business and community leaders working to create an economy built on sustainable practices.

TAKE THE CHALLENGE

Businesses and homeowners who want to take part in the Community Energy Challenge need to first sign up for an energy assessment of their buildings. The cost is \$95 for homes and \$65 for businesses.

Learn more by:

--Going online to communityenergychallenge.org.

--Calling 360-676-6099.

--Sending an e-mail to communityenergychallenge@oppco.org.

Reach KIE RELYEA at kie.relyea@bellinghamherald.com or call 715-2234.
