



THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

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Whatcom County gets \$2.7 million for energy-efficiency programs

KIE RELYEA - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

A \$2.7 million federal grant will be used to start a two-year pilot program in Whatcom County, beginning in mid-January, to increase energy efficiency and reduce utility bills for homeowners and small businesses.

The U.S. Department of Energy awarded the grant, which came from federal stimulus dollars, to the Opportunity Council.

The council is partnering with Sustainable Connections on the local program, called the Community Energy Challenge. Both nonprofits are based in Bellingham.

In addition to reducing the use of electricity and natural gas, the goal is to create 35 local jobs, to train contractors who want to be certified in retrofit work that focuses on weatherization and energy efficiency, and to generate more than \$10 million in construction activity.

"The Opportunity Council is looking at this as a jobs-creation program to get local contractors back to work, and provide training to contractors who are interested in working in the energy-efficiency field," said Shawn Collins of the Opportunity Council.

"Sustainable Connections is looking at making our community the most energy-efficient in the nation," said Collins, manager of the Community Energy Challenge. "Together we expect to make a significant impact in both of these areas."

Under the program, a one-stop shop will be created 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, retrofits to buildings and equipment to make them more energy-efficient, utility rebates, tax credits, contractor services, and financing through a revolving loan program for conservation projects.

The loan program will be done in conjunction with banks, credit unions, Whatcom County government and the City of Bellingham. The city and county are contributing federal stimulus dollars they received for energy efficiency and conservation projects to the revolving loan program.

Energy audits will be provided to 1,800 residences and 150 businesses over the next two years. Of that total, half might secure funding for some remodeling, Collins said.

"Once the rubber hits the road, we'll see what people's choices are," he said.

The goal is for homeowners to reduce the amount of energy their homes use by up to 30 percent, and up to 15 percent for businesses.

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

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 homes.

The \$2.7 million award was one of eight such grants distributed in Washington. Puget Sound Energy, Cascade Natural Gas, the Building Performance Center, and Bellingham Technical College also are part of the pilot program.

LEARN MORE

Details about the Community Energy Challenge program is available by going online to sustainableconnections.org and clicking on "Community Energy Challenge" on the left. Or, send an e-mail to Shawn Collins, program manager, at communityenergychallenge@oppco.org.