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Program launching remodeling collective

BY SHAWN VESTAL
Staff writer

Remodeling one home to save energy and money can be an imposing task.

Despite long-term savings, there's an initial cost – sometimes a big one. There's the task of finding and selecting contractors, arranging financing, checking with the power company to see if there are bonuses or incentives, and on and on.

A new Spokane program is looking to knock down those obstacles one by one – and to create collective, neighborhood efforts to "retrofit" homes. The program aims to provide financing to homeowners to make the work pay for itself immediately, get better prices on the work by band-

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ing jobs together under one contract, and help provide local union jobs for tradespeople with new, specialized training.

The program, known as SustainableWorks, is in its infancy. But it already has attracted grant funding, completed several projects at small commercial and nonprofit buildings, and started a pilot project in the South Perry neighborhood. It is looking to qualify for federal stimulus money to expand.

Ultimately, those involved with the program hope that neighborhoods around the city – and the state – will band together to do these projects, reducing Spokane's carbon footprint, saving energy and money, and providing union jobs.

"FDR had this thing called the New Deal," said Dave Sproull, the project manager of SustainableWorks and a retired union electrician from Chicago. "We call this the Good Deal. The Good Deal is when everybody involved in a job gets a sound value."

Coming together

The idea of collective purchasing, in various guises, is beginning to take hold around the country as a strategy for homeowners to help offset the cost of green projects. Several programs target historic – and inefficient – homes in particular, such as an effort in Portland to create one block where homes use renewable, carbon-neutral, thermal energy. In other cities, such as Washington, D.C., the model of collective purchasing is being pursued to help offset the high cost of solar projects.

But the approach of SustainableWorks is original to Spokane, and emerged from some community meetings held by the Spokane Alliance several years ago. The alliance, a group representing churches, unions and other local organizations, found that people had concerns about saving energy, protecting the environment and maintaining good jobs, and began looking for projects that might serve those goals.

The group began working to promote apprentice training and hiring, with the idea of strengthening the local work force. Gradually, stakeholders came together – including local trade unions, credit unions helping with the financing, Washington State University experts helping to develop training for electricians, pipefitters and other tradespeople, and Avista.

Learn more

SustainableWorks will host a public meeting about the project Friday night at Liberty Park United Methodist Church, 1526 E. 11th Ave. Food will be available starting at 5:30, with a presentation beginning at 6 p.m.

Three years ago, the project landed a $280,000 grant, and Sproull was hired to run it. A burly man with a thick Chicago accent, Sproull brought his considerable negotiating skills to the job. When he found boilers and furnaces priced at levels he considered unfair, he pressed hard for better deals. When he found asbestos-removal contractors weren't working up to his standards, he put off jobs until he could find acceptable crews.

"I'm doing this because I feel I owe something to organized labor and people having a good standard of living," said Sproull.

Sproull said that when he approached the Bonneville Power Administration to discuss the project a few years ago, he was told that it wouldn't work – energy was too cheap and retrofits were too expensive to make it feasible for small businesses and homes, he said.

"Their word was it can't be done here at this time," he said. "Quite often, when we say 'can't' it's an inaccurate word. It would be better to say, 'I don't know how' or 'I don't want to.' "

Sproull pushed ahead. Over the past few years, the program has begun cross-training workers for retrofits and undertaken some projects in small commercial or nonprofit buildings. An example is Center Pointe, which provides education and activities for people with disabilities.

Another is Liberty Park United Methodist Church, which recently replaced its creaky old boiler with a new one that includes zoned heating and sensors to modulate the energy use. That $41,000 project – with a $6,000 break from Avista – will cut its energy use by a third, Sproull said.

In addition to the financial savings, the Rev. Debra Conklin said her congregation supports the program's environmental and social goals. Like others associated with SustainableWorks, she sees a need for expanding it.

"It's not going to have a major impact on the whole environment unless we do it on a large scale," Conklin said.

'Something good'

The South Perry pilot project is moving forward. Homeowners in the neighborhood have been canvassed, and Sproull has gotten energy usage information for interested homeowners to see which ones could save enough money to make the retrofits pay.

"We'll tailor these jobs so the cost of the loan plus their utility bill will be no more than their current utility bill," he said.

By June and July, workers should be in as many as 20 homes doing audits and remodeling, he said. The program is targeting people whose incomes are just above the qualifying level for free weatherization help though the Spokane Neighborhood Action Programs.

Sproull said that combining all the neighborhood jobs will save a lot of money – a huge portion of the cost of such jobs goes into travel time and down time at the start and finish of projects, he said. There will be savings on materials, as well.

In the long term, Sproull said, he'd like to see the project expand neighborhood by neighborhood across the city. It would help provide a steady source of good jobs and go a long way toward cutting the city's overall carbon emissions – something city officials are interested in.

SustainableWorks' effort seems like a good match for recent legislation passed – though not funded – by lawmakers in Olympia, calling for a range of conservation measures, including weatherizing 20,000 homes statewide over the next five years.

"This thing could snowball into something really good," Sproull said.

Shawn Vestal can be reached at (509) 459-5431 or shawnv@spokesman.com.