Stimulus money to go to energy efficiency

$14.5 MILLION: Middle-class homes targeted for upgrades

BY MELISSA SANTOS
The News Tribune

About $14.5 million in federal stimulus money will go to installing energy efficient upgrades in middle class homes under a bill signed into law by Gov. Chris Gregoire Thursday.

Local community organizers fought hard for the allocation, which comes out of a $60 million pot of stimulus money Washington state is receiving for discretionary spending on energy projects.

One group already has a project in mind for the Pierce County area that would boost energy efficiency in about 1,500 homes while providing local construction jobs. Leaders still must apply to the Washington State University's Energy Extension Program to have a shot at the money.

State officials said the $60 million is perhaps the most flexible of any of the money Washington is receiving from the federal stimulus package. With fewer strings attached, private companies had urged the Legislature to spend the funds on large retrofitting projects or renewable energy research.

Instead, the moderate-income weatherization money will focus on energy efficiency measures such as replacing oil-burning furnaces and installing insulation in homes and small businesses.

The $14.5 million will pay for at least three neighborhood-based weatherization projects throughout the state.

The projects would target families that make between $50,000 and $70,000 per year, unlike existing programs managed by utilities and the state that help only lower-income families.

"It's going to affect the people that are in a higher wage bracket," said Dusty Hoerler, an organizer with Sound Alliance, a collection of congregations, labor unions and community organizations in the Puget Sound area. "The long-term stimulus is that it will lower people's energy bills."

The largest chunk of the state's $60 million in flexible energy stimulus money will create a grant and loan program run by the state Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development (CTED).

Governments and companies throughout Washington can apply for a portion of that $38.5 million.

CTED officials are pleased the Legislature is letting them solicit applications for projects to receive funding, said Cory Plantenberg, CTED energy program manager. Department officials said last month that they wanted a chance to evaluate projects individually instead of having funds prescribed by the Legislature.

Pierce County and other local jurisdictions may be among the applicants for that grant money, said Randy Harrison, a special assistant to County Executive Pat McCarthy.

The county and other local agencies are holding meetings to discuss collaborative energy projects they could pursue, Harrison said.

Part of those discussions include how four Pierce County jurisdictions will spend about $7 million they are receiving directly from the stimulus package in the form of energy efficiency and conservation block grants. Jurisdictions have until June 25 to develop their proposals.

"We're forming collaborative partnerships that will allow us to be more effective with our energy solutions money," Harrison said.

"All of the different things we can do for climate change, we want to be one of the leaders in."

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ENERGY MONEY FROM THE STIMULUS PACKAGE IN WASHINGTON

Here's a summary of what Washington state and local governments are receiving from the federal stimulus package for energy projects.

STATE ENERGY PROGRAM
$60 million statewide

These funds have few federal requirements attached. The state Legislature decided to dole out the money like this:

- $38.5 million for loans and grants for energy efficiency and renewable energy projects
- $14.5 million for at least three community-wide energy efficiency improvement projects
- $5 million for credit enhancements, which will help ensure favorable loans for public energy efficiency projects
- $500,000 to increase energy efficiency on farms

LOW-INCOME WEATHERIZATION
$60 million statewide

- $60 million for the Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development's low-income weatherization program, which helps fund energy efficiency improvements for homeowners making less than 125 percent of the federal poverty level, or $27,563 for a family of four in 2009.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT BLOCK GRANTS
$17 million statewide

This money can be spent on a variety of energy efficiency or conservation projects, to include green buildings, transportation infrastructure and energy conservation. About $6.4 million is going directly to large jurisdictions throughout the state, while smaller cities can submit grant applications to the state for the remaining funds.

Jurisdictions receiving money through a federal funding formula have until June 25 to come up with project proposals.

Here's what governments in Pierce County and South King County are receiving so far, based on population formulas.

Pierce County: $4,376,400
Tacoma: $1,947,300
Lakewood: $541,000
Puyallup: $164,500
King County: $6,141,100
Federal Way: $777,700
Auburn: $235,500

Local governments can also apply for competitive federal grants distributed by the U.S. Department of Energy. For a more complete list of what's available, go online and visit http://www.energy.gov/recovery/funding.htm.