

Home energy upgrades could get huge boost from new state program

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Cal Walker used to put his Town of Ithaca home's thermostat up to 74 degrees just to keep the house comfortable.

Then, he and his wife, Glenda, had their attic and crawlspace heavily insulated, after an energy audit found his house was leaking valuable hot air into the cold night.

Now, he keeps the thermostat at 68 degrees, and their heating bills dropped by 30 percent, helping them pay off his mortgage faster.

"We could not believe the difference that made ... it blew my mind," Walker said. "If we had done this years ago, we could have saved thousands of dollars, that's the only regret I have. The bottom line is people grossly underestimate the significance of poor insulation. It's like opening up your wallet to a vacuum cleaner."

Starting this year, New York state has made it easier for homeowners such as Walker to have a more comfortable, energy-efficient house through a new program called Green Jobs/Green NY. With a goal to retrofit a million homes across the state and give a boost to this nascent industry, the program offers more incentives to homeowners to sweeten the deal than in the past. It provides free home-performance energy audits through approved contractors -- a value of around \$400 -- and up to \$13,000 in low-interest loans (3.49 percent) to finance improvements.

In the near future, the program will also be offered to small-business owners, not-for-profits and multifamily buildings. The program has a job-training component for entry-level workers and those who have been displaced from their previous job.

Jon Harrod is the owner of Snug Planet LLC, an Ithaca-based company that performs home energy retrofits and renewables installation. He said that while there's enthusiasm in the Tompkins County area for this kind of work, unlike other counties in the region, there's still a lack of personal experiences with the process everywhere that customers find daunting. Though his company is training other contractors to perform energy efficiency work, there still aren't enough contractors.

He hopes the new program will make his industry more accessible to everyone.

"What it means is essentially you could be saving more in energy than you're paying out in loan payments," Harrod said. "You get a warmer, more reliable house, and your total energy bills will go down."

In the Southern Tier, experiences with energy-performance upgrades are across the board. In Chemung County, only 37 homes have taken advantage of earlier

retrofitting incentives programs since 2003, and in Broome County, 207 homes have.

Compare that with Tompkins County, which has had at least 744 homeowners undergo retrofits, according to data from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority.

Tompkins also ranks in the top 10 counties in the state for installations of solar panels, a popular renewable energy option, while Chemung and Broome lag far behind, with only 13 and 68 systems installed, respectively.

That's partly because Tompkins has more specialized contractors, is a wealthier county overall, and there's an environmental consciousness that's not as strong elsewhere, said Dominic Frongillo, who works with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County on energy issues.

Even in Tompkins, however, he said there's a lack of awareness that these types of renovations can save money over the long term and result in immediately more livable homes, which he hopes Green Jobs/Green NY can improve.

In an effort to warm more people to the idea organically, free energy audits were provided to 125 local leaders in an attempt to get conversations started at the highest levels.

"We gave them the recommendations, and many people were just shocked at how much air was coming out of vinyl windows, cracks in their floors or attics," Frongillo said. "It just kind of blows their minds. We walk them through what they can do for their home. Often, people had no idea funding was available to offset the costs of doing the work."

It's already being emulated in other counties.

Carol Houssock, the director of RSVP of Chemung County, has started an "Energy Stewards" program that trains volunteers, often senior citizens, to go out into the community and communicate to their neighbors low-cost ways to save energy and dollars.

"We can identify no- and low-cost things people can do to decrease their energy consumption, and we also refer homeowners to other programs and incentives and grants," she said. "It's a huge eye-opener for people."

Blue Ox Energy in Binghamton, which does energy upgrades in Broome County, got its start delivering petroleum. Jeff Emerson, the company's director of sales and market development, said they started performing energy upgrades recently. The company does this, even though a retrofit might cut a customer's need for fuel oil in half, hurting Blue Ox's bottom line.

"We have a long term vision that's ultimately a retention model," he said. "If we can't control the price per gallon, we can reduce the amount of gallons a customer needs, so we have a better chance of retaining that customer."

His company's energy efficiency projects start mainly through need-based calls, and then his contractors will introduce clients to energy-saving tools and financing options during the course of a relationship. He hopes the free audits provided by Green Jobs/Green NY will spur more people to at least consider the options.

He said for wide adoption, the financing needs to be attached to a house's energy bill, so when the home is sold, the payback is the new homeowner's responsibility.

But there's a chicken-and-egg conundrum at work here: without enough contractors, people don't find out about the possibilities, but contractors won't come without the market.

"Contractors are our most powerful marketing mechanism, but without enough contractors involved, our level of marketing is relatively small in the overall market," he said. "There's a lack of consumer awareness that these programs are real and can have an impact."

Homeowners such as the Walkers are an important part of the puzzle, as they share their experiences with others. Cal Walker often mentions the results of his own home insulation project to friends with drafty houses.

"I would encourage anyone to weatherize their home, and not to wait. It has meant the world to us in terms of savings and comfort," he said. "With this economic downturn, every effort to stress dollars is worthwhile. It was always a good idea, now it's absolutely essential."