

County homeowners eligible for incentives through \$4.1 million grant

By Amy Revak Herald-Standard | Posted: Sunday, February 27, 2011 12:00 am

For any Fayette County homeowner thinking about taking steps to make their home more energy efficient, doing it now may pay off in more ways than one.

Homeowners are now eligible to apply for incentives to make their homes more energy efficient through the Fayette County Better Buildings Initiative. The \$4.1 million grant, awarded last year, was made possible through the U.S. Department of Energy with the goal of reducing energy usage.

Incentives will be provided in the form of rebates to help residents obtain an energy assessment of their homes and to implement measures to make their homes more energy efficient and thus reduce their overall energy costs.

Also known as an energy audit, the assessment will review a homeowner's heating, electrical and water utility usage, as well as measure air loss and drafts. Also, infrared inspection of walls, attics and roofs will be done to measure insulation and areas where energy loss is occurring.

Once the audit is complete, the contractor will prepare a scope of work, which recommends measures for energy-efficiency improvements.

Andrew French, executive director of the Fayette County Redevelopment Authority, said during a press conference Friday that this grant will help people reduce energy consumption. Officials are anticipating a reduction of between 20 and 27 percent of energy costs.

"That's money in people's pockets," French said.

French, said unlike other authority-related programs, this grant is not only for low-income people. "This program takes us into a different realm," French said. The authority has been involved in an energy-efficiency weatherization program since 1975 and has helped more than 10,000 households.

A participating Building Performance Institute (BPI)-accredited contractor must perform the audits and the homeowner must also submit a summary of the annual electric and heating usage for the building.

If the homeowner chooses to make the recommended improvements, rebates will be provided. Depending on income, homeowners may qualify for up to \$2,000 in rebate incentives to help pay for the audit and improvements. Affordable financing options may be available.

French said filling out the application is the "portal into gaining access" to the program.

Erin Albert of Conservation Consultants Inc., a BPI contractor, demonstrated some of the equipment that is used in the evaluation process, including a blower door to check the pressurization of the home; an infrared gun to check for insulation and a carbon monoxide detector to check combustion appliances.

She said the tests are done both before the improvements and after to ensure they were done in a safe and correct way.

The program is the result of a collaboration of various people and organizations.

Sean Sybolt of the Private Industry Council said that as a way to tie into the local workforce, the goal is to train people to do the BPI audits and to keep people doing the "retrofits" local.

He said people could sign up and enroll for training at the Careerlink Center in the Fayette County Business Park in South Union Township.

"This grant program will provide people the opportunity to realize the importance of energy efficiency," said Fayette County Commission Chairman Vincent Zapotosky. "Energy is a vital part of our economy."

U.S. Rep. Mark Critz, D-Johnstown, who briefly appeared at the press conference, said the grant offers people the opportunity to be more fuel-efficient. He said energy is a big part of western Pennsylvania's economy.

Fayette County Commissioner Vincent A. Vicites said only 20 communities throughout the country are getting similar funding, which will be used locally to help more than 1,000 homes.

Vicites said with the recent change of the county zoning ordinance, residential sites can implement alternative energy sources.

"Energy is the future of Fayette County," Vicites said.

Anyone who is selected must agree to energy efficiency measures of at least a 15 percent reduction in energy usage. The level of assistance will depend on the household income of the applicant.

The authority has partnered with various utility companies, including Columbia Gas, CCI, Allegheny Power, Dollar Energy and Peoples Gas.

To obtain an application to pre-qualify for rebates, go to the redevelopment authority website at www.racfa.org or call 724-437-1547, ext. 206. The application period ends April 29.



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During a press conference to announce Fayette County's Better Buildings Initiative, Erin Albert, Conservation Consultants Inc., demonstrates an infrared camera used to detect heat loss in poorly insulated buildings and homes. (by John F. Brothers)