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## Energy efficiency work, weatherization on rise

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After more than 30 years of on-again, off-again growth, one industry in Central Massachusetts, the home energy efficiency business, is booming even as the recession deepens.

A surge in funding from conservation fees on utility bills, revenues from the new system for state auctions of carbon pollution credits, and now an anticipated massive infusion of weatherization and energy efficiency funds from the pending federal stimulus package are all driving the trend.

In the last year, dozens of new small businesses have formed, and hundreds of new workers are in the field trying to keep up with demands for home energy audits, insulation, efficient lighting, and new heating and power systems.

"This is one sector of the economy that is hiring, hiring, hiring," said Stephen L. Cowell of the Westboro-based Conservation Services Group, which runs energy efficiency programs with utility and other funding. The firm conducts free home energy audits and packages discount heating system retrofits, weatherization rebates and lighting improvements for homeowners trying to find affordable ways to cut energy costs.

Even before President Barack Obama called for a nationwide revolution in energy efficiency last week in a speech to federal energy workers and got Congress to agree to allocate \$5 billion from the stimulus bill for low-income weatherization programs, the business here was ramping up. For more than a year now, cities and towns, homeowners and businesses have been scrambling for refuge from skyrocketing energy prices that peaked last year.

It was about then that the backlog for Conservation Services Group home energy audits went from four weeks to eight weeks, the company expanded its call center, and hired more insulation, heating system and electrical contractors. The changes brought the wait for initial audits back to about a month.

From 2007 to 2008, the number of homes in Massachusetts that received energy audits from Conservation Services Group, which are requested through the state energy Web site MassSave.com, jumped by an estimated 40 percent, Conservation Services officials said. Last year, it did 17,000 energy audits statewide, and this year it expects to perform 21,000 of the free audits. Meanwhile, Mr. Cowell said, the number of homeowners taking major steps beyond simply switching to energy-efficient light bulbs after the audits jumped from one in three to more than half.



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Expanded rebate programs and the availability of zero-interest loans to help pay for insulation and new heating systems have made those major improvements more affordable. Those programs, along with energy-efficiency steps people can undertake on their own, are explained on the MassSave.com Web site.

Meanwhile, the people at the Worcester Community Action Council, based in downtown Worcester and serving lower-income residents of 24 area cities and towns, are going through a major ramp-up in what has historically proven a more comprehensive weatherization program they have run for several decades. The local agency expected to see some of the direct infusion weatherization funding from Massachusetts' share of the \$5 billion federal allocation for lower-income weatherization programs in the stimulus bill.

Mark Sanborn, director of energy resources for the CAC, which spends \$5,000 to \$6,000 on each home weatherized, is in the middle of a major ramp-up in the program. The program identifies the neediest homes from among the 13,000 that got public heating assistance last year.

"We do the walls, the ceilings and the attics" with insulation, he said. "That is after we do extensive air sealing, caulking, weatherstripping, pipe and chimney insulations," he said. Where needed, the CAC will replace inefficient heating systems. Older systems often operate with about 70 percent efficiency. New ones have a minimum 90-percent efficiency rating.

The agency undertook full weatherization of 225 homes last year. Mr. Sanborn said it expects to do about 425 homes this year. More homes are now eligible, he said, because of a change in income restrictions. He said income eligibility has been bumped up from about \$42,000 for a family of four to \$53,600, opening the program up to thousands more families.

CAC staff chooses homes for the work based on high-energy use, with a priority for households with elders, people with disabilities, and young children.

"We know in this area we have a lot of older housing stock, and the improvement will make those homeowners less reliant on fuel assistance over time," he said.

"There is no end to the pool of properties we have to go and weatherize," Mr. Sanborn said. "The three-deckers around here are all in need of air sealing, side wall insulation and attic insulation," he said.

While the absence of snow on roofs after snowstorms bears witness to poor insulation in local homes, Mr. Sanborn said he cringes when he drives around and sees the many schools and public buildings that are not insulated properly. The state's new grant programs for municipal building energy projects, approved last year, will now be bolstered by the state's share of up to \$3.5 billion in stimulus funding for cities and town block grants and municipal facilities.

Already, Mr. Sanborn said, there is growing demand for weatherization workers. The agency is working with 16 weatherization contractors and about 25 heating contractors.

"Contractors have beefed up their crews and on an average they are each doing one unit a week more," he said.

The CAC is working with Quinsigamond Community College, area vocational-technical schools and regional employment boards to train more local workers for energy efficiency work. Some building trade workers left out in the cold with the lack of new home construction are finding work with weatherization contractors, he said.

Mr. Sanborn said all of the homes weatherized by CAC undergo a detailed inspection audit afterward, including wall and ceiling scans with infrared cameras to ensure high-quality efficiency results.

"When we go through the home afterward, if they missed one foot square in a wall, they have to go back and drill it and fill it," he said of the sealing and insulation inspections.

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