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"Cash for Caulkers" would boost strong area weatherization programs

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If insulation is "sexy," as President Obama insisted this week, the Cape Fear region has been a knockout for a long time.

Speaking at a Virginia Home Depot, Obama said he wants Congress to fund a program designed to provide temporary incentives to encourage consumers to rush out and buy such items as insulation, new windows and doors, and caulk to plug leaks around the house.

Dubbed "Cash for Caulkers," it would boost efforts that have thrived in the Wilmington area for decades under the label "weatherization."

Often offered by local utilities, these Cape Fear programs are veterans in the ongoing war against drafts that has gotten some reinforcements in the past few months.

On the state level, the Weatherization Assistance Program to help low-income North Carolinians save energy and reduce utility bills got a shot in the arm this year when \$132 million of federal Recovery Act funding was added to its \$9.7 million annual funding from the U.S. Department of Energy. It was the state's share of \$8 billion in recovery funds for that purpose.

The Recovery Act funds allowed North Carolina to raise the eligibility income limits to twice the federal poverty level, according to Seth Efron, a spokesman for the N.C. Energy Office, which administers the program through local agencies.

In Pender and Brunswick counties, the local agency is Four-County Community Services, which also administers the program in Robeson, Scotland, Hoke and Columbia counties.

Presently there is no local administrator for Wilmington and New Hanover county, Effron noted.

New Hanover is benefitting from new Progress Energy efficiency programs approved by state utility regulators earlier this year.

In July, the utility launched the Home Energy Improvement Program, which has already paid incentives for more than 9,500 efficiency measures installed throughout Progress Energy Carolina's service area, company spokesman Jeff Brooks said.

The utility has nearly 600 contractors participating in the program, he added.

Added to the utility's list of programs is the Neighborhood Energy Saver, designed to help low-income neighborhoods.

Noting this program was launched in Asheville in October, Brooks said a launch in Florence, S.C., is planned for January with Wilmington and Raleigh after that.

He said the utility evaluates the neighborhood and selects an appropriate community or communities for the program.

Residents in the selected communities then sign up to have free energy-efficiency measures installed in their homes and receive education on how to save energy in their homes.

Besides state efforts, Brunswick and Pender counties have also benefited from free energy audits conducted by their local electric cooperative, which also provides loans for the cost of projects not covered by state grants.

Brunswick EMC lent \$600,000 to its members in Brunswick and Columbus counties this year, said Judy Gore, vice president for customer service.

This helped 150 members pay for such things as insulation, storm windows and doors, high efficient heat pumps and water heaters, she added, noting over 2,500 have been helped over the years.

Four County EMC has some \$500,000 outstanding in loans to members under a program that has been in place "close to 30 years," spokesman Don Allen said.

"Cash for Caulkers" it would provide homeowners with a 50 percent rebate on energy-efficient items, according to the Wilmington-Cape Fear Home Builders Association, which has endorsed the plan.

The association views Obama's support of "cash for caulkers" as the administration's recognition of the recession's impact on the building industry and the need to put our people back to work," said Executive Officer Donna Girardot.

The program would cost \$23 billion, according to the Building Performance Trade Group, a trade group.

“Home builders may be a large part of our association,” said association President John Lancaster, but equally as important are our local suppliers and remodelers who have also had to weather this tough economic storm.”

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