

Pushing to boost energy efficiency (3/18/10)



Congressman Welch promotes legislation in Williston

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Monday brought a busy morning to the Williston residence of Lynn Goyette and Eileen Blackwood. A half-dozen workers, dressed in white protective suits, pumped foam insulation into the drafty corners of the house's basement and attic.

As a member of the Williston Green Initiatives committee, a citizen action group formed in 2008, Goyette saw she needed to make some changes to the couple's 1840s home.

"As homeowners, we just knew where the drafts were," Goyette said. "You can really feel them sometimes."

By enlisting the aid of Williston-based Building Energy to perform an energy audit on the house, the couple realized they could save more than \$1,000 a year by making home efficiency improvements.

Their project even gained national attention.

Congressman Peter Welch stopped by and toured the home Monday as Building Energy crews began their work. Amidst the couple's basement, with plastic sheeting covering workbenches and furniture, Welch used the project as an opportunity to promote a new bill he's working on in the U.S. Legislature.

Known as the Home Star bill, the legislation would provide all Americans with the possibility of saving money on energy-conserving home renovations and would spur job growth in the construction and home improvement industry. Welch told the assembled guests and media the bill would likely cost \$6 billion and could be funded through the federal stimulus package, although that has not yet been determined.

"I'm optimistic this will be successful in Washington, and that's saying a lot these days," Welch said.

Welch said the legislation, sometimes referred to as Cash for Caulkers, would offer up to \$3,000 in rebates for homeowners purchasing energy-saving items. Customers could receive the rebates instantly at the cash register rather than waiting until the tax-filing period.

Tom Allen, vice president of Allen Lumber in St. Johnsbury, was on hand for Welch's speech. He said the legislation, if passed, could be a real "shot in the arm" for home improvement companies, large and small.

"This program has the potential to be a real win-win situation," Allen said.

Welch said he wants to put into practice nationally what already takes place in Vermont. He added that President Barack Obama, along with many Republican members of Congress, support the bill.

"I'm delighted that what they want to make happen we're already making happen here in Vermont," Welch said.

As Welch explained, Vermont already offers rebates and tax incentives to residents making energy efficiency improvements. Goyette said that while the Building Energy installation will cost approximately \$6,500, a third of that is covered through Efficiency Vermont, a nonprofit agency that urges residents to conserve energy.

"It's not cheap, but it's still a good deal," Goyette said.

Goyette and Blackwood said they got the idea to make home improvements after Building Energy completed an energy audit of Williston Town Hall in late 2008. Even after recent renovations to the town building, the audit showed the inefficiency of the space.

Brian Bergeron, Building Energy's job supervisor, said Goyette and Blackburn's home had typical problem areas for structures more than 150 years old. By adding state-of-the-art foam insulation, the old home becomes new again and could sell for thousands more on the housing market, Bergeron said.

Even if Goyette and Blackburn don't sell their home in the future, the energy savings they'll receive will pay any costs back over time. Blackburn hopes to save 30 percent on the heating bill each month next winter. This winter, for instance, the couple paid \$600 to \$700 per month for propane heating, Blackburn said.

Welch said the energy savings and home improvement work will go a long way in creating jobs and kick starting the economy.

"It just makes common sense to get our economy going again," Welch said.