THE GREEN TEAM

Attempt to make LI homes more efficient has tremendous upside, but must overcome obstacles

By BERNADETTE STARZEE

Long Island's homes are largely inefficient. But while homeowners from Mineola to Montauk think it's a good idea to make upgrades to cut their energy bills, multiple efforts to get them to do so have failed to win mass adoption.

The latest attempt is the Long Island Green Homes Initiative, a partnership of four nonprofits and five towns, which are working with local contractors and a state grant program to help homeowners make energy-saving upgrades.

While organizers know they face many challenges — chief among them is inertia — they say they're addressing some of the issues that have caused other programs to fail short.

Officially launched last November, the initiative is housed at the Sustainability Institute at Molloy College. The institute is partnering with nonprofits Community Development Corp. of Long Island, LI Green and United Way of Long Island, as well as the towns of Babylon, East Hampton, Huntington, North Hempstead and Smithtown.

The participating towns receive funds to spread the word to their residents, but all Long Island homeowners are eligible to participate in the program.

The initiative arranges for homeowners to receive a free home energy assessment from a local contractor which is paid for through New York State Energy Research and Development Authority grant funds. From the assessment, homeowners are given a list of improvements they can make, with an emphasis on those upgrades that will give them the best energy-saving bang for their buck.

Long Island Green Homes will also connect participants with low-interest-rate loans in addition to guiding low- and moderate-income customers and those with central air conditioning to additional grants and rebates that they qualify for.

"There’s no doubt there’s a tremendous need for homes to be more energy-efficient," said Neal Lewis, executive director of the Sustainability Institute. "About 50 percent of Long Island homes were built before we even had an energy code, and 30 percent of all homes have heating systems that are 30 years or older."

The New York State Energy Conservation Construction Code of 1970 required certain standards for insulation and other factors in new constructions, and it has been made more stringent over the years.

Making homes more energy-efficient would not only benefit homeowners' pocketbooks, but it would decrease greenhouse gas emissions while stimulating the local economy, Lewis said.

"Everyone who looks at this issue sees it as win-win," he said. "Homeowners who have an extra $1,000 in their pocket that they’re not wasting on energy bills will be able to spend it on things like going out to dinner. And if you’re getting work done in your attic, it’s been a local company — you can’t outsource it."

Homeowners agree that going green is a good thing.

"We never got someone who said, 'No, I don’t want to make my home more energy-efficient,'" Lewis said. "But sometimes it’s not the highest priority. Everyone has so many things to deal with in their busy lives; this is on their list, but it’s not on the top of the list."

As upfront costs are also an issue, the program, like others before it, includes access to low-interest-rate loans, allowing homeowners to make improvements at little or no cost upfront and pay the loan back from energy savings.

Unlike in recent years, the latest initiative has to deal with the added challenge of motivating consumers when energy costs are relatively low.

"It has been a tough year, with the warm winter and low gas and oil prices," said Chuck Green, director of LI Green. "We’re not seeing the same growth within this industry that you saw in recent years."

In designing the latest program, however, organizers studied other reasons why energy-efficient programs have struggled nationwide.

"One factor is, whenever you’re dealing with a government program, it can be complex — you have to go to a website and figure out what information you have to put in and what you need to qualify," Lewis said.

Long Island Green Homes responded by establishing a call center and bringing in "energy navigators" — folks who are knowledgeable about energy — to guide homeowners through the program.

The energy navigators also give participants objective advice about which upgrades to make.

"If you go to a window salesperson, they’re going to say you need windows, and if you go to a boiler salesperson, they’re going to say you need a boiler," said Schwartz, who serves as an energy navigator. "We act as a clearinghouse — we’re like your uncle or brother-in-law."

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