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Seattle green jobs program falls short of goals

VANESSA HO, seattlepi.com
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SEATTLE (AP) — Last year, Seattle Mayor Mike McGinn announced the city had won a coveted $20 million federal grant to invest in weatherization. The unglamorous work of insulating crawl spaces and attics had emerged as a silver bullet in a bleak economy - able to create jobs and shrink carbon footprint - and the announcement came with great fanfare.

McGinn had joined Vice President Joe Biden in the White House to make it. It came on the eve of Earth Day. It had heady goals: creating 2,000 living-wage jobs in Seattle and retrofitting 2,000 homes in poorer neighborhoods.

But more than a year later, Seattle's numbers are lackluster. As of last week, only three homes had been retrofitted and just 14 new jobs have emerged from the program. Many of the jobs are administrative, and not the entry-level pathways once dreamed of for low-income workers. Some people wonder if the original goals are now achievable.

"The jobs haven't surfaced yet," said Michael Woo, director of Got Green, a Seattle community organizing group focused on the environment and social justice.

"It's been a very slow and tedious process. It's almost painful, the number of meetings people have gone to. Those are the people who got jobs. There's been no real investment for the broader public."

The buildings that have gotten financing so far include the Washington Athletic Club and a handful of hospitals, a trend that concerns community advocates who worry the program isn't helping lower-income homeowners.

"Who's benefitting from this program right now - it doesn't square with what the aspiration was," said Howard Greenwich, the policy director of Puget Sound Sage, an economic-justice group. He urged the city to revisit its social-equity goals.

"I think what it boils down to is who's got the money."

Organizers and policy experts blame the economy, bureaucracy and bad timing for the program's mediocre results. Called Community Power Works, the program funds low-interest loans and incentives for buildings to do energy-efficient upgrades. They include hospitals, municipal buildings, big commercial structures and homes.

Half the funds are reserved for financing and engaging homeowners in Central and Southeast Seattle, a historically underserved area. Most of the jobs are expected to come from this sector.

But the timing of the award has led to hurdles in enticing homeowners to bite on retrofits. The city had applied for the grant at a time of eco-giddiness, when former Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels was out-greening all other politicians except for Al Gore. Retrofits glowed with promise to boost the economy, reduce consumer bills and lower greenhouse gas emissions.

"A triple win," is how Biden characterized it.

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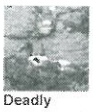
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By the time Seattle won the award, homeowners were battered by unemployment and foreclosures. The long-term benefits of energy upgrades lacked the tangible punch of a new countertop. And the high number of unemployed construction workers edged out new weatherization installers for the paltry number of jobs.

"Really, we couldn't have rolled out this program at a worse time," said Greenwich, who had helped write the city's grant proposal.

"The outcomes are very disappointing. I think the city has worked really hard, but no one anticipated just how bad this recession was going to be, and the effect it was going to have on this program."

City feels 'cautiously optimistic'

As of last week, 337 homeowners had applied for the program. Fourteen had gotten a loan, or were in the process of getting one.

"Yes, we're not seeing as many completed retrofits as we wanted to," said Joshua Curtis, the city's manager for Community Power Works. "While everyone would like to see more upgrades, I think we're feeling cautiously optimistic."

He said the residential portion of program didn't launch until April. He said there was a normal summertime lull in work and that he expected things to pick up in the fall. He was confident that the city's marketing campaign and loan partner held promise.

Curtis said there were factors outside the city's control, such as the economy. And he attributed frustration among job-seekers to a "mismatch" in the timing of two federal grants.

Before the city got the $20 million, some local agencies, including Got Green, had received funds in a government push to train workers in weatherization. But the anticipation of landing career-path jobs evaporated as months went by with no work.

"People are frustrated and rightly so," Curtis said. "There's been sort of a lag time when people graduated from those programs."

They include Long Duong, 32, who got a certificate in sealing air leaks and insulating walls after he was laid off from a job handling bags at the airport. But he soon found that other men had more qualifications than him, and he took part-time gigs - installing light bulbs and canvassing doors - while waiting for work.

A year later, he's still looking.

"I haven't given up yet," said Duong, of South Seattle. "Weatherization is another opportunity for me."

Curtis said the money that financed the Washington Athletic Club and hospitals doesn't draw from funds reserved for single-family homeowners. He said the program's standards will ensure that people targeted by the program - low-income workers - will get good jobs. And he said the WAC project will create some new work in September.

"We're not where we want to be, but we have a path forward," he said.

But will the city hit its goals? Curtis was hopeful Seattle would make it by 2013, when the funding ends. Greenwich, of Puget Sound Sage, said the city needs to retrofit 100 to 200 homes a month to create 2,000 jobs. Woo, of Got Green, thinks the city needs to throw more money on incentives.

Greenwich said the energy retrofit market has turned out to be extremely complicated, with required hammering out of job standards, hiring practices, wages and how best to measure energy benefits.

"The city is really going to have to step up its game to get the 2,000 retrofits," Greenwich said.

"But if this would have been easy, it would have been done already."

Information from: Seattle Post-Intelligencer, http://www.seattlepi.com/