

IN THE REGION | LONG ISLAND

Improving Energy Efficiency in Long Island Homes

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Lindenhurst



IT'S toastier in George and Eileen Trujillo's living room this winter. In September, the Trujillos had the front window replaced, installed a new wooden front door and put weatherstripping around the basement door frame. The drafts they used to feel in their three-bedroom Cape have mostly abated.

"It made a difference, absolutely," said Mr. Trujillo, 87, who is happy that he no longer needs plastic sheeting on his windows or a rug to keep cold air from seeping in under his front door. "The house stays warmer."

The Trujillos' \$4,500 weatherization was done, free of charge to them, by the [Community Development Corporation of Long Island](#), a nonprofit group that offers homeowner assistance. To check the home's airtightness, auditors from the agency even

came back on a recent afternoon to do a “blower door” test with a calibrated fan and computer.

The couple are among the 15,000 low-income homeowners across the Island who, in the last 20 years, have been provided with free energy-efficiency retrofitting.

Another 2,200 homes are to be weatherized this year, said Maureen Pedrotti, the weatherization director. Qualifying owners include families of four whose annual income is less than \$46,836; couples making \$31,848; and singles earning \$24,360.

The program’s success has even encouraged a new effort — this one to move beyond low-income families and focus on middle-class homeowners in eight Island towns. Owners will be offered loans for retrofitting, rather than grants, but will have a financial inducement to take part: their monthly savings in utility costs may exceed their monthly payments on the loans.

Earlier this month, the Community Development Corporation became the lead agency for the eight towns’ newly formed Long Island Green Homes and Buildings Consortium, whose goal is to make homes and buildings across the area more energy efficient and reduce their carbon footprint, said Marianne Garvin, the chief executive of the Centereach-based agency.

The towns — Babylon, Brookhaven, Huntington, Islip, North Hempstead, Oyster Bay, Smithtown and Southampton — have committed 20 percent of their federal Energy Department funds to the effort. Babylon is furthest along in the process; the other towns are still more or less in the planning stages (for details: ligreenhomes.com). The alliance was formed partly as a result of state legislation passed last month enabling municipalities to start “Property Assessed Clean Energy” loan programs.

The consortium also intends to label the homes it retrofits, branding them as energy efficient and using that as a selling point. Joseph E. Mottola, the chief executive of the Long Island Board of Realtors, said that the process significantly reduces operating costs and makes homes more comfortable.

“This improvement will be an attractive selling feature should the homeowner decide to sell their home,” he said, adding that brokers would use the energy labels in marketing the houses.

It was Babylon that provided the impetus and a model. In July 2008, it created Long Island Green Homes, the first such loan program in the country for energy efficiency. To jump-start the program, it redefined its solid-waste code to include energy waste and tapped into \$2 million of its \$25 million solid-waste reserve fund.

The idea was to have a “common-sense, cost-effective sustainable program that addresses key issues like [climate change](#) and job creation,” said Steve Bellone, the town supervisor. As in many towns, he added, “by far the biggest amount of energy use comes from our existing single-family homes.”

According to Dorian Dale, the town’s energy director, 309 of its 60,000 homes have been audited or retrofitted, by a town-certified pool of six contractors. To begin with, residents pay only the \$250 cost of an energy audit. But they can apply for up to \$12,000 in loans to finance energy-efficiency improvements or, if the house is already deemed energy efficient, to pay for solar panels.

Once the work is done, they are billed monthly, though energy savings can be greater than the costs incurred. A third of the jobs involve replacing the boiler, a third involve attic insulation and a third focus on sealing the “thermal envelope,” Mr. Dale said.

The den in John and Donna McAteer’s 32-year-old Copiague home was colder in the winter and warmer in the summer than the rest of the ranch. In September, following the recommendations of a town energy audit, they had a new gas furnace and water heater installed. Extra insulation stopped air leaks in the attic. “Now this room is as comfortable as the rest of the house,” Mr. McAteer said.

The cost, almost \$10,000, was just as comfortable: Babylon town paid the contractors; the McAteers are paying the town back at \$134 a month for 10 years. (It is too early to know specifics on energy savings.)

A key hurdle in creating the program in the first place, Mr. Bellone said, was overcoming residents’ reluctance to make efficiency improvements if there was a chance of their moving.

To address that concern, payments pass along to the next homeowner if the property is sold. “There are no upfront costs,” Mr. Bellone said.

Ms. Garvin said the consortium was seeking further financing for the program by applying for an Energy Department “Retrofit Ramp-up” competitive grant of \$40 million.

In the first three years, she said, about 30,000 homes in the eight towns could be retrofitted to be about 29 percent less leaky. Homeowners could save more than \$1,000 per year.

Ronald Pulito, the senior auditor for Brookhaven, said that early next year the town would be sending a mailing to about 130,000 homes to inform residents about the retrofit and solar initiative programs.

Jon Kaiman, the North Hempstead town supervisor, was among those who jumped on the sustainability bandwagon. Beyond the environmental component, retrofitting homes will add jobs and bolster home values.

“One of the big concerns for anyone buying a home, it is not simply the cost of the home,” he said, but “the cost of the upkeep of a home.”