



Energy compact riles contractors

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The state is gearing up for a \$2.2 billion program aimed at improving the energy efficiency of homes and businesses across the commonwealth. Some \$76 million is headed to the Cape and Martha's Vineyard to fund programs, including home energy audits and rebates on the implementation of efficiency measures.

But some local weatherization contractors are worried they won't have a fair shot at the money because of a system that they say makes it very difficult for them to compete for business.

"We're not asking for them to give us jobs," said Prescott Wright, sales manager at Resolution Energy, a Buzzards Bay weatherization company. "We're just asking for the ability to compete for jobs."

Since 2001, the Cape Light Compact has administered energy efficiency programs in Barnstable and Dukes counties.

Among the initiatives run by the electricity cooperative is the residential energy conservation program, which provides free energy audits to residents of Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard and offers sizable rebates on the cost of making recommended changes.

And the program has been growing.

In 2006, it served 2,186 participants with a budget of \$586,000, according to Cape Light Compact reports.

In 2009, the program had a budget of \$1.9 million and 3,955 participants.

In a new plan filed as part of the state's energy efficiency efforts, the program has been budgeted at a total of \$22.3 million for the next three years. The money will come from a combination of sources, including from fees charged by utility companies to fund energy efficiency efforts and from proceeds of the state's participation in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative.

Competitive disadvantage?

The way the program is now structured, local contractors say, gives Cape-based businesses little opportunity to compete for the work of implementing energy-saving recommendations.

Currently, one vendor, RISE Engineering of Cranston, R.I., is contracted to perform all home energy audits requested through the Cape Light Compact's program. At the end of the assessment, the RISE employee gives the client a report of the results, a list of proposed measures to improve the home's energy efficiency and an estimated price for RISE to perform the recommended work.

"The problem is, they have no incentive to give referrals to any other contractors," said Nicole Goldman, the owner of 'g' Green Design Center in Mashpee, which works with local contractors to help her customers implement energy-saving measures.

The paperwork mentions that an outside contractor can be hired to do the work, said Briana Kane, residential energy efficiency program coordinator for the Cape Light Compact.

"In the home energy assessment plan, it does state the process for a customer to use an independent contractor," she said.

But that option is not clearly promoted and is hidden in the fine print, Wright said.

Furthermore, RISE is able, through its partnership with the Cape Light Compact, to give instant rebates, charging customers only the bottom-line cost for its services. Other contractors must charge full price, leaving customers to pursue rebates from the energy efficiency program after the work is done.

"It is structured to give RISE a competitive advantage in a number of ways," said Chris Powicki, the principal of Water Energy and Ecology Information Services, an energy and environmental policy consulting company in Brewster.

And it's not just businesses losing out, said David Evans, general manager of Resolution Energy; consumers aren't able to shop around for the best deals when there is no competition for jobs, he said.

RISE residential operations supervisor Christopher Gorham defended his company's prices, noting that the firm has submitted prices for its work as part of the bidding process by which it was selected as the program's lead vendor.

Nonetheless, he said, RISE is not averse to competing for business.

"It's a big playground, and we welcome other contractors to come in," he said. "Let's get the work done."

A master list

Local contractors upset by the current situation have been agitating for change for the past three months by talking to state lawmakers and calling the governor's office, Wright said.

And the possibility of change is on the horizon.

The Cape Light Compact yesterday hosted a closed-door meeting with contractors to discuss how the program would be changing this year. Though the press was not allowed to attend, a printed copy of the slide show presented indicates that the cooperative is proposing adding a list of qualified contractors to the materials given to a customer receiving a home energy assessment.

And the three-year statewide energy efficiency plan calls for the creation of a master list of contractors qualified to implement energy-efficiency measures.

"We're striving for a single statewide list," said Frank Gorke, director of the state Division of Energy Efficiency. "It was put in place as one attempt to both control what's delivered and open up how it's delivered."

And getting their businesses in front of potential customers is just what dissatisfied local contractors need, Evans said.

"We just want a shot at the job," he said.

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