

Nashua, Berlin, Plymouth chosen for efficiency program

◆ Better Building

Initiative: Federal funds help homeowners in the three towns button up for winter. They must have an energy audit done, with financial help available.

By **VIRGINIA BATTLES-RAFFA**
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It's been a cold winter that could have been warmer for some if they had added insulation or new windows to their homes and reduced their fuel costs, but how does the average homeowner find the money for such improvements in a struggling economy?

Assisting people with energy-efficiency improvements is the objective of The Better Building Initiative.

Three New Hampshire communities — Nashua, Berlin and Plymouth — were chosen to be beacon towns for this federally funded program.

"Being a beacon town means becoming a shining example of sustainability. It involves hyper-investing in energy conservation and asks us to consider our building practices, incorporating renewable alternatives, and includes municipal planning, education and transportation as well as making an effort to support the local economy," said Madeline McElaney, Plymouth community manager for The Better Building Initiative.

Any resident of the three towns, including those who own commercial, residential, or government buildings, can receive assistance from The Better Building Initiative to make their home, office or building more energy efficient.

The organization will not only provide guidance, but will also help residents find money for their projects.

Interested community members are first asked to have an energy audit. "A residential energy audit can cost between \$400 and \$600, but we offer \$250 toward that cost to those accepted into the program. If they move forward with the measures suggested, they could receive up to \$750 toward the improvements," said McElaney.

The federal government awarded \$10 million to the N.H. Office of Energy and Planning, the agency that oversees the Better Building Initiative. Approximately \$6 million of those dollars have been earmarked for developing financial incentives to spur small loan lending from area banks. Small home-improvement loans are often difficult for people to access at reasonable interest rates.

"Traditionally, banks have been reluctant to grant loans for things not easily secured. We are working with area banks to create a loss-reserve fund, to reduce the bank's risk on these loans, and we are buying down interest rates so that a residential loan for things such as insulation or windows can be accessed at an interest rate as low as 1 percent," said McElaney.

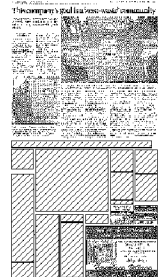
"The purpose of the grant

wasn't to just throw big chunks of cash into projects. The intention was to build a self-sustaining economic stimulus. We expect that by supporting the banks in funding loans for energy-efficiency improvements, lending will continue for these sorts of projects long after the initiative terminates in May 2013," said Kate Peters, Better Building's program director.

Several banks in the three towns have expressed interest in participating, including Merrimack County, Community Guarantee Savings, Woodlands Credit Union and Laconia Savings, among others. "This initiative is only just getting under way. We hope to have agreements with the banks within the next couple of weeks, and we have already had community members come in to start the process of getting their improvement projects approved," said McElaney.

The initiative hopes to stimulate the job market as well. Better Building will work with local contractors and energy auditors, keeping any money spent in the local community, improving the community's economy.

"There are qualifications required such as being BPI (Building Performance Institute) certified, and we have guidelines for the audits. We want to maintain consistency



so we can measure the results better ... but we will provide some training." Training in the energy analysis program, TREAT, is available as well as mentor programs for those wanting to qualify as energy auditors.

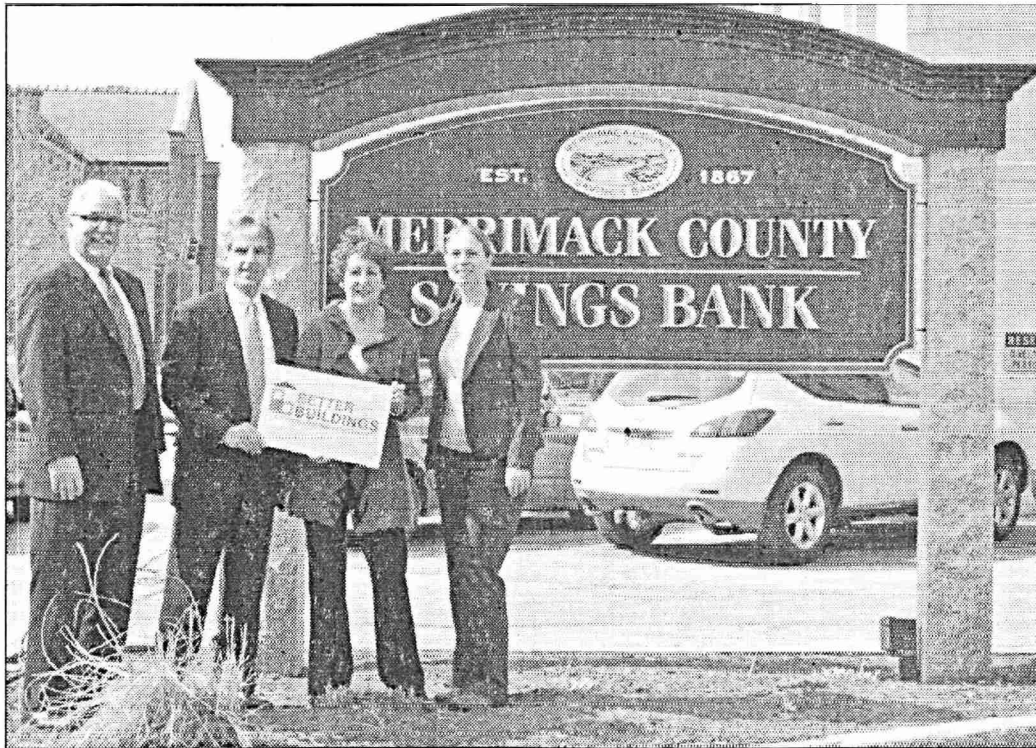
An independent technical adviser is assigned to each approved project to act as a liaison between the community resident and contractors.

"He's there to verify the

work is done in compliance with the guidelines laid out and to help keep the homeowner apprised of how the project is progressing," said McElaney.

The Better Building Initiative has \$200,000 budgeted for marketing their program to community residents. The money will be spent on education forums, marketing the banks' financial programs and outreach to the community.

Nashua, Plymouth or Berlin residents wanting to make energy improvements, who want to participate in the program, can contact their local community manager. Bob Eldredge is Nashua's and can be reached at 717-6530, and Berlin's community manager, Cimbria Badenhausen, can be reached at 717-6166. Madeline McElaney is located at 85 Main St. in Plymouth and may be called at 717-6531.



COURTESY

Merrimack County Savings Bank has partnered with the CDFA and Better Building Initiative. Shown are Paul Rizzi Jr., Merrimack County Savings Bank's President and CEO, Art Letendre, Merrimack Bank's consumer loan manager, Kate Peters, Better Buildings program director, and Veronica Collins, assistant program director.