



Save Energy—And Money

By Donna LaGraffe

Energy Upgrade California is a statewide program that was established in March 2011 by the California Energy Commission in collaboration with the Public Utilities Commission, utilities, local governments, nongovernmental organizations and the private sector to promote and finance energy efficiency and renewable energy projects for homes and businesses, reduce energy use and help train contractors and building professionals. These efforts are supporting construction-related job creation by increasing sales for local building suppliers and retailers.

In Sonoma County, Energy Upgrade provides a “one-stop shop” to help businesses and homeowners throughout the county reduce energy use and lower utility bills. The program supports a whole-building approach to saving energy that goes beyond lighting system upgrades to achieve efficiency and cost savings. Energy Upgrade guides and assists commercial property owners and building managers through the process of evaluating opportunities for water conservation, energy efficiency and renewable generation. Approaching a building as a complete system means considering how HVAC, lighting, insulation, cool roof, water and other systems can work together most effectively to reduce energy use and help lower utility bills.

Tax deductions—ranging from \$0.60 to \$1.80 per square foot—and utility rebates are available for owners of both new and existing buildings who upgrade interior lighting, building envelope (the physical separator between a building’s interior and exterior environments, also known as “building shell”), heating and cooling, ventilation, and/or hot water systems to reduce the building’s total energy use.

Multiple financing options for commercial projects are available through Energy Upgrade, including the Sonoma County Energy Independence Program (SCEIP). SCEIP finances energy efficiency, water efficiency and renewable energy improvements through a voluntary assessment known as Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) financing. These assessments are attached to the property, not the owner, and are paid back through the property tax system over time. SCEIP is a partner in the Energy Upgrade California program in Sonoma County.

Rod Stevenson, owner of Stevenson Supply and Tractor Co. in Sonoma County, recently completed Energy Upgrade projects for both his business and home financed through SCEIP. “We looked at the whole (building) concept when making upgrades. Even in a down economy we must make business decisions that make sense and cents. Right now I have a large enough (solar energy) credit to pay November and December’s heating bill.” Stevenson says. Other local businesses pursuing projects through Energy Upgrade include Children’s Village of Sonoma County, Santa Rosa Plaza, Amy’s Kitchen and Larsen’s Feed Store in Cotati.

What is the business case for pursuing energy efficiency?

Lower up-front investment. Energy Upgrade lowers the cost of investing in energy efficiency upgrades, because rebates and incentives make the initial investment in improvements more affordable and the return on investment faster.

Lower operating costs. Reducing building energy use can potentially make a big difference in monthly utility bills, savings that ultimately provide that return on investment. Simple energy efficiency improvements to existing buildings, such as insulating window films, yield \$3 in savings (on average) for every \$1 invested.

Increased property value. Energy-efficient buildings retain higher real estate value by commanding 6 to 7 percent higher rents and maintaining higher occupancy rates than less efficient buildings.

Reduced carbon footprint. Improving a building’s energy efficiency is a key way to green a business and directly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, demonstrating compliance with AB32.

Building energy rating boost. Commercial properties are required by California law (AB1103) to disclose Energy Star Portfolio Manager benchmarking data and ratings to prospective buyers, lessees or lenders, similar to a “miles per gallon” rating. A good rating can be turned into a business asset.

Improved indoor air quality. Proper ventilation and nontoxic materials create a healthier environment for employees and customers.

Local economic stimulation. Local energy efficiency projects create jobs and support the local economy.

Another kind of green business opportunity

Energy Upgrade’s Employee Outreach Program offers opportunity for Sonoma County businesses to extend their sustainability efforts even further by providing employers with tools to educate their employees about energy efficiency services and benefits for their own homes. The Employee Outreach Program also provides participating businesses with marketing opportunities and community recognition for supporting their employees’ participation in the residential Energy Upgrade program.

About Energy Upgrade California in Sonoma County

Funding for Energy Upgrade California comes from multiple sources, including federal stimulus funds (American Reinvestment and Recovery Act), the U.S. Department of Energy Better Buildings Program, the California Public Utilities Commission and the California Energy Commission. Local partners include SCEIP and the Regional Climate Protection Authority (RCPA) working in coordination locally with: Clean Energy Advocates—City of Santa Rosa, Climate Protection Campaign, Solar Sonoma County, Sonoma County Energy Watch and Efficiency First.

Donna LaGraffe is marketing specialist with the Sonoma County Energy Independence Program. For more information about Energy Upgrade California in Sonoma County, call SCEIP at (707) 565-6470 or visit www.sonomacountyenergy.org.

