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Cities offer incentives to encourage residents to go green

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PARKLAND, FLA. - Free hybrid car parking. Cash rebates for solar panel installations. Low-interest loans for energy-efficient home renovations. Tearing up that water-thirsty lawn in the parched Southwest? The check's in the mail, courtesy of a city government.

Frustrated by what they see as insufficient action by the federal government, municipalities around the country are offering financial incentives to get people to go green. The United States is the only major industrial country to have rejected the Kyoto Protocol, which requires international greenhouse gas reductions. More than 700 cities, however, have signed a U.S. Conference of Mayors document pledging to try to meet Kyoto targets.

In Parkland, where the motto is "Environmentally Proud," the city plans next year to begin offering a package of cash rebates to its 25,000 residents for being more environmentally friendly.

"We will literally issue them a check," Vice Mayor Jared Moskowitz said. "We're sick of waiting for the federal government to do something, so we've got to do what we can."

Residents who install low-flow toilets or shower heads will get \$150. Replacing an old air conditioner with a more energy-efficient brand brings \$100. Buying a hybrid car? Another \$200 cash back. And the list goes on.

Based on an estimate of 1,000 residents participating in the rebate program during the first year, the city predicts it will cost as much as \$100,000 -- no small change in times of tight budgets.

But for Moskowitz, it's the principle, not the payout, that matters.

"The gain to the city and the residents is to improve the environment. That's what we get," Moskowitz said. "Could this bankrupt the city if the program grows by leaps and bounds? I can only wish that so many residents want to go green that that becomes an issue."

Other incentives

Many states already offer such rebates and incentives through tax breaks, loans and perks such as allowing hybrid car drivers to use car pool lanes.

Utilities have long provided incentives to purchase energy-efficient appliances, solar panels and toilets that use less water. The federal government, too, offers tax incentives for purchases of many hybrid vehicles and energy-saving products.

Still, for many cities, it's just not enough.

"In terms of waiting for the federal government, we've waited a long time, and frankly we haven't gotten very much," said Jared Blumenfeld, director of San Francisco's Department of Environment. "And how do you change someone's behavior? The simple answer is cash."

Starting next year, San Francisco will offer homeowners rebates worth as much as \$5,000 off the price of installing solar panels if they use local contractors. Coupled with state and federal incentives, that could cut in half the \$21,000 cost for an average household, Blumenfeld said.

The city also will cover as much as 90 percent of costs associated with making multifamily dwellings, such as apartment buildings, more energy efficient, and will pay residents \$150 to replace old appliances with ones that meet federal energy-saving standards.

The neighboring city of Berkeley is financing the cost of solar panels for homeowners who agree to pay the money back through a 20-year property tax assessment.

Nearby Marin County offers a \$500 rebate to homeowners who install solar systems.

Baltimore offers a minimum \$2,000 grant toward closing costs on new home purchases within the vicinity of a resident's employer under the city's "Live Near Your Work" program.

"Just living near your job and taking transit or walking to meet your daily needs provides basically the same environmental benefit as buying a hybrid car," said Amanda Eaken of the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group.

Residents of Albuquerque, N.M., get fast-track building permits and other perks if they agree to make their homes more energy-efficient.

"Our actions are influencing our climate," said John Soladay, the city's sustainability officer. "The action has to take place locally."

In Arizona, many cities pay residents to replace grass with artificial turf or plants that use less water. Scottsdale, outside Phoenix, will pay its citizens as much as \$1,500. "The overriding motivation is principle," city spokesman Mike Phillips said. "We're in the middle of a desert, and water is absolutely the most precious resource we have."

Glendale, another Phoenix suburb, has spent about \$500,000 over the past two decades helping pay to replace homeowners' lawns and gardens, bringing an estimated savings of a million gallons of water a year.

Focus on residential

The movement began with cities "greening" their own operations, switching to natural gas buses, installing energy-efficient light bulbs in administration buildings and leading by example.

Mayors then looked to businesses to do their part, offering enticements and tax breaks to reduce their carbon footprints. Now they're encouraging residents.

"There's a lot of policies now that are really starting to focus on residential," said Jason Hartke, director of advocacy for the U.S. Green Building Council. "And a lot of localities recognize they're going to get a lot more done using carrots and incentives rather than regulatory means."

Steve Morgan, vice president of the environmental consulting firm Clean Energy Solutions Inc., said local efforts, while "noble," are no substitute for federal action.

"I applaud it," he said, "but it's just the tip of the iceberg of what needs to be done."

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