

Adapting to the environment

Green jobs program brings a fresh angle to construction industry

By Kate Ramsayer / *The Bulletin*

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The inch-thick sheets of Styrofoam were all that passed for floor insulation at a northeast Bend house.

“This is the first I’ve seen Styrofoam,” said Dave Bowman, looking at a pile of the broken up material. But at least someone had made an attempt to insulate the place when it was built several decades ago — even if it was ineffective, he said.

Bowman, an energy efficiency specialist with GreenSavers, was at the house last week, helping take out the old floor insulation and replacing it with a mat of fiberglass, blowing loose insulation into an attic space, sealing up leaks around ducts and generally making the home less prone to cold air seeping in.

“We’re tightening the place up pretty good,” Bowman said.

It’s a new field for Bowman, 50, who lost his job in the construction industry last year. But he turned a class on green building and renewable energy into a new job — a direction that others in the construction business are taking as well, and a movement that is receiving federal stimulus funds.

“It’s mostly due to the recession,” said Andy High, vice president of government affairs for the Central Oregon Builders Association. “As we saw buyers retracting from the marketplace, we saw builders and developers and others saying, ‘What can we do to differentiate (ourselves) from the competition.’ So they started learning more.”

Companies are turning to green products and energy efficiency projects to try to reinvent themselves to get through the economy’s downturn, he said, and so people are learning about solar water heaters, insulation and more.

“Consumers are still demanding it,” High said.



Photos by Rob Kerr / The Bulletin

GreenSavers’ Dave Bowman, 50, an energy efficiency specialist, used training from a sustainable building course to help him get a new job after being laid off from a construction company last year.



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Bowman, who was in the construction industry for more than 30 years, signed up with the Sustainable Building Advisor program at Central Oregon Community College simply because he was interested in the subject. The lectures, on things like transportation systems, resource conservation, natural light and more, were “fantastic,” he said.

“Nobody had a chance to talk long enough, as far as I was concerned,” Bowman said.

Midway through the course, however, he lost his job at a construction company because of the slowdown in business.

“It’s kind of disheartening, being laid off,” Bowman said.

He sent out hundreds of résumés, he said, often competing against 80 or more other job-seekers.

He answered an ad for an energy efficiency auditor with GreenSavers, who would test buildings to see where energy is being wasted, and after nine months of unemployment, found a job.

His construction background was probably about half of what got him the job, after nine months of looking, Bowman estimates. But the training “helped close the deal,” he said.

The Sustainable Building Advisor program attracts a diverse group of people, said M.L. Vidas, who coordinates the class.

Some people take the class to strengthen sustainable aspects of their business, some are interested in green construction or design and about one-third of the class participants are there to find a new career, she said.

“People realize that doing good, sustainable design and construction ... there’s a market for that,” she said.

And more training programs could be heading Central Oregon’s way.

Last week, officials announced that Oregon would receive \$5.38 million in stimulus money, to help place unemployed Oregonians in green job training programs. The money includes about \$2.5 million for rural areas of the state, which will be used to develop an Oregon Green Technology Certificate and match people with the program.

While some of the training would focus on work for renewable energy projects, other sections would cover retrofitting and refurbishing existing buildings with energy conservation projects, said Camille Preus, director of Oregon’s Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development.

“This is the kind of training that we’re being told is in short supply and needed by employers,” she said. Most of the jobs pay around \$12 an hour, but some can pay \$25 an hour as well, she said. And the training is designed to ensure that there are people to fill those positions, she said.



Subcontractor Abel Hernandez, 39, of Redmond, sprays fiberglass insulation in the attic space of Lona Hale’s northeast Bend home Thursday morning. Because of savings on her energy bills, the improvements should pay for themselves in five to seven years, according to GreenSavers’ Dave Bowman.

Bowman said his construction background helps in his new job in a number of ways — he knows where to look for possible leaks or problems, for example. And he's slated to take more classes in the coming months to get certified as a building performance analyst.

Less than two months into his new job, Bowman said his favorite part of the energy efficiency business is knowing that a homeowner will immediately notice a difference in their house's comfort — like fewer cold drafts and fewer clicks of the furnace turning on.

He's seen a lot of other contractors start thinking about energy conservation in their business, he said: "The more people we can get doing it, the better."

Bowman said he'd like to push for more incentives so people can afford to make their homes and businesses energy efficient — whether they're doing it to conserve natural resources or to save money on electric bills.

And more energy-saving projects could also lead to jobs for energy efficiency experts, he said.

"It'd work hand in hand with our employment problems and our energy problems," Bowman said.

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