

Community Energy Planning and the Stimulus -- Take a Time Out!

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Stimulus money is available for a variety of energy efficiency projects, but many understaffed cities are having trouble meeting the impending deadlines. Jessica Millman, Joe Schilling, and Kathryn McCarty have found a loophole that can help.

Many local government officials and staff are working late nights and weekends filling out Stimulus paperwork, as application deadlines flow one right after another. Whether these dollars flow directly to local governments from federal agencies or through the states, the Stimulus legislation has created a myriad of separate processes and deadlines. In everyone's haste to get the dollars on the street, many communities are overlooking this rare opportunity to leverage these federal funds and build self-sustaining initiatives. "But that requires time to plan," our local colleagues tell us — a luxury most federal and state Stimulus processes do not encourage.

Last week's New York Times article documents the frenzy surrounding Department of Energy's (DOE) Energy Efficiency Community Block Grant (EECBG) program. Communities across the country are struggling to devise plans that create green jobs, promote energy efficiency and reduce carbon emissions. Few cities are thinking big or long term. Plus, within 18 months the communities must show reductions in overall energy outputs. Yikes!

Hidden with the EECBG regulations is a potential safety valve. Communities receiving direct formula funds can file an extension (Form 424) on or before the June 25th deadline, which gives these local governments 120 days to develop a more robust community energy plan. Think of it like filing for an income tax extension. As part of the deal DOE will even advance up to a maximum of \$250,000 to support energy plan development.

For those readers who have pulled-up Form 424 on their computer screens, the following five point strategy might help with the launch of your community energy planning effort:

1. **Inventory existing plans, projects, and programs.** EECBG dollars can be used for a wide variety of projects and programs. Eligible activities do not have to be capital projects. DOE is saying that anything that reduces energy consumption will be eligible. Determine what your existing plans recommend for energy efficiency, conservation and the generation of renewable energy.

2. **Benchmark model programs.** Whether from your region or across the globe, what have other cities and counties done in the emerging field of community energy planning. We don't have a great track record here in the US, but with the recent explosion of climate action plans, more local governments have begun to think seriously about the links between carbon emissions reduction, energy efficient buildings, and climate change.

3. **Get your green team together.** What other department and agencies within the confines of local government should be involved in this planning effort—planning, housing, building, public works, general services, etc.?

4. **Engage local residents and businesses.** Developing a community energy plan is not an exclusive local government activity. When it comes to community energy programs and projects, what ideas and issues do homeowners, tenants, manager and employees have? How will these longer term energy and climate change challenges affect them? Public workshops and town hall meetings are excellent ways to share information and generate buy-in.

5. **Launch a collaborative planning process.** Now the tricky part is facilitating a planning process that brings together these internal and external elements within that 120 day period.

Strategic planning is hard work. Building consensus among diverse constituencies with different interests and agendas can often be more art than science. However, any meaningful movement towards energy independence and a new carbon economy will require thoughtful community energy plans. For our local government colleagues out there, take a deep breath. Push forward with the rest of your stimulus applications. Fill out DOE's 424 Short Form and take at least one weekend off this summer.

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Jessica Cogan Millman is a national expert and leader in urban planning, environmentally sustainable development, and the principles of smart growth. She served as Deputy Chief of Staff for Maryland's Office of Smart Growth and then joined former Governor Parris Glendening at the Smart Growth Leadership Institute.

Professor Joseph Schilling is associate director of the Green Regions Initiative at the [Metropolitan Institute—Virginia Tech](#), investigating innovative ways of creating eco-sustainable communities through better design, planning, and collaboration. Schilling is currently completing a [multi-year planning studio](#) for the Institute's home city of Alexandria, Virginia that developed the Mid-Atlantic's first Eco-City Charter.

FOOTNOTES:

1 The Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grants (EECBG) Program offers states and local governments about \$2.8 million in direct formula grants. EECBG grants can be used to reduce energy use and fossil fuel emissions and for improvements in energy efficiency.

2 For those smaller cities with modest formula grants (say less than \$250,000) the DOE regulations seem to permit a proportionally smaller advance of their grant funds for developing the plan.

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