

[By Gordon Dritschilo, Rutland Herald](#)

The federal government is giving a local group \$4.5 million to make Rutland County buildings more energy efficient.

NeighborWorks of Western Vermont hopes Rutland County will lead the state in energy efficiency, according to its executive director, Ludy Biddle. She said helping homeowners make such improvements has been a goal for the group since an "energy summit" it organized in September.

"It was clear the people we work with and work for could benefit from energy efficiency projects in their home," she said.

However, Biddle said costs and lack of expertise can make shoring up houses against energy waste a forbidding prospect for homeowners. Enter the stimulus, which funded an energy efficiency and conservation block grant program written by Vermont's congressional delegation.

"This is exactly why we wrote the program, to do exactly what NeighborWorks have planned," said Sen. Bernard Sanders. "Rutland County is taking a great step forward in saving people substantial sums of money of their fuel costs."

Using the funds to enhance an incentive program offered through Efficiency Vermont, Biddle said they hope to encourage 40 percent of Rutland County homes to make improvements. The organization will also work with Central Vermont Public Service, Green Mountain College and several local banks.

NeighborWorks will offer efficiency audits, which look at what improvements can be made to a home, and then manage the construction while those improvements are made.

Biddle said they will fund improvements with a combination of cash rebates and loans and that they hope to structure the loans so the payments are less than the projected savings from the improvements.

An audit can cost around \$300 to \$400, Biddle said, but that cost is generally forgiven or folded into the construction if the homeowner decides to go forward with the recommended improvements.

Improvements can range from \$15,000 for a complex series of changes, including a new boiler to around \$5,000 for simple insulation work.

Sanders, Vermont's independent senator, said the money joins \$12 million already going to Vermont for energy efficiency and that the effort is projected to create 352 jobs over a three-year period.

"This is a very big deal for Rutland County," Sanders said. "This money is designed to do exactly what we want to do right now."

Biddle said going through the process on her own home was an eye-opening experience.

"In the projections, I was going to save almost 60 percent," she said. "It was a question of air sealing and insulation, a couple modifications to the garage ceilings. ... Most of it qualified for some incentives that cut the cost way down."

The savings were such, she said, that she expects to have the work paid off in 2-1/2 years. A winter later, she said the effort is living up to the projections.

"I am literally kicking off the covers on a cold night where I had been used to freezing in my own room no matter how high I had the heat," she said.