

[By Sen. Jeff Merkley and Rep. Peter Welch, published in Roll Call](#)

Almost two years after the bottom fell out of the American financial system, the economy has stabilized. Congress has done a lot to turn the recession around and prevent another financial crisis. But we cannot give in to complacency or fatigue.

Millions of Americans are still out of work, and the unemployment rate is holding steady in double digits. The recession has touched every sector of the economy, and the construction industry has been hit especially hard. It took years of failed policies to create the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, and we cannot expect one small burst of legislation to turn it around. It will take a relentless focus on putting people back to work, because — and this sounds rudimentary — the only way to dig out of this recession is by creating new jobs.

One of the best ways to get our small businesses humming again and put tens of thousands of construction workers back on the job immediately is a robust program for the energy-efficient renovation of buildings and homes across the country.

Because of their scale, retrofits to larger buildings like office towers and apartment buildings can amplify energy savings and pay off big through lower monthly energy bills. It's a significant return on investment that starts the day renovations are installed. But the obstacle that keeps many building owners and business owners from immediately investing in energy efficiency measures is the high upfront cost.

To address this challenge, we have offered legislation to implement the Building Star program. Building Star would allow building owners to use low-cost loans to help pay for the upfront costs of renovations with those loans to be paid back through savings on monthly energy bills. The program would also provide rebates for some retrofit equipment such as high-efficiency furnaces; heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems; water heaters; and insulation.

Building Star shares many of the potential benefits of its close cousin, Home Star, which passed the House in May with support from both sides of the aisle. While Home Star focuses on renovating houses and Building Star focuses on commercial spaces and apartment buildings,

the programs work together to achieve a legislative hat trick of creating jobs, reducing energy costs and cutting harmful carbon emissions.

The positive effect these efforts would have on employment is considerable. Like Home Star, Building Star would begin creating jobs immediately. It is projected to create as many as 150,000 jobs in some of the economy's hardest-hit sectors, including construction, manufacturing and distribution, over the next two years. These are good American jobs that can't be shipped overseas. It would also stimulate new jobs in the 55,000 construction and manufacturing firms that deal in building materials, roof insulation, windows and window films.

In addition, Building Star is expected to save building owners more than \$3 billion on their energy bills annually. The program would actually reduce energy use by the equivalent of 33 300-megawatt power plants. This would result in a reduction of the carbon pollution that contributes to global warming by 21 million metric tons, equal to the emissions of nearly 4 million cars each year, according to the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy.

When it comes to utilizing federal dollars to create jobs, Building Star is head and shoulders above most other options. Through the rebates and low-interest loans, the Building Star program leverages \$2 to \$3 in private investment for every federal dollar spent.

With so much potential to bolster job creation and create energy savings, Building Star, Home Star and other energy-efficiency efforts such as the Rural Energy Savings Program are gaining momentum.

Support is growing quickly for two reasons. First, they will produce results right away. Energy-efficient retrofits don't require new technology to be developed before being adopted nationwide — in fact, these renovations are already being installed in buildings around the country. Second, because buildings account for 40 percent of the energy used in America each day, renovations will help put us on the path toward a clean energy future that will yield lower costs for families and businesses.

No one program can completely address our energy challenges or provide a new job to everyone who needs one, but Building Star is a great place to start.

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Sen. Jeff Merkley is an Oregon Democrat, and Rep. Peter Welch is a Vermont Democrat.