

Energy makeover illustrates potential of green jobs

'Idea House' » Cooperative project brings together students, government and green-economy pros

By Judy Fahys, The Salt Lake Tribune

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Electrician Jeff Cutrer had some clients not long ago who asked about installing solar equipment.

"I told them I was looking into it," said Cutrer, a father of four from Draper and a student in the Salt Lake Community College Green Academy.

On Saturday, he joined his academy classmates at the presentation of the latest "Idea House," a foreclosed home that has been updated, fitted with energy-efficient appliances, swathed in extra insulation and topped off with solar panels that can provide 3 kilowatts of clean electricity. With graduation two weeks away for their advanced photovoltaic class, they're at the front end of a booming industry.

Utah Gov. Gary Herbert stopped in for a tour and declared the project "impressive." Also on hand were Sen. Karen Mayne, D-West Valley City, and Rep. Eric Hutchings, R-Kearns.

"This is a wonderful example of what we can do," Herbert said, noting that the project had come together, thanks to the efforts of the Community Development Corporation of Utah, Salt Lake County, the community college and the Utah Solar Association (USA).

Orrin Farnsworth, president of the USA, said these training programs fill an acute need in the market. He has twice as many customers this year as last.

"The demand is so high," he said, "we can't get enough people trained fast enough to get the job done."

Green technology jobs are expected to grow by up to 40,000 a year nationwide, Farnsworth added.

Saturday's clouds aside, the future looks bright for solar on a number of fronts.

For one, the cost is coming down. Last year alone, prices dropped 25 to 30 percent, according to the USA. A system like the one installed on the Kearns home would cost about \$25,000, not counting incentives that cut the bill by thousands.

That, coupled with new batteries and solar cells coming online, means that solar is no longer a rich's man's solution to rising energy costs -- especially since rates are likely to increase under climate legislation.

Solar also is benefiting from tax credits and rebates, primarily a generous 30 percent federal energy credit. And, between the interest expressed Saturday by Capitol leaders and the federal stimulus program, there could be more incentives for Utah in the near future.

Finally, a set-up like the one at the Kearns house helps cut homeowner power bills, said Levi Belnap, executive director of the USA. "It's realistic," he said, "to potentially have no energy bills."

Farnsworth said Utah is in a fine position to capture the full range of benefits offered by the shift under way.

"It's all about jobs," he said, "and Utah has the biggest potential in the country because of the environment" and its work force.