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PALM DESERT, CALIFORNIA POISED TO ADOPT ENERGY INDEPENDENCE PROGRAM

Sponsors unprecedented state bill, AB 811, that allows cities to provide low-interest loans to property owners making energy improvements; More than 275 residents have expressed interest since the bill was signed into law one month ago

PALM DESERT, CALIFORNIA (August 27, 2008) Already an innovator in its efforts to reduce its carbon footprint, the city of Palm Desert is one step closer to realizing its goal of reducing citywide energy consumption by 30 percent before 2012. Governor Schwarzenegger last month signed Assembly Bill 811 into law as an “urgency measure,” for the first time allowing city and county governments throughout California to provide loans to property owners planning home or business improvements that will reduce energy consumption. The bill, termed locally the Energy Independence Program, was written and lobbied for by Palm Desert’s civic leaders.

Palm Desert’s City Council is working to formulate a strategy to put the bill into effect locally as quickly and simply as possible, and has already heard from more than 275 residents who are interested in participating. The Council will vote on the Energy Independence Program at its regular meeting on August 28, finalizing details and plans for this extraordinary initiative. The city plans to provide loans for as little as \$5,000, with no upper limit, for improvements such as efficient air-conditioning, dual-pane windows, pool pumps, solar panels, or white roofs—anything that will reduce electricity consumption and is considered a permanent fixture. The city will provide low-interest loans requiring no credit checks or other qualifications other than the title to improved property. The loans will be paid back as part of the property tax bill—meaning if the home or business is sold, the loan stays with the property.

“Three years ago, we set a lofty goal of reducing our energy use by 30 percent, and now we have the means to accomplish it,” said Councilman Jim Ferguson, who spearheaded the passage of the Energy Independence Program. “During the summer months, when temperatures regularly reach over 100 degrees, Palm Desert residents can pay over \$1000 a month for electricity. This program will empower them to explore renewable energy sources and make meaningful changes for the environment as well as their own finances.”

The city has enlisted the expertise of EcoMotion, a consulting company that also advises cities such as Anaheim and Santa Monica on their environmental initiatives. Under the leadership of president Ted Flanigan, EcoMotion will coordinate and help facilitate the loan program. Flanigan will also work to document Palm Desert’s carbon footprint and suggest further improvements to the city’s already aggressive energy- and emissions-reduction programs.

“Palm Desert is unbelievably progressive,” said Flanigan. “I salute its leaders for having the foresight and tenacity to change state law in this historic way, and now for promoting such a consumer-friendly program. The Energy Independence Program is rallying the public for responsible local action.”

Classifying the reduction of a city’s energy consumption and carbon footprint as “public good” is a groundbreaking approach, and opens the door for cities across the state to adopt similar programs. AB811 updates sections of California’s Streets and Highways Code that allow cities to set up assessment districts to pay for public improvements such as sewers and roads. Mindful of the far-reaching possibilities, Palm Desert has created a model that can be easily replicated elsewhere. At least ten other cities and three other counties are currently researching Palm Desert’s Energy Independence Program.

Besides creativity, another major asset in Palm Desert is sunshine. With 350 days of sunshine each year and an average of 5.5 hours of high-quality solar insulation per day, the city far outperforms the national average and is an ideal site for sun-powered energy systems. Home solar systems last up to 40 years, so the Energy Independence Program allows homeowners to finance systems—using the security of their improved property—with long-term loans to match the long-term benefits of solar. In a city so dependent on electricity for features such as air conditioning and pool pumps, energy-efficient improvements represent a long-term investment and increase the value of homes and businesses.

The Energy Independence Program is just one more way Palm Desert is thinking green. In 2006, the city introduced a new government division, the Office of Energy Management, and unveiled Set to Save: its unprecedented plan to cut energy consumption by 30 percent—or 215 million kilowatt hours of electric energy—in five years. The plan is the most ambitious of its kind in California and provides incentives to businesses and residents engaging in energy-saving behavior. Palm Desert has since then opened 141 energy-efficient apartments for low- and middle-income families, including several that are partially fueled by solar energy.

That same year, Palm Desert passed a law requiring all new construction to surpass state energy requirements by 10 to 15 percent. It has also pioneered zero-emission hydrogen fuel-cell city buses, waived permit fees on the installation of photovoltaic solar systems in homes and businesses and declared electric golf carts street-legal. Palm Desert has the only LEED-certified visitor center in the United States and opened the country's first environmentally sound public golf course 10 years ago. For more information, visit www.cityofpalmdesert.org.

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