

THE GREEN PAGES

Green initiatives can help Allentown become 'city without limits'



By **RUTH HEIL**
Business Journal Columnist

When Allentown's former director of Community and Economic Development, Joyce Marin, wanted an environmental conservation strategy, she contracted Tom Kerr of Thomas J. Kerr LLC.

THE GREEN SCENE

Kerr helps business and government entities set green priorities and meet conservation goals. After 20 years serving as the president and CEO of the Emmaus-based Wildlands Conservancy as well as time spent working at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, he is an established member of the Lehigh Valley's conservation community. He is also a businessman with a solid understanding of a green strategy's broad economic benefits.

With Mayor Al Pawlowski's support and input from all departments within Allentown's government, Kerr's expertise and Marin's leadership created a green plan called the Allentown Sustainability Plan. Today that plan is in motion, and Allentown hopes its businesses (and residents) will participate.

Private Sector Improvements

When American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 funds were distributed, Allentown was awarded a \$1.04 million portion because it had a plan in place. Since then, the city has earmarked one quarter of the grant for its Allentown Energy Conservation Program through which qualifying businesses, nonprofit organizations and residents who want to reduce energy consumption, cut energy costs and create jobs can get financial help.

Energy efficiency improvements are often cost neutral; they should pay for themselves within just a few years. Meanwhile, the availability of natural resources (or lack thereof) is directly linked to the bottom line, so efficiency makes fiscal sense, especially when you take advantage of cost-saving programs like this.

According to a city press release the program includes loans and rebates for projects such as the "replacement of antiquated furnaces, heat pumps, air-conditioning systems and hot-water heaters with Energy Star-Certified units. Others involve the replacement of leaky windows and doors, while still others involve switching out old-style florescent lamps with energy-efficient T-8s. In addition, the installation of two, solar photovoltaic electrical systems and a solar hot-water heater were completed this year with money borrowed and/or rebated. The capacity of the two generating installations together totals nearly 80 kilowatts of electricity."

Through arrangement with lending partner, the Sustainable Energy Fund, low-interest loans of \$10,000 to \$750,000 are available to small commercial and small non-profit property owners at an interest rate of 1.5 percent for the first \$25,000. Not-for-profit organizations and small businesses located in one of three designated "green zones" may be eligible for rebates from \$2,500 to \$5,000 for projects that offer at least a \$7,500 energy savings.

The green zones are defined and an application is available at www.allentownpa.gov/ecp. For those who are unsure where energy is escaping, the city has resources for free walk-throughs, detailed audits and advice on developing a strategic energy plan.

Government Improvements

Called an Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant, the remaining three quarters of the grant is funding specific energy-saving projects within the city. These include fuel-saving devices installed on 324 diesel-powered machines, "smart" lighting controls for City Hall, energy-consumption reductions within the park system and solar-powered, sidewalk trash compactors that reduce trash-truck traffic. High-tech coolers "will save a huge amount of electricity," said Kerr, when they replace the air conditioning units that now cool the city's computers.

"We've got money to hire a contractor to figure out how to establish bike paths and

bike lanes on particular city streets," said Kerr. "The difficulty is that like 3 percent of the bikers would actually not be afraid to go out on city streets." Kerr wants to safely connect the river to Muhlenberg College. "The engineering task will be to figure out how to make that happen," he said.

When asked why all this matters to jobs and businesses, Kerr said, "It's about comparisons." The cities that have coordinated, intergovernmental recreational and environmental conservation plans will create the green infrastructure needed for a competitive advantage. Allentown does not plan to be left behind. Plus, cities are at the forefront of the climate change debate. They are in a position to offer solutions with the greatest impact. Green cities will attract a healthy, conscientious citizen workforce that is in demand.

For more information about this program, contact Kerr at the Allentown Sustainability Office at (610) 437-8713.

Kerr hopes that, after the stimulus dollars are spent, the Sustainability Office will continue because he sees ripe conditions for public and private green projects throughout the city. He also found a sincere concern for conservation, along with great ideas, within City Hall — ideas that will improve quality of life, boost tourism, increase job attractiveness and transform this "city without limits" into a competitive place to do business.

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