

FINANCIAL AID FOR ENERGY CONSERVATION

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The oil crises of the 1970's spurred all kinds of financial incentive programs from both governments and utilities with the objective of conserving energy. This availability of funds created an army of fly-by-night contractors willing to blow just about anything into your attic. Although much of the money was properly spent and did save energy, a lot was used to create moisture problems in the attic while ignoring significant heat losses elsewhere in the structure. Since then the drive for insulation has shifted to whole house re-winterizing and more training and occasionally certification for contractors. The objective was to train the industry to seal first, then ventilate and finally insulate older homes. Over the years the financial aid programs grew in sophistication as preserving the housing stock and saving energy have become national priorities. Some programs were designed to help new products or industries to develop, as with solar energy subsidies and subsidies for high efficiency windows. In the year 2000 we can say that the Canadian housing stock has greatly improved from an energy consumption point of view. But there is still room for improvement. Unfortunately, with the sense of a national emergency past us, there are not many financial incentives left. But keep your eyes open as certain problems or local utility demand side management objectives may present new opportunities. Here is an overview of the types of programs we have had in the past:

Energy saving programs: -- These programs were designed specifically to save energy and could come back with our international obligations to reduce greenhouse gasses. They helped to upgrade sealing, ventilation efficiency, insulation, windows and doors. -- Occasionally a specific region will offer subsidies to get "off-oil" or "off-electricity". Make sure it makes sense for you before buying in.

Rehabilitation programs: -- These are designed to upgrade existing housing through structural and aesthetic renovations for specific target groups. They can be used in combination with energy saving programs. There is a federal program, most provinces have programs and most large municipalities have programs aimed at specific neighborhoods. Your house may qualify for all three.

Types of money: -- Outright grants. -- Matching grants: they pay 50 percent of cost up to some maximum. -- Low or no-interest loans: usually through the power companies. -- Loans with forgivable amounts: if you fulfill certain conditions, part of the loan is forgotten. -- One-time offers: you can usually only apply for a grant or loan once -- if you are eligible for \$800 and you only ask for \$100, the other \$700 is lost. -- Some programs require that you obtain others first. The provinces would rather that you spend federal money.

The catches: -- Most money is taxable and often there are riders requiring more work than you had planned to do. This can make a grant a net loser for you. Grants for houses are generally designed to help low income (and low tax bracket) individuals. Grants designed to help industries or utilities are generally more widely useful.

Where to look: -- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. Most of the still functioning grants come from CMHC and are aimed at special target groups: handicap, low income, historical buildings. -- Natural Resources Canada. They used to do a lot but don't have much of a budget any more although climate change obligations may change that. -- Provincial energy and housing departments. I haven't seen much activity here recently. -- Municipal housing departments. They often administer CMHC programs. -- Provincial power corporations. Demand side management strategies will create occasional specifically local programs. Recently Hydro Quebec installed thousands of quality electronic thermostats free, then continues to offer them at a good price. BC hydro paid people to get on electricity, then turned around and paid them to get off electricity. Read the literature with your monthly utility bills, but judge the offers carefully to see if it helps you as well as the utility.

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