

## RI Stimulus Advisors Get Down To Work

By Peter Lord  
Journal Environment Writer

PROVIDENCE — Leaders of a new team of state officials charged with finding ways to spend \$58 million in federal stimulus money for energy projects laid out broad goals to a packed State Department of Health auditorium of local officials, business people and environmental advocates Monday night.

Details are still thin, they said, but when they do come, it will be very fast.

The state has to present a draft spending plan by Tuesday and a final plan by June 17 to the federal government, said Jeffrey R. Seemann, dean of the College of Environment and Life Sciences at the University of Rhode Island, who is co-chairing the team with Andrew Dzykewicz, commissioner of the state Office of Energy Resources.

Seemann, who will be leaving URI July 1 for Texas A&M University, said the team wants the planning process to be transparent and full of public input while it necessarily also has to be on an “extraordinarily tight timetable.”

All of the energy team’s work and reports will be made available, he said, by going to a new state Web site.

While many communities have already made proposals for stimulus funding, Seemann said that when it comes to energy projects, “Everyone will be given a new starting line that is equal and clear.”

With \$34.5 million of the energy money already earmarked for home-weatherization programs or existing state and municipal energy programs, the team said it is focusing on how to spend the remaining \$23.5 million.

The three top goals, according to Seemann and policy official Kenneth Payne, are to create jobs, reduce the state’s energy costs and create environmental benefits.

To help decide how to spend the money, Payne said the team is looking at where Rhode Island is now, and where it is going.

The state has the lowest per-capita energy costs in the nation, he said, because it has so little heavy industry and relatively little demand for air conditioning.

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On the other hand, the state is fourth-highest when it comes to the costs of energy, largely because it imports all of its prime fuels — heating oil and natural gas.

Some 33 percent of Rhode Island's energy use is residential, 30 percent is for transportation and 25 percent is for commercial buildings.

Those facts, along with the state's old housing stock, suggest energy-savings efforts should be focused on houses and transportation, Payne said.

The team was peppered with questions and suggestions from those who filled the auditorium.

One "taxpayer" asked the team to not act in ways that left the state with budget increases.

Others raised questions about funding solar panels, providing equity to all Rhode Islanders, upgrading the state staff to handle the funding crunch and doing more to inform the public about available bus service.

One person asked why the experts on the team were volunteering their time if their work would only be advisory to Governor Carcieri.

"We wouldn't have done this if we didn't think we could be appropriately influential," said Seemann. "This will be an open, transparent and thoughtful process."

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