

Solutions for Energy Efficiency in Existing Austin Homes

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Objective

Present options for consideration by the Energy Efficiency and Retrofit Task Force that achieve the dual goals of improving the energy efficiency of existing homes in Austin while maintaining affordability of homes in the city.

Strengthen Incentives

Currently, the City of Austin provides various incentives to help Austinites make their homes more energy efficient, mostly offered on a one-time basis as rebates. The task force and city should examine offering annual rewards for energy efficiency improvements through a series of options such as: local homestead exemptions, sale tax exemptions and an expansion of the Austin Energy rebate and 0% fixed-interest loan program. Not only would this program increase the number of participants, it would put more money into the pockets of those already focused on efficiency and encourage them to go even further in their efforts to care for our environment and reduce our over-burdening reliance on energy.

The City of Austin and Austin Energy already have the initial framework program in place through which this could be implemented (the “Home Performance with Energy Star” program) and two sections of the Texas Constitution allow for such a local option homestead exemptions (Article VIII, Section 1-g; Article VIII, Section 1-l). Both incentives enable a homeowner to choose the best option, and the loan program could be reserved for low-income and first-time homeowners. Such incentives would allow the City of Austin to promote energy efficiency in a positive manner and be recognized among the citizenry as a leader and champion for the environment and housing affordability.

Austin Energy and the Austin Board of REALTORS®: Partners in Energy Efficiency

The Austin Board of REALTORS® (ABoR) is Austin’s largest local trade association comprised of 9,000 REALTORS® who conduct 25,000 real estate transactions per year in the Austin area. These 25,000 closings offer an excellent opportunity to educate Austin homeowners about efficiency and encourage them to take advantage of the many programs available to them.

Beyond closings, REALTORS® interact with their past, present and future clients throughout the year on renovations, questions about property taxes and a myriad of other issues. Through these trusted relationships, our REALTOR® members can help their clients learn about and take advantage of the many opportunities available to make Austin homes more energy efficient.

Specifically, such a program could include:

- Creation and promotion of a co-branded campaign with the City of Austin and the Austin Board of REALTORS® that promotes energy efficiency for existing homes;
- Creation of a set of energy efficiency standards that designate a home as “Austin

Energy Recommended” to be promoted on “For Sale” signs and in other promotional materials, including the Multiple Listing Service (MLS);

- Creation and promotion of a “Green REALTOR®” designation that identifies a REALTOR® as particularly knowledgeable about environmental issues (including class instruction collaboratively developed by the City of Austin and ABoR);
- Creation of a Green Living Packet that REALTORS® would provide to clients at closings that includes information about Austin Energy’s efficiency programs, rebates and tax exemptions, with particular focus on encouraging Austinites to schedule a free energy audit of their new home;
- Addition of a “Green Living” page to AustinHomeSearch.com (which receives 70,000 unique visitors each month) educating homebuyers and sellers about the many ways they can make their homes and lifestyles more environmentally friendly;
- Introduction of an energy audit at the sale of the property;
- Addition of an addendum to ABoR’s Sellers Disclosure Form providing space to disclose the findings of the energy audits; and
- Other ideas for promoting green living in Austin, such as an Austin Energy booth at Realty Round Up (ABoR’s annual convention that draws upwards of 3,000 attendees each year).

Summary

Austinites are independent free thinkers, which is how we’ve become leaders in protecting the environment. A voluntary program that rewards Austinites in a meaningful way for making good decisions about energy efficiency is the right way to build long-lasting support. The Austin Board of REALTORS® would be excited to mobilize its 9,000 members for this initiative and work hand-in-hand with the City of Austin to promote energy efficiency in our city.