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Nevada urged to boost energy efficiency in construction

Adopting better standards could save state \$1.4 billion, study says

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Nevadans would save \$1.4 billion by 2020 if the state adopted higher minimum standards for energy efficiency and better promoted energy conservation in new construction, according to a study announced Thursday.

The report from the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project of Boulder, Colo., reviewed construction practices in Nevada and five other states in the region.

"In terms of energy (building) codes, Nevada is lagging many other states and is not in the top half nationally," said Howard Geller, who co-authored the report with Larry Kinney.

Geller complimented Nevada's voluntary programs that promote energy conservation in new buildings and homes, but he noted that the state, its key cities and counties have yet to adopt the International Energy Conservation Code. The international code has the most stringent provisions setting minimum standards for energy efficiency in building.

The Nevada Legislature last approved an update in building energy efficiency standards in 1985, said David McNeil, state energy program manager.

"The energy portion of building codes should be updated. They are out of date at the state level and the local level in Nevada," Geller said.

"There's still a lot more progress that could be made with the carrot, but the stick is weak," Geller said.

"There's definitely some high-efficiency homes and commercial buildings going in," Geller said. "Not every home and commercial building today is wasteful, but most are."

The initial cost of energy conservation measures exceeds that of standard construction costs, he said, but owners can recover the cost through power savings in several years and enjoy savings for another 30 years. In addition to saving money, energy conservation reduces water consumption and pollution from power generation, he said.

Geller likes some of the energy conservation programs that Nevada Power Co. of Las Vegas and Sierra Pacific Power Co. of Reno adopted but he recommended the utilities provide energy conservation expertise to commercial building developers and financial incentives for exceeding minimum energy efficiency requirements.

McNeil said voluntary energy conservation programs provide the best protection for home buyers.

Understaffed building inspection departments focus mostly on safety factors, not energy conservation improvements, he said.

A number of homes qualify for federal Energy Star designation, but McNeil said only one in seven homes built is inspected for compliance under the Energy Star program. He recommends Masco Corp.'s voluntary Environments for Living home program, which requires inspections of each house. Builders participating in this program guarantee heating and cooling bills won't exceed a maximum amount.