

Sarbanes embraces energy saving

Council president candidate says proposal will trim utility bills while creating jobs

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SUN REPORTER

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED JUNE 11, 2007

Michael Sarbanes, a candidate for City Council president, plans to unveil a proposal today that he says would promote energy-efficiency measures to help residents reduce the impact of higher electricity rates, while also creating jobs.

Sarbanes, a longtime community activist making his first run for public office, was to announce his proposal this morning, followed by a demonstration of an energy audit at a private residence.

The proposal would encourage people to conduct an energy-efficiency audit on their homes, identifying passages where air escapes and targeting areas for sealing and insulation. That - combined with painting roofs with an aluminum coating - could reduce home-energy bills by one-third to one-half for work that costs about \$4,200, said Sarbanes.

"Rather than everybody paying BGE all this extra money, it would make more sense to spend the money to actually make the house more energy-efficient," said Sarbanes.

Frank Lee, director of energy efficiency of Baltimore-based TerraLogos, which conducts energy-efficiency audits of homes, said costs vary widely - from as little as several thousand dollars, to up to \$10,000 to thoroughly insulate a large, older house. Lee was consulted by Sarbanes on the plan.

The proposal would require the cooperation of a number of organizations, and possibly even bring on Baltimore Gas and Electric Co. as a funding partner.

Sarbanes said existing nonprofits that focus on vocational and construction skills could easily include energy-efficiency work as part of their programs. To fund the program, the city could look to current federal and local home programs that give homeowners low-interest loans for similar work - or BGE could finance the program with a 30-year loan program, Sarbanes said.

"This is an opportunity for Baltimore to get at the front edge of a new industry that can create a lot of jobs and to get ahead of a problem that's going to put a real strain on a lot of families with these higher BGE rates," said Sarbanes.

Linda Foy, a spokesperson for BGE, would not comment specifically on Sarbanes' proposal. But Foy said in January that the company submitted to state regulators a "Smart Energy Savers Program" with three components, two of which have been approved. The

third, which is still pending, would give customers rebates for purchasing energy-efficient appliances and would offer home audits to show ways to make homes more energy-efficient.

Electricity rates became a hot political topic in last year's gubernatorial election and remain a focus of voters and candidates running in this year's city races, particularly in the mayoral election.

Maryland's five-member Public Service Commission approved last month a 50 percent increase in electricity rates for BGE customers. Of BGE's 1.1 million customers, more than 277,000 are in Baltimore.

State regulators gave customers the option of paying the full increase starting June 1 or phasing in the higher costs starting in January.

Sarbanes said his plan focuses on what residents can control rather than what they can't: regulation of the electric industry.

"This is focused on the possibility of the future for employment and for more energy-efficient homes, as opposed to focusing on the past and whether deregulation is a good idea, which is the discussion everyone's continuing to have, but it's not actually solving people's problems," said Sarbanes.

Lee, of TerraLogos, said the average older house circulates air every hour or less. A house that is properly sealed, on the other hand, circulates air every three hours, said Lee.

Lee said proper sealing and better insulation could save up to one-third on an electric bill, depending on the house. Replacing old furnaces or heat pumps will increase savings even more. "Not every house has dramatic defects, but every house has opportunities to tighten up in some ways," said Lee.

Brad Rogers, CEO of Baltimore Green Construction, a company specializing in environmentally sensitive construction, confirmed that retrofitting a house will save between 30 percent and 50 percent on home energy bills.

"We use 30 to 50 percent as a rule of thumb," said Rogers, who was also consulted by Sarbanes. "But of course, once you get into the technical details of it, a lot of it is specific to the nature of the house, when it was built, how it was built - there are lots and lots of variables."

The policy proposal by Sarbanes is his first since his announcement last month that he is running for council president. Sarbanes, who served as the executive director of the Citizens Planning and Housing Association and as an attorney with the Community Law Center, is running for the four-year term in the Sept. 11 Democratic primary.

He faces competition from current City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake, who was elected to the position by council members in January, and City Councilman Kenneth N. Harris Sr.

Harris said he is a co-sponsor of a bill introduced by Councilwoman Belinda Conaway last month that urges the governor to convene a special session of the Maryland General Assembly to address the increase in energy rates.

Shaun Ademec, a spokesman for Rawlings-Blake, said she has talked to the governor about providing more state funding for assistance and to the mayor about getting the state to intervene.

Additionally, he said, Rawlings-Blake is "constantly pushing for neighborhood revitalization which makes the economy stronger, which allows for people to have a stronger base so expensive energy bills aren't as much of a burden."

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