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## Montgomery Aims to Make Green Homes Mandatory

By Ann E. Marimow  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
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New homes built in [Montgomery County](#) would have to meet federal energy efficiency standards under innovative legislation approved yesterday by the County Council over the objections of builders who said that the mandate would drive up costs for consumers.



The measure, meant to reduce energy consumption by 15 to 30 percent, is part of a far-reaching environmental initiative. It includes property tax credits for residents who switch to renewable energy, a requirement that residents disclose utility costs when they sell a home and a plan to get county officials to trade in their government-issued sport-utility vehicles.

"We are attacking literally every source of greenhouse gas that exists and ensuring that our county and our citizens use less energy," said council member [Roger Berliner](#) (D-Potomac-Bethesda), lead sponsor of the measures and an energy lawyer.

Developers in the Washington region have been voluntarily building homes with energy-efficient appliances and heating and cooling systems. But Montgomery officials said the county would become the first in the country to require that new single-family homes and townhouses meet Energy Star standards created by the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) to encourage the use of energy-efficient windows, tightly sealed structures and effective insulation. Oregon, a Dallas suburb and Gaithersburg have similar programs.

Other jurisdictions in the region have tackled pieces of Montgomery's energy package, but none has taken on so many issues at once. [Arlington County](#) fuels its diesel vehicles with biodiesel, almost 10 percent of [Fairfax County](#)'s employees participate in a telecommuting program and [Howard County](#) provides tax credits to homeowners who install solar or geothermal heating systems.

"Montgomery County is definitely on the leading edge," said Stuart Freudberg, director of environmental programs for the [Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments](#).

A spokesman for County Executive [Isiah Leggett](#) (D) said he is "fully supportive" and intends to sign the seven-bill package.

Homes that meet the EPA standards would use 15 to 30 percent less energy than those built under Montgomery's current guidelines, county analysts say. To comply, homes would have to be certified through an independent review; builders who do not comply would be fined an amount to be determined through regulations.

Depending on the size of the home, analysts and developers estimate that construction costs would increase \$2,000 to \$20,000. For an \$800,000 home -- the average price for new residential construction -

- Berliner said that an additional \$10,000 would increase the overall cost by about 1.25 percent.

In a compromise designed to win support from his colleagues, Berliner agreed yesterday to delay the home-building requirements, which were to take effect in January, for one year. He also offered what he called an "off ramp," allowing the council to choose an alternative if a working group appointed by Leggett comes up with a less costly plan that offers comparable results.

Although they voted in favor of the measure, which was approved unanimously, council members [Nancy Floreen](#) (D-At Large), [Michael Knapp](#) (D-Upcounty) and [George L. Leventhal \(D-At Large\)](#) expressed concern about piling costs on the development industry after the council doubled taxes on home builders last year, and about passing those costs on to residents.

[Raquel Montenegro](#), a lobbyist for the [Maryland-National Capital Building Industry Association](#), said her members "are not opposed to better building; we're opposed to imposing a mandate that the market is unwilling to pay for."

In response to questions from the building industry, EPA's Energy Star residential branch chief, [David Lee](#), said in a letter that the agency does not advocate putting its standards into law and suggests that local and state governments "consider alternative, more market based solutions to encourage construction of Energy Star qualified homes."

Last year, Montgomery committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions 80 percent by 2050, becoming one of the [Sierra Club's](#) Cool Counties, a group that includes Fairfax and Arlington. David Hauck, chairman of the Sierra Club's Montgomery County Group, said the legislation approved yesterday will help Montgomery begin to meet its commitment.

The county would provide a property tax credit of as much as \$250 a year for residents who retrofit their homes with conservation devices, such as solar heating systems. Under another measure, homeowners would be required to provide electric, gas and oil bills from the previous 12 months before signing a contract for the sale of a house.

County government would do its part by developing a telecommuting program for employees, using biofuels for all diesel vehicles and increasing fuel-efficiency standards for its fleet of 1,430 cars, 286 SUVs, 252 vans and 168 pickup trucks.

An annual count of the government's SUVs would be required to determine which employees could use a more efficient vehicle. Leggett rides in a flex-fuel [Chevrolet Suburban](#) powered by a mix of ethanol and gas, which reduces carbon emissions and other pollutants.

"If there's a way to get the county executive around the county with a different vehicle, we'll certainly be looking into that," spokesman [Patrick Lacefield](#) said.

As the council copes with a \$297 million budget shortfall and considers raising taxes and trimming services, some members questioned the estimated \$1.5 million cost to administer the new initiatives. But, Leventhal said, "the costs of climate change are going to be far, far more costly."

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