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Energy Smart Receives 3-Year Funding Through Xcel Energy

Renewed funding will allow program to help more Minnesota businesses save money through energy efficiency.

ST. PAUL, Minnesota -- Energy Smart, a one-year-old program helping Minnesota businesses take advantage of rebates and other financial incentives for becoming more energy efficient, is receiving additional funding through Xcel Energy to continue its work for another three years.

The funding plan was recently approved by the Minnesota Office of Energy Security and took effect Jan. 1.

Energy Smart, run through the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce's Waste Wise program, started as a pilot in 2008. Its first year was funded through four investor-owned utilities, including Xcel Energy. Continued funding by Xcel Energy will allow Energy Smart to assist a far greater number of businesses that need help navigating the web of energy-efficiency incentives, such as rebates, low-interest loans and grants, available to them. Energy Smart provides its assistance to Minnesota businesses at no charge, regardless of energy utility.

"Saving energy is smart business," said Mark Blaiser, executive director of Minnesota Waste Wise and Energy Smart. "Our team is helping small and midsize businesses that are overworked and understaffed save time and money."

Energy Smart directly contacted more than 5,000 businesses, most of which were not aware of the opportunities for energy cost-savings. Program staff visited about 150 Minnesota businesses in its pilot year, evaluating operations and recommending steps for savings.

Energy Smart also hosts educational workshops on energy efficiency and works with economic development and business-networking groups across the state to help mobilize business communities toward energy-efficiency goals.

One business it helped was Bernick's Beverages & Vending, a St. Cloud-based beverage provider with six facilities. Minnesota Chamber of Commerce member Jason Bernick asked for Energy Smart's help in evaluating energy usage at his company's Waite Park warehouse. Energy Smart lined up an audit, and Bernick's eventually replaced 500 lights with high-efficient T-8 bulbs. The company expects to save $80,000 annually on its electric bills and recoup the investment in one year, thanks to energy savings and a lighting rebate from Xcel Energy.

"Bernick's appreciates the expertise that Energy Smart brings to the table," says Bernick. "It's partnerships like this that not only save on expenses for our company but also reduces demand on power plants for a 'greener' environment."

In a letter of support to the OES, Suzanne Doyle, manager of Xcel Energy's DSM Regulatory Strategy & Planning, said Energy Smart had access to a broad audience of business owners, including Minnesota Chamber of Commerce members. "We are appreciative of the Chamber's efforts to work with us to promote an impactful energy efficiency message and help us reach our conservation goals while keeping budgets reasonable," she wrote.

Energy Smart is seeking additional funding from the rest of the state's energy utilities to reflect its statewide service.

Energy Smart also recently launched a blog with energy-efficiency tips, resources, and news and information on financing opportunities for businesses. Read the blog at www.mnenergysmart.com/blog or check out Energy Smart on Twitter at www.twitter.com/mnenergysmart.

"Energy Smart is helping businesses save money in a tough economy," said Blaiser. "And helping the state meet its mandated energy conservation goals."

For further information about the program, businesses may contact Jill Curran, Energy Smart program manager, at (651) 292-4653 or jcurran@mnchamber.com.