

Drive on to clear air in smoky Oakridge

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OAKRIDGE - Tired of being blamed for Lane County's poor showing in air-quality rankings, this community is lighting a fire under efforts to curb the wood smoke curling out of its residents' chimneys.

In conjunction with the Lane Regional Air Pollution Authority, the city on Friday launched a "Warm Homes, Clean Air Project."

"You get tired of the bad publicity saying Oakridge is the black eye of Lane County," Mayor Sue Bond said. "Yes, we do have an air quality problem, but we're trying hard to work on it."

The American Lung Association last winter named Eugene-Springfield as the fifth-worst urban area in the country for short-term pollution caused by tiny, airborne particles. It also ranked Lane County the seventh-worst county in the nation for short-term particulate air pollution from 1999 to 2002. In response to public expressions of disbelief about those rankings, LRAPA officials said the regionwide ranking was skewed by heavy particulate counts in Oakridge.

In a meeting Friday morning, Oakridge leaders hosted officials from seven agencies: the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Office; the state's Department of Energy and its Housing and Community Services Program; Lane County's Human Services Commission and Housing and Community Services Agency; St. Vincent de Paul; and Lane Electric Cooperative.

LRAPA administration and planning manager Sharon Banks began the meeting with a summary of the challenges the Cascade foothills city faces in reducing particulate pollution.

"The Oakridge topography traps particulates, especially during winter inversions," she said of the phenomenon in which warmer air in the upper atmosphere traps smoke particles in cold air closer to the ground. "Burning wood is an economical way to heat homes, especially in forested communities. Many Oakridge citizens cannot afford to pay for heat."

The city already had responded to its particulate problem by adopting a strict ordinance that requires noncertified wood stoves to be removed during the escrow phase of a home sale.

But about 60 percent of the city's residents still burn wood daily during the winter months, Banks said, and wood stoves are the only source of heat for 30 percent.

The fine particles found in smoke penetrate deeper into the lungs than larger particles such as dust, she added, aggravating serious health problems such as asthma and emphysema.

LRAPA officials said that Oakridge exceeded the American Lung Association's 40 microgram benchmark for unhealthy air on 20 days in 2000, 25 days in 2001 and 17 days in 2002. By comparison, Eugene-Springfield exceeded 40 micrograms on just six days in 2000 and 2001, and on seven days in 2002.

The Oakridge fine particulate levels are still below EPA standards, but the federal agency is expected to adopt stricter standards by the end of 2006, Banks said.

"Simply imposing regulations would, in a sense, force residents to choose between warmth and clean air," she said.

Participants in the Friday meeting outlined a wide array of assistance and incentives to help Oakridge residents improve the efficiency and safety of their wood stoves or to reduce their use through weatherization or installation of other heat sources.

Options include outright grants for the city's many elderly and low-income residents, as well as low-interest loans of up to \$25,000 - some of which require no repayment until a home is sold or no longer owner-occupied.

Grants and loans are available to renters and owners of mobile homes and multi-family housing units as well as traditional single-family dwellings, they said.

But making residents aware of what's available - and persuading them to take advantage of the assistance - remains a big challenge, said Craig Satein of the Housing and Community Services Agency of Lane County.

"We have a lot of folks that we know are eligible who do not make application," he said.

Some residents may fear taking advantage of weatherization or heating system improvement programs would require them to bring all other aspects of their homes up to current code, several participants said.

While such improvements will be done to code, "we can operate within narrow boundaries to keep people safer and warmer in their homes without changing the whole house," Satein said.

There is also a pride factor that keeps some residents from asking for assistance, said Richard Dannemiller, a wood stove inspector for St. Vincent de Paul who helps low-income residents access the equity in their own homes to replace uncertified or improperly installed wood stoves.

"Particularly in rural areas, people are reluctant to take anything they perceive as a handout," he said. "We need to convince them that what they're actually doing is helping their community to create a better airshed."

John Murray of Lane Electric Cooperative said he believes many area residents not only recognize air quality as a serious concern, but have other reasons to reduce their dependence on wood stoves.

"The average age level here is getting to the point that people are no longer able to split and carry wood, yet they're not able to afford their electric bills," he said.