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County affordable housing program will offer grants up to \$50K for improvements

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May 9, 2024



A new Santa Fe County affordable housing program will offer low- and moderate-income homeowners in unincorporated areas of the county grants of up to \$50,000 for improvement projects.

Matt Dahlseid/New Mexican file photo

A growing number of homeowners in communities south of Santa Fe began testing their water wells and installing filters after well testing conducted by Santa Fe County in November found unsafe levels of toxic substances.

“The people who can afford it are doing what they need to do now,” said Phyllis Baca, a longtime area resident who has become a grassroots advocate for her neighbors in La Cienega and La Cieneguilla. “They’re spending thousands of dollars if they have to.”

But many residents don’t have thousands of dollars to spend on the effort. “So there are some people who are still drinking the water, but they’re concerned about it,” Baca said.

She and other community advocates are eagerly awaiting the rollout of the county’s new affordable housing program, which will provide grants for income-eligible homeowners to make a range of improvements to their properties — including testing and filtering their water.

“I’m just calling everybody saying, ‘This is what’s coming out. Tell everybody you know,’ ” Baca said. “Word of mouth can spread quickly if there’s money available.”

The Home Rehabilitation and Energy Efficiency Program will allow low- to moderate-income homeowners and some landlords in unincorporated areas of the county to apply for grants of up to \$50,000 to cover all or part of the costs of home projects. In addition to testing and filtering water, projects the grants can pay for include roof, stucco and window replacements; energy efficiency upgrades, such as installation of solar panels and smart thermostats; hazard remediation projects like asbestos and mold abatement; Americans with Disability Act modifications; and residential connections to public utilities.

County staff, still developing some components of the program, aim to roll out online grant applications and a public outreach campaign by the end of May, housing operations director Jordan Barelasaid. He hopes to award grants to homeowners as soon as June.

For the current fiscal year, which ends July 1, the county has about \$1 million in its affordable housing fund for home rehabilitation grants, Barela said. The fund receives revenue from fees developers pay in lieu of building affordable units.

The county also will apply for state and federal housing and sustainability grants that could bolster the fund, Community Development Director Paul Olafson said.

“We’ll try to process as many of these as we can within the allowable budget for the fiscal year and then bring where we are at with the program back to the [County Commission] to determine, is there additional funding needed? What is the real community need for this?” Barela said.

Concerns about contamination of groundwater in La Cienega and La Cieneguilla from perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances — better known as PFAS or “forever chemicals” — accelerated the rollout of the grants, Barela told county commissioners, who had approved the program in late April.

State, county and federal officials say a likely source of the contamination is a New Mexico National Guard site at the Santa Fe Regional Airport, where foam containing PFAS was long used in firefighter training and fire suppression.

Conversations about the grant program started back in 2022, when county staff and a 25-member advisory committee began an update of the county’s Affordable Housing Plan, adopted in 2009.

The updated plan, approved in July, recommended the county create incentives for developers to build more affordable housing units and help property owners maintain and rehabilitate their homes. Based on U.S. census data, the 2023 plan estimated at least 300 units in Santa Fe County need repairs.

Barela has observed “a significant need” for the rehabilitation grants, particularly among rural homeowners and elderly residents on restricted incomes, he said.

The county has offered a roof rehabilitation assistance program since 2009, and many people seeking roof repairs have “needed a lot more” help, so the county sought to expand its aid, he said.

A provision in the New Mexico Constitution known as the anti-donation clause prohibits local governments from giving money to private individuals; however, the Affordable Housing Act passed by state lawmakers in 2004 provides an exception for affordable housing, as long as government “donations” meet a need outlined in a local affordable housing plan.

Any homeowner in Santa Fe County at or below the area’s median income will be eligible for a home rehabilitation grant. A single homeowner earning up to \$64,100 per year, a two-person household earning up to \$73,200, or a four-person household earning up to \$91,500 would qualify for the county grants.

Landlords leasing a home to tenants who receive rental assistance from a local, state or federal housing program for households at or below 80% of the area's median income will also be eligible for the grants.

Barela said he expects to see "significant" interest in the program when applications open, and the grants will be awarded on a first-come, first-served basis as long as funds are available.

The costs for well water testing and treatment are nowhere near \$50,000, but homeowners seeking safe water might qualify for additional repairs or energy efficiency upgrades through the program, he said. "That's where we're wondering, what's going to be the final grant point for a lot of these initial applications? Is it going to be more towards the \$10,000 range or are we going to be putting out full \$50,000 grants?"

County commissioners have suggested they might push for prioritization of certain rehabilitation projects in the future. Commissioners Justin Greene and Camilla Bustamante have said the county should prioritize upgrades ensuring residents' health and safety.

Barela expects the program to evolve.

"To my knowledge, there is not a rehabilitation program in the state of New Mexico that is as comprehensive as this," he told commissioners, "so, one, it's a good thing, because it meets a wide array of community needs, but two, I think there will be a learning process."

In an interview, Barela said Santa Fe County uniquely consolidated various resources and streamlined programs to make them more accessible to residents.

"If we're going out to do an assessment on home, and there are a plethora of issues associated with that home, we do not want to be sending people to multiple programs and multiple applications ... to try to get those addressed," he said. "Our intent was, let's make something broad enough where we can really have an impact and make it easy on applicants trying to access resources to have a one-stop shop" for assistance.

Uses for Home Rehabilitation and Energy Efficiency Program grants

People can apply for county grants up to \$50,000 to cover the full or partial cost of the following:

- Exterior home rehabilitation projects, including roof, stucco and window replacement.

- Energy efficiency upgrades, including the installation of solar panels; high-efficiency furnaces and water heaters; low-flow toilets, aerators, faucets and fixtures; and smart thermostats.
- Home hazard mitigation projects, including the abatement of lead-based paint, asbestos, mold and groundwater contaminants.
- Home modifications for people with disabilities.
- Residential connection to public utilities.

Takeaways

- A new Santa Fe County housing rehabilitation program will provide up to \$50,000 grants to low- and moderate-income homeowners and some landlords for home improvement projects.
- Grant applications are expected to open by the end of May and will be awarded on a first come, first served basis as long as funds allow.
- For now, the program has a \$1 million budget — the amount of money in a county affordable housing fund that receives revenue from fees developers pay in lieu of building affordable units.

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