

Leominster woman tapped for energy task force

By Dan Magazu
Sentinel & Enterprise

Article Launched:07/12/2008 06:01:20 AM EDT

LEOMINSTER -- A Leominster woman has been invited to serve on a state task force hoping to craft a strategy for dramatically reducing the energy consumed by residential and commercial buildings in the Commonwealth.

Michelle Roberts, principal and CEO of Ecohealth Homes of Boston, was asked last week to join Gov. Deval Patrick's Massachusetts Zero Net Energy Building task force.

The National Association of Home Builders recommended her for the task force, Roberts said.

"There's about 60 of us in the group," Roberts said over the phone during a break in the task force's first meeting Thursday. "It's a really dynamic group. I was sitting next to some big wigs from N-STAR and the Department of Energy."

The purpose of the task force is to develop a plan that will make it easier for the public and private sector to develop super-efficient green buildings, according to David Cash of the state Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs.

"We're hoping for a really far-reaching strategy that will create energy cost benefits, environmental benefits and a whole range of new green jobs," Cash said.

Roberts was chosen for the group because of the work she has done designing eco-friendly homes, Cash said.

"The task force by design has a broad range of experts that we're trying to tap into," Cash said. "It ranges from engineers, to utility professionals, to clean energy experts. The work Michelle has done designing eco-friendly buildings is the kind we're very interested in."

Roberts has lived on Johnny Appleseed Lane since 1998. She has two children that attend Southeast Elementary School.

"I'm thrilled to be a part of the task force," Roberts said. "The group has some really ambitious goals."

Roberts is also the founder of Chatham Hill Residential Design and Build, LLC, a woman-owned residential design and build consulting firm.

She started in the industry shortly after obtaining a degree in women's studies from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst in 1990. Roberts said she also studied residential design at Mount Ida College's School of Design in Newton.

The ultimate goal of the task force is to create a strategy that will allow for the universal adoption of zero net energy buildings in Massachusetts by 2030, Cash said.

Zero net energy buildings meet all or nearly all of their energy needs through on-site renewable energy sources, such as solar power. Such buildings have the dual benefit of saving people money on energy costs and helping the environment, Roberts said.

The group is also exploring how older buildings can be retrofitted to be more energy efficient, something that Roberts said is important for Leominster.

"Leominster has a very old housing stock," Robert said. "Older homes tend to be the least energy efficient and

with costs continuing to rise, a lot of people are getting hit hard."

Nationally, buildings account for 40 percent of overall energy use, two-thirds of total electricity consumption, and half of all greenhouse gas emissions, Cash said.

The cost of new green technology is the biggest obstacle right now, Roberts said.

"There are a lot of questions that need to be answered," Roberts said. "Is it economically feasible? There may be something that can be done by offering people incentives for building green or retrofitting their property."

Among the short term goals of the task force is laying out an agenda to develop specifications for the first state-owned zero net energy building by the start of 2010, Cash said.

The task force is divided up into sub-groups based on each person's expertise. The entire group will meet just four times between now and March, when a final report will come out.

Gov. Patrick will present the report during the North East Sustainable Energy Association's annual conference in March, Cash said.