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How Mayors Used the Stimulus for Energy Efficiency Projects.

A new survey shows how cities used money from the 2009 stimulus package to invest in energy efficient infrastructure.

A one-time infusion of federal funds five years ago enabled cities across the country to build charging stations for electric vehicles, wind turbines and other energy-efficient infrastructure, according to a new survey conducted by the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

The association examined how cities took advantage of the federal Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant Program, which received \$2.7 billion under the economic stimulus package, officially known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. About half of the money went directly to cities, with an average grant per city of about about \$1 million.

“What the survey shows is that cities made very good use of these funds,” said Shane Bemis, mayor of Gresham, Ore. “[Cities] moved in many new directions in terms of energy and climate.”

The survey went out to nearly 1,400 mayors. Between late November 2013 and mid-January, 204 of them answered questions about the block grant program. Mayors from cities as large as Los Angeles and as small as Redmond, Wash. — population 54,000 — participated in the survey. The sample spanned cities across country, from Fairbanks, Alaska to Tallahassee, Fla.

About 62 percent of respondents said they used the federal funds to invest in new programs that weren’t in their existing climate or energy plans. The report’s authors highlighted the statistic to demonstrate that mayors leveraged federal aid to make new progress on energy efficiency and conservation. “The prevailing view at the time [the stimulus bill passed] was that many cities would simply substitute EECBG dollars for allocated local funding to existing city energy initiatives,” the report said.

The vast majority of mayors (87 percent) said federal funds went to city projects and operations, such as making city-owned buildings more energy efficient and upgrading streetlights. Retrofits of government buildings were the most common use of the funds, though write-in responses detailed a variety of other projects, such as putting a wind turbine on top of a building and buying a solar-powered garbage and recycling container.

Bridgeport, Conn., used about \$70,000 from the grant program to pay for a feasibility study on constructing an anaerobic digester, which recovers methane from food waste and other types of biodegradable material and converts the gas into heat and electricity. Now Anaergia, a biogas energy company, plans to build the digester next to the city’s sewage treatment plant. Currently, Bridgeport pays more than \$2 million a year to haul its sewage to New Haven, where it is burned. The project is currently in a design phase, but eventually the digester could save the city about \$1 million in trucking fees and energy fees, said Bill Finch, the mayor of Bridgeport.

“We’re all trying new things,” said Jim Brainard, mayor of Carmel, Ind., where the federal grant

program paid for replacing almost all the city's streetlights with LED bulbs. "The best ideas are going to be copied and repeated."

On a conference call Feb. 27, Bemis, Brainard and Finch — two Republicans and a Democrat — said the survey results underscore the effectiveness of the grant program and should persuade Congress to allocate more money in the future. Mayors needed to talk with their representatives in Congress and point to specific projects that demonstrate a return on investment, Bemis said. Both Republican mayors stressed that energy efficiency should not be a partisan issue.

Though the mayors pushed a policy agenda that would yield environmental benefits, such as improving water and air quality, they did not mention the phrases "climate change" or "global warming" on the 20-minute call. Instead, they emphasized how mayors could save money through energy efficiency and conservation. "Sometimes it's a little more difficult to talk about climate in different parts of the country," Bemis said. "But it's always open and available to talk about saving money and return on investment."

<http://www.usmayors.org/pressreleases/uploads/2014/0227-report-eebgsurvey.pdf>

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