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North Tipperary to become a leading European light in renewable, efficient energy use

18th October 2007

North Tipperary is set to become a beacon of sustainable energy use in Europe following the awarding of €4.1 million in EU grant-aid to make existing homes in the area more energy efficient, and to develop the renewable energy district heating system at Ireland's first eco-village, in Cloughjordan.

Residents of Toomevara, Borrisokane, Terryglass, Dromineer and Ballingarry, as well as other rural dwellers in the area, will be able to apply to North Tipperary County Council for grants for energy efficient upgrades including roof and wall insulation, energy-efficient windows and state-of-the-art heating controls.

As well as reducing the amount of energy being used in the region, this initiative, known as SERVE, aims to promote renewable energy systems, in particular the pioneering district heating system at the Cloughjordan eco-village. This will be powered by state-of-the-art wood-chip boilers and solar panels. Each home in the eco-village will be metered to measure energy use, and the whole process will be closely monitored, so that other communities can learn from the experience.

The project also aims to show-case the installation of a small number of micro-wind turbines at particular locations in the region, along with researching how the area's future electricity needs can be met from renewables.

The energy project is being spearheaded by a consortium of partners including North Tipperary County Council, the Cloughjordan eco-village, Irish renewable energy equipment suppliers and international experts, and is being led by Tipperary Institute.

“The concept evolved out of discussions with eco-village members about how their project could be integrated into the wider community, and how the aims of their project promoted beyond their membership,” said Seamus Hoyne, project co-ordinator and lecturer in the rural development department in Tipperary Institute.

“This led to a proposal to the EU which seeks not only to support the development of the eco-village but also, and equally importantly, to improve the energy efficiency of existing towns and villages in the region,” he said.

Already feed-back from local communities about the grant support is very positive, with community leaders confident many people will avail of the opportunity to make their homes more energy-efficient, and thus save on bills.

“We are delighted that an idea which was spawned by the creation of our eco-village is leading to immediate practical benefits for the people of North Tipperary,” said Rónán Kennedy, chairperson of the eco-village development company, Sustainable Projects Ireland Ltd.

“The grant-aiding of our wood and solar-fuelled district heating system is also very welcome,” said Mr Kennedy. “It is an important part of our project, both for individual members who will be able to avail of its renewable energy, and in terms of our village’s educational role in demonstrating sustainable living.”

Construction work at the eco-village, where house sites are still available, started earlier this year.

The SERVE project, which is being funded under the EU Concerto programme, starts in November 2007 and will provide grant support over a three year period. The impact of the project will then be monitored and assessed for two years.

The project will importantly show case technologies which are being supplied by Renewable Energy Management Systems Ltd and Surface Power Ltd, both Irish energy companies. Expertise is also being provided by the Danish Energy Consulting Network; CREA, an international socio-economic research company based in Croatia; Econnect, a UK company specialising in local renewable energy systems, and the CIRCA Group, experts in the administration and management of EU Projects.

The research collated during the five years of the project will allow any lessons learned to be used by other communities in Europe.

North Tipperary County Council has a lead part to play in the project as it will administer the grants support programme for existing buildings.

“We are delighted to be involved in this project as North Tipperary County Council has taken an active role in the promotion and development of sustainable energy,” said Terry O’Niadh, County Manager. “This project is an additional practical example of how we can influence change in our community for the better. This links with our existing work on sustainable energy under the Regional Planning Guidelines and our support of the Tipperary Energy Agency since 1998.”

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For further information please contact:
Seamus Hoyne, Project Co-ordinator,
Tipperary Institute, Nenagh Rd., Thurles, Co. Tipperary
Tel 0504-28114
Email shoyne@tippinst.ie

Further information:

The SERVE project demonstrates sustainable energy use in rural communities. Retrofit work is led by the North Tipperary County Council (NTCC) and new build by the not-for-profit Cloughjordan eco-village, Sustainable Projects Ireland Ltd (SPIL).

SPIL is selling serviced sites in Cloughjordan to its members, who will then build under the control and guidance of the eco-village’s ecological charter. This 132-home project is already under way. Thus, it will act as a flagship for SERVE from the start,

by raising public awareness of energy efficiency and renewable energy systems. This high-profile project has the strong support of the local community and of the local authority.

Under Concerto, the local authority will promote advanced retrofit technology and renewable energy systems, with the aim of reducing heat demand in a cluster of buildings by 40% and doubling the amount of energy from renewable sources. Five hundred buildings will be upgraded, in an area housing 0.1% of Ireland's population. This will ensure national impact. Building owners will use diverse energy efficiency and renewable energy technologies, which will maximize replicability. Performance data will be widely disseminated.

SPIL will promote state-of-the-art technology in new eco-buildings and at a community level. This will include Ireland's first district heating system, a state-of-the-art plant integrating wood-chip boilers with centralised solar panels and a balance between supply and demand. Building types and energy efficiency will be diverse because of the citizen-led mode of development but SPIL will ensure quality control. Smart metering and intensive monitoring will provide detailed performance data.

Major roles for both NTCC and SPIL will entail educating and empowering citizens and distributing Concerto funding to them upon successful completion. This citizen involvement does add to project costs. However, it will effect a long-overdue step change in public awareness of energy efficiency and renewable energy systems in Ireland.

The SERVE consortium teams local actors with EU experts, to facilitate technology transfer and ensure best practice. SERVE may be the first such program targeted at rural areas. It would be widely replicable across the EU.

The SERVE Project is supported under the EU Concerto programme which is funded by the EU Commission under the Framework 6 programme.