

By Susan Smallheer, Rutland Herald

The workers at Jeld-Wen Inc., make insulated fiberglass and steel doors, but they are also paying attention to a vote coming up in Congress on Thursday.

They say they hope the U.S. House of Representatives passes the Home Star Energy Retrofit Act.

The legislation would mean jobs for three important parts of the economy, Rep. Peter F. Welch, D-Vt., told the manufacturing workers: construction, retail and manufacturing. And it would save energy, he said.

"It's a win, win, win," Welch said.

Welch came to the Jeld-Wen plant in North Springfield Industrial Park to drum up support for the bill, of which he is a sponsor.

The bill recently won the endorsement of the House Commerce Committee. It has strong support in the U.S. Senate and President Barack Obama supports the bill.

"He called insulation sexy," the congressman joked.

Welch said the Home Star legislation would help solve several problems: It would save homeowners money on heating and energy bills, it would put thousands of out-of-work construction workers back on a job and it would give a big lift to manufacturers.

The construction trades are enduring a 25 percent unemployment rate.

The congressman said the program would cost about \$6 billion, which he said should come out of undesignated stimulus funds.

He said the bill could create up to 170,000 jobs, save up to \$10 billion in 10 years in energy savings and it would give homeowners "instant rebates" to make necessary improvements to their homes.

Jeld-Wen General Manager Al DiBella said the bill would be good news for the 225 employees at the Springfield and Ludlow plants.

Also on hand Monday was Rick Bibens, owner of Bibens Home Center in Springfield and four Ace Hardware stores in the Burlington region, who said the building materials aspect of his Springfield store was down 20 percent in the recent recession.

Bibens said the "Silver Star" portion of the law would give instant rebates, at the point of purchase, for homeowners. He said he was waiting to hear about the details about how companies like his would be involved in administering such a rebate.

"Housing and remodeling is down," Bibens said while noting that his five hardware stores were doing very well.

"If there's no housing, there's no building materials," he said. "If this is implemented, this will be a slam dunk."

Welch said the bill would come up for a vote on the House floor on Thursday.

Bob Flint, executive director of the Springfield Regional Development Corp., said his 90-year-old father, a contractor, supported the legislation, which would put contractors back to work doing something worthwhile.

"It's not just a grant program," Flint said. "It would put people back to work ... in an activity that makes sense."