

# Green businesses get a new boost

## Nonprofit Northwest Climate Change Center hopes to 'educate public'

[Parker Howell](#)

Staff writer

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A local university professor, a business executive and an environmental group leader are starting a non-profit center to spur Pacific Northwest businesses into adapting to and helping alleviate global climate change.

The Northwest Climate Change Center will seek to help companies and communities develop and execute climate-change plans, drawing on experts in fields such as "green" building, transportation and energy. The brainchild of Washington State University Spokane health policy and administration associate professor Melissa Ahern, PacifiCAD Inc. President and CEO Ron Reed and The Lands Council Executive Director Mike Petersen, the center is another development in a growing local focus on green practices in the face of potentially harmful global warming and scarcity of fossil fuels.

Last month, a group of volunteers from government agencies, area banks and nonprofits announced they would form the Sustainable Local Investments Partnership, to help finance green businesses.

"It's more trying to educate the community in the economic value of doing these things, so that the policy will just follow if the community leads the way," Reed said. "There are enough positives economically for businesses in this area; it saves them money. It's kind of a no-brainer when it's done properly."

Proponents of sustainable building and retrofitting assert businesses may need to spend more upfront, but can save money long-term on reduced utility bills or increased worker productivity. Recent construction at the Saranac Hotel building downtown and the Mountain Gear Inc. headquarters in Spokane Valley incorporates cost-saving techniques, such as recycling runoff and rainwater, using energy-efficient lighting and landscaping with native plants.

Founders first expect the NWCCC to aid The Lands Council in developing a climate change strategy for the city, a project Petersen said will help prepare the center for future work.

The council received a \$10,000 grant from Seattle-based non-profit The Bullitt Foundation to create the action plan, which is a stipulation of Mayor Dennis Hession signing the U.S. Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, Petersen said.

The agreement pledges the city will try to slash its global warming pollution to 7 percent below 1990 levels by 2012.

NWCCC already has federal income tax-exempt status, and founders expect the center to begin operating in coming months.

Businesses will pay a fee for the center's services. PacifiCAD will donate funds, and the Lands Council will offer two AmeriCorps workers and space in the soon-to-be unveiled Saranac Building, said Ahern, who will become the center's director.

University of Washington data predicts a "perfect storm of less snow pack, more droughts in the summer leading to much higher risk and more extensive forest fires," said Petersen.

Businesses have become more receptive to the idea of climate change, Ahern said.

"It's fair to say that there are businesses at this point in time that are taking climate change seriously," she said. "It's not like everyone's in denial about it."

Ahern has a doctorate in economics from Florida State University and has researched global oil depletion. In January, she was appointed to the board of the Spokane County Air Pollution Control Authority — a regulatory agency whose members have debated humans' effect on climate change.

The center is "just another signal" that Washingtonians are ready for a productive response to climate change, said Paul Horton, executive director of Climate Solutions, a Seattle-based non-profit that aims to influence state policy on climate change and promote clean energy. While change has been "slow in coming at the national level," groups have been driving it, Horton said.

He noted almost 700 cities have signed the mayors' agreement.

Ahern and Reed have coordinated conferences in the last two years on green building and the environment. Eventually, the center will offer a Web site as a clearinghouse of sustainability information, Reed said.

PacifiCAD vends computer-aided design software, including new sustainable building tools, Reed said.

"I see us really sort of catalyzing our community to take action that will help the entire community get more resilient when the climate change starts hitting us," Petersen said.