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State grants \$510,000 for ‘zero net energy’ projects in Amherst, Northampton and Easthampton

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The Hitchcock Center for the Environment’s quest to build a new education center on the Hampshire College campus in Amherst is among three projects in the region that received a total of \$510,000 in grants from a new state program to assist development of “zero net energy” buildings and homes.

The new Pathways to Zero program under the direction of the state Department of Energy Resources recently announced \$2.9 million in grants statewide, including \$330,000 to the Hitchcock Center in Amherst; \$156,000 to Transformations Inc., of Townsend, for two planned housing developments at Village Hill Northampton; and \$24,000 to Pioneer Valley Habitat for Humanity to build two new homes on East Street in Easthampton.

While their missions are different, the projects share one thing in common — the buildings will conform to zero net energy building standards that use renewable resources to produce at least as much energy on site as they use over the course of the year. Such buildings are touted as money-savers for owners and good for the environment.

The Hitchcock Center is in the midst of a \$5.8 million capital campaign to construct a larger, more environmentally friendly building on the Hampshire campus off Route 116. Groundbreaking on the 8,500-square-foot environmental education center is expected early next year, with the project scheduled for completion by summer or fall 2016.

The center’s natural ventilation, roof-mounted solar panels and rainwater collection barrels will help it achieve zero net energy and net zero water status. It will also have composting toilets that will not be tied into municipal water and sewer systems. The structure will be built to meet conditions of the Living Building Challenge, described as the most advanced measure of sustainability in the built environment.

Transformations landed two grants for projects at the former state hospital campus in

Northampton. One is for \$136,000 and will be used for a planned 83-home development on a 35-acre site at the far north section of Village Hill. There will be three types of net zero energy homes — 23 single-family, 15 duplexes and a 30-unit cohousing community. The grant is earmarked for the duplexes.

The company also received a \$20,000 grant to help build zero net energy homes on Laurel Street as part of the south campus at Village Hill. Two of those homes are already built, with construction on the other two about to begin.

The homes will include photovoltaic systems on roofs and carports that owners will be required to buy or lease, Transformations President R. Carter Scott told the Gazette in May.

The \$24,000 grant to Pioneer Valley Habitat for Humanity will help it construct two affordable homes in Easthampton that will enable residents to live there with little to no annual utility expenses.

The homes at 246 and 248 East St. are the first zero net energy homes the Pioneer Valley chapter has built and will include solar panels. The homes will also be highly insulated and include energy-efficient heaters and appliances. The homes are expected to be finished late next year.

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