

Agency offers assistance to make homes more energy-efficient

By Hallie Arnold , Freeman staff

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TOWN OF ULSTER - Investing money in energy efficiency can yield returns that far exceed the initial investment, experts say.

But encouraging homeowners to make that up-front investment can be a tough sell, says Patrice Courtney of Mid-Hudson Energy Smart Communities, a program administered by the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority.

Through a variety of low interest loans, discounts, and matching grants, the program helps people make changes to their homes to save energy.

This week, the Rev. James Childs of St. Clara's Church of God in Christ had an energy audit done on his 31-year-old raised ranch home in the town of Ulster to promote these financial assistance programs.

"There are some incentives for people, so it would help people to know about it," Childs said. "The program is pretty broad and can impact a lot of people's lives if they take advantage of it."

Energy auditor Todd Pascarella of Shandaken uses a variety of tests and tools to determine how well a home uses energy. In some cases, it's a matter of simple observation, such as feeling the amount of heat coming off a home furnace.

In the case of Childs' furnace, which is original to the home, Pascarella says a new unit would double the efficiency of the home heating system.

"Based on an observation of its age, and the heat coming off it, I would say it's very inefficient," he said of the existing furnace. "I would rate it at about 50 percent efficiency."

Using a device called a manometer, which measures air pressure and draft, Pascarella can determine the efficiency and safety of the heating system, as well as check how airtight a home is overall.

To do this, a frame with a fabric shroud and high-velocity fan is installed in a doorway, and air is drawn out of the house. In an airtight home, the air pressure should drop to a standard level when vented like this, but in a drafty house, outside air is pulled into the home through cracks and leaks.

"With the house depressurized, it exaggerates all the little air leaks, so now we can go around the house and identify them," Pascarella said.

In Childs' house, for example, Pascarella could feel cold air coming into the house from a switch plate, indicating that some portion of the outer shell of the house is letting in the cold air.

Once an audit determines what can be done to increase a home's efficiency, programs offered by the Energy Research and Development Authority can help homeowners to afford to make the changes.

Income-qualified owners of single- and two-family homes can receive subsidies of up to \$5,000 to fund half the cost of energy-efficiency improvements, while owners of three- and four-family homes can receive up to \$10,000. Income caps range from \$27,664 for a one-person household to \$53,200 for a family of four.

The authority offers loans up to \$20,000 at 4 percentage points less than a bank's going interest rate by making up the difference in interest to the bank, with no income cap. A third option gives homeowners a 10 percent discount on eligible home improvements, up to \$2,000.

"For us in this field, first cost vs. life-cycle cost is a hard sell," said Courtney. "This program really helps."

For more information or to apply for assistance from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, call the agency toll-free at (866) NYSEDA. Information is also available online at www.nyserda.org or www.getenergysmart.org.

ENERGY-SAVING TIPS

There are a number of things you can do in your home to save energy and lower your monthly energy bills during the winter months.

Mid-Hudson Energy Smart Communities, a program of the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, offers the following energy-saving tips for homes and businesses.

- * Insulate. It's important that your home is well-insulated to get the most out of your heating system without wasting energy.
- * Reduce heating costs. Keep your thermostat at 68 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and 60 degrees or lower at night during the winter.
- * Use ceiling fans. During winter, ceiling fans can be set on a low speed to pull warm air down from the ceiling.
- * Let the sun shine in. Keep drapes and shades on south windows open during the day in the winter to let the sunlight in. Keep curtains closed at night to retain indoor heat.
- * Eliminate drafts. Check doors and windows for leaks and caulk and weather-strip problem areas.
- * Conserve power. Turn off lights, computers, televisions and other appliances when not in use. Set your computer to go into sleep mode after 15 minutes of non-use.
- * Buy Energy Star products. When replacing appliances, look for the Energy Star label.
- * Change lightbulbs. Replace incandescent lightbulbs with energy-efficient compact fluorescent bulbs, which use 75 percent less energy and last about 10 times longer.
- * Adjust lighting. Turn off or dim lights when daylight is adequate to meet lighting needs.

* Make sure dishwasher is full. Run the dishwasher only when fully loaded, and let dishes air dry.

* Remove clothes dryer lint. Each time you use the dryer, clean the lint filter. Also, make sure you have a full load of laundry.

* Take short showers. Conserve hot water by taking short showers. Install "low-flow" shower heads.

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