

Turn off, tune down and save up



Want an eco-friendly home in the new economy? The new mandate: Don't buy stuff. Instead, go frugal

By Heidi Kyser

Remember when people showed off their green bona fides by incorporating reclaimed bricks and bamboo floors into their home renovations? One blessing of the recession is that it shifted consumer attention from buying stuff to saving energy - you know, where it should have been to begin with.

"It's great if you're buying recycled carpet or using low VOC (volatile organic compound) paint, but in this economy, hardly anybody is remodeling," says Lance Kirk, a designer with Lucchesi Galati Architects and cofounder of local chapters for both the U.S. Green Building Council and the AIA's Committee on the Environment. "It doesn't make sense to invest a lot of money in a house that has lost half its value, and it makes even less sense if it's leaking hot or cold air into the atmosphere and wasting energy anyway."

If you really want to green up your home, conservation is the place to start. As a bonus, there are loads of free programs, rebates and DIY fixes that will lighten the impact on your wallet, as well as the planet.

Audit? Yes please!

"If somebody were to get serious about energy efficiency, I'd say, 'You should hire a reputable, trained auditing company to do an audit of your home.' Almost every home can benefit from energy efficiency," says Steve Rypka, founder of Green Dream Enterprises and cofounder of Nevada's USGBC chapter.

Easy to say for a guy who operates a small solar plant on the roof of his house. For the rest of us, an energy audit elicits the same emotion as a visit to the proctologist. One way to lessen the pain is by going through HomeFree Nevada (www.homefreenevada.org). That's our state's version of a national home performance program started by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Energy.

At the website, you can sign up for a home performance audit online, or print an application to mail in. HomeFree Nevada suggests three certified contractors, selected from a rotating pool of candidates. The chosen contractor will interview you by phone to assess your situation and goals before setting an audit date. On that day, one or two auditors poke around your house for three to five hours, inspecting heating and cooling equipment, duct systems, lighting and appliances. They'll follow up with a report, complete with recommendations for improvements, cost estimates and a list of contractors.

Paying (or not) to be green

The cost of a comprehensive audit depends on the home's age, design and other factors. A typical price is \$500 to \$700, but HomeFree Nevada includes an incentive that reimburses homeowners up to \$1,000 for the total cost of both the audit and recommended fixes made (if you spend at least \$2,000).

"It's not unusual that the cost of the audit can be recovered in the first year, by information the homeowner is taught by the certified auditor," says Les Lazareck, owner of Home Energy Connection and a certified energy auditor and trainer.

If \$500 still sounds like too much, how about \$0? That's what NV Energy charges customers for its (albeit less

comprehensive) audits, which entails a web-based questionnaire that assesses your current equipment and usage. At the end, you get a pretty thorough understanding of where your energy is going and how much it's costing you, from clothes dryers to water heaters.

If all that doesn't warm up the odd cold room in your house, you can call NV Energy for one of its complimentary on-site audits. Both NV Energy and Southwest Gas free programs for income-qualified customers. These can include anything from advice on energy efficiency to installing attic insulation and blanketing hot water heaters.

The two major local energy providers also offer also offer a lengthy list of rebates for repairs, replacements and retrofits. There are rebates for everything from recycling your working refrigerator (\$30 from NV Energy) to buying an Energy Star combination oven (\$2,500 from Southwest Gas).

Remember: Conservation is free

One thing that's free to fix: your behavior. Energy experts readily offer a number of not-so-obvious tips to trim your power bill.

- Turn off ceiling fans when you're not underneath them. "It's a 100-percent electric heater, the way the motor works," says Lazareck. "It doesn't move the air around the house. The cooling effect is from it evaporating the moisture off your skin. They're about 75 watts, and most people have lots of them."

- Make sure your air filter is clean - and rated NRV-8 or less. "They're rated by how small a particle they can filter out. Costco sells some that filter out really small particles, but they put a drag on the blower, and make it less efficient," says Lazareck.

- Shorten your showers. "When you're looking at appliances within your home, the No. 3 energy user is the hot water heater," says Emily Huffman, NV Energy's energy educator.

- Avoid the hot water handle. "Even if you turn on the hot water automatically by habit, and you don't get any because it takes a while to get to your sink, you've still pulled hot water out of your tank and pulled cold water in that has to be heated. And you didn't get any hot water anyway," says Rypka.

- Vacuum your refrigerator coils. "That can add an extra 15- to 20-percent energy efficiency," says Lazareck.

- Use surge protectors that eliminate phantom power. "People who have phone chargers and other devices plugged in on standby are using power. It can add up to \$5-15 a month in some homes," says Lazareck.

- Stop obsessing about windows, doors and electrical outlets. "Plastic and tape around windows and doors is the least of your worries. Only 25 percent of air leakage comes from there. The bulk of it is through your ceiling and floor. That's where you need to invest," says Lazareck.

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