

QUINCY

Quincy helps homeowners reduce energy consumption

By Robert Knox, Globe Correspondent | July 29, 2010

Quincy homeowner Caryn Smith wanted to reduce her family's heating, air-conditioning, and other energy costs. But for her, as for most homeowners, the question is where do you start? An equally important question: How much will it cost?

Smith started by connecting with Energy Smart Quincy, a new program aimed at reducing the city's energy consumption, and scheduling an energy audit of her home.

The audit showed her 130-year-old Dutch Colonial house on Wollaston Hill needs insulation in its roof and overhanging eaves. It's a \$5,500 job, but rebates and tax breaks will reduce her cost to \$2,000. A rebate from National Grid power company will contribute \$2,000 to the energy-saving upgrade, and her federal tax credit is worth \$1,500. And Smith said her own investment will pay itself back in two or three years through reductions in heating costs of \$700 a year for the four-bedroom house. "Plus, the house will be warmer," she said.

Cost savings like Smith's are typical for homeowners who take advantage of rebates for energy-saving home improvements, said Larry Chretien, executive director of Mass Energy Consumers Alliance.

"Most homes can benefit from a small investment and get a very good rate of return," said Chretien, whose agency is helping to spread the word on the energy savings available to households through Energy Smart Quincy.

In another common example, Chretien said, the householder leverages a modest expenditure of \$500 to bring \$2,700 worth of new insulation and air sealing work by taking advantage of the rebates. He will earn that investment back in a single year by saving on fuel costs.

The city this month kicked off Energy Smart Quincy to help homeowners, businesses, and the local government save money by increasing energy efficiency and reducing consumption. It's funded by \$881,000 in federal stimulus money awarded to Quincy as an Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant.

In addition to helping homeowners, the program will hire a manager to reduce the city's energy consumption by 20 percent over three years; pay for energy-efficient streetlights and intersection improvements at Brewer's Corner in West Quincy; and fund new windows, insulation, central heating, and air conditioning for a Head Start school moving into an old city building.

The grant will also pay for synchronizing traffic lights at busy intersections around Quincy with the goal of reducing vehicle idling — a major source of greenhouse gas pollution — and help install solar panels at the city’s senior center and new high school.

Mayor Thomas Koch called the program “an invaluable tool to help us act locally to reduce our fossil fuel use, create green jobs, and get the community involved.”

For Quincy homeowners, getting involved means getting a visit from Next Step Living, a company that performs comprehensive home energy audits with the expertise and equipment to find what chief executive Geoff Chapin of Cohasset calls “opportunities” for reducing energy costs.

An energy auditor brings an infrared camera to customers’ homes to give them a picture of air flows within their house, Chapin said. He uses a fan to depressurize the house, pulling air out of the house to exaggerate leaks. The camera then shows temperature differences in different colors — red for hot air, blue for cold — along the house’s walls, floors, and attic. An absence of wall or attic insulation, a failure to air-seal, or other problems will show blue air in winter and red air in summer entering the house.

“They see the leaks in their home in a whole different way,” Chapin said. “They say, ‘Oh, that’s why that room is always cold.’ ”

In Smith’s case, the audit found two areas where insulation could make a difference, he said.

Carmen Donohue, who lives in a circa 1900 house on North Payne Street, said the audit’s infrared camera revealed there was no insulation in her house’s walls and lots of holes in the attic insulation. A solution would be to blow in 9 inches of cellulose insulation in the attic and seal the cracks, a job priced at less than \$1,000, and insulate the walls — a bigger undertaking estimated at about \$3,500.

National Grid, the power company that serves Quincy, gives customers rebates for energy-saving work of 75 percent of cost, up to \$2,000. Homeowners are also eligible for federal tax credits of 30 percent of their cost, up to \$1,500.

In Donohue’s case, the National Grid rebate would pay 75 percent of the attic job, reducing her cost substantially. For the walls, the company’s rebate would max out at \$2,000, and the federal tax credit would save around \$450, leaving the homeowner with an outlay of a little more than \$1,000. Fuel cost savings would repay that investment in a couple of years.

“It’s an incredible deal. Not many people know about it,” Chapin said. “We help people access the rebates, fill out the forms. We make it easy.”

Customers receive the rebate money up front, he said, so they don’t have to pay the full amount themselves and then wait for a reimbursement.

Opportunities for energy-efficiency upgrades can be found in almost all houses, he said. Some houses have insulation without air sealing to seal the cracks. And some newer houses are “built to budget” and don’t have full insulation because the builder is cutting costs, Chapin said.

Donohue said she got involved with Energy Smart Quincy because she’s equally concerned about the environmental costs of high energy consumption. She’s “passionate” about saving energy, Donahue said. “This Earth is all we get.”

Quincy residents can get involved through the program’s website, energysmartquincy.org, or by calling Maura O’Gara at Mass Energy at 617-750-4329.

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