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Energy audit: Local Realtor puts her house to the test



Written by Rachel Kirkpatrick
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There used to be a common scenario in real estate where a prospective home buyer would ask the cost of the utilities per month.

The answer was "two fold," said Maryann Levanti, a Realtor with The Higgins Group.



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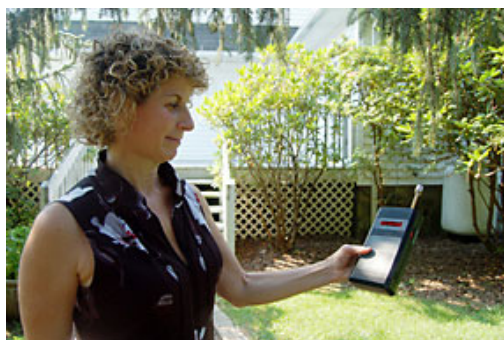
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Often, she said, if the buyer had to ask, he probably couldn't afford to purchase and live in the home. But also, she said, the question was hard to answer, because it depended on the habits of the homeowner.

"Those answers aren't working anymore, because buyers want to know, they want to see the bills. They want to know if it's a well-insulated, energy-efficient house," Ms. Levanti said. "A buyer may well think about another house, or make the seller give up some money, in order to winterize the house — and this is happening at all price ranges right now."

Recently, Ms. Levanti volunteered her 1920s Black Rock Turnpike farmhouse for an energy audit conducted by Jim Baker of Gault Inc., a Westport-based energy and materials supplier. She plans to use the results of the audit as a "case study" to help clients learn "simple fixes," like weather-stripping and window-caulking, to reduce home energy bills.

"People are much more concerned, specifically after oil prices went through the roof last winter, on how to save money," Ms. Levanti said. "We also don't know where electric and oil prices are going to go, but they're not going to go down hugely so there is no downside to this."



A number of cities and towns across the country have and are enacting legislation requiring home energy audits before real estate sales transactions can take place.

The city of Austin, Texas, recently passed an Energy Conservation Audit and Disclosure Ordinance. The ordinance, which took effect on June 1, is intended to meet the goals of the city's Climate Protection Plan, a 10-year plan aimed at reducing its carbon footprint.

There are number of conditions that exclude homes from these required audits, among them, if a house is less than 10 years old or if it has a total of three energy-efficient improvements.

In June, the city council of Berkeley, Calif., adopted the Berkeley Climate Action Plan, which enacts strict energy standards.

The U.S. Senate is also expected to act on "cap and trade" legislation, part of the American Clean Energy and Security Act, which would force home sellers to disclose their home's energy performance, among other standards.

This is all especially significant now, given the market, Ms. Levanti said. The first inclinations of a failing housing market, she said, were seen in the summer of 2005, when the market "really dropped."

In Redding, as of last week, there were 125 single-family homes on the market. At this time in 2005, 101 homes had been sold.

"This is a town people love and live in, but this year we had 36 houses sell so far," Ms. Levanti said. "There are 125 houses on the market. We're talking a four-year absorption rate."

An absorption rate is the ability of the market to "absorb" or sell all of the houses for sale in a set amount of time. What's going to differentiate your house, she said, as well as having a freshly painted door and certain upgrades, "is the energy efficiency."

"You might as well do the insulation, check out the easy fixes, because every little thing you can do to make your house more energy efficient, besides the price point, is going to help," Ms. Levanti said.

Mr. Baker began the audit by conducting an analysis of how the house is lived in. He then walked room by room, attic to basement, and then around the exterior of the house.

He used tools, such as a device that identifies how appliances are draining energy, on or off.

"The TV will be an interesting read," Mr. Baker said.

He uses a particulate reader to figure out the quality of the air inside the house, compared to the air outside.

"This tells me how well a house filters outside particulates," he said.

Mr. Baker also takes a reading of the current temperature and relative humidity. He then uses a smoke stick, which when lit, indicates crevices where air can go.

"These tools let me know how insulation in the home can be improved," Mr. Baker said. "Usually I'll find air leakage in the recessed lights."

The results on Ms. Levanti's home were somewhat surprising, Mr. Baker said. Despite the age of the home, it did quite well, he said.

One of the recommendations he did give to Ms. Levanti was to install a programmable thermostat, which can offer a savings of approximately \$30 per month, he said. A programmable thermostat has an "auto shutoff" function.

Mr. Baker said the "zone" set-up of the heating system in the home was a plus, because certain rooms may be closed off during the winter.

"I was thrilled because I thought my house would come off much worse than it did," Ms. Levanti said. "My husband and I were reading through the report and said, 'We're going to do it.'"

Aside from unplugging unused appliances, replacing regular bulbs with energy-saving bulbs will offer a "huge savings," Mr. Baker said. This is estimated to provide at least \$10 per month in energy savings.



Justamere Ponies

Quality Imported and Domestic Horses and Ponies, Redding, Connecticut

"I usually recommend unplugging a second refrigerator where people may store spare drinks, because that can be a dramatic savings on an energy bill," he said.

He recommended TVs and other large appliances be plugged into a surge board, which also is less messy than having cords everywhere.

Part of the purpose of the audit was to mark a "partnership" between Gault's energy division and The Higgins Group.

Rick Higgins, founder of The Higgins Group, said he thinks an energy "deficient" home will be the next big deal breaker (since in-ground oil tanks and asbestos) hit the industry.

"I'm not surprised that energy efficiency issues, including high energy bills, have become top of mind among Realtors nationwide, especially here in Connecticut where energy costs are ranked highest among the lower 48 states," Mr. Higgins said.

There are a number of tax credits and rebate programs available to homeowners who would like to make energy-efficient improvements to their homes.

With energy costs soaring, President Obama recently launched a \$3-billion national home weatherization investment program, from which Connecticut received millions. Information on credits and rebate programs, may be found at energystar.gov.

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