

Under the microscope

Energy audits reveal savings

By Anthony Karge
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Jim Baker, an energy audit specialist at Gault, Inc., plugged a toaster into his hand-sized watt reader to see how much electricity it drains. Even when not being used, he determined that the toaster adds \$1 or \$2 dollars to the monthly utility bill.

"Let's save a buck," said Lewis Sneiderman, who decided to leave the toaster unplugged.

Sneiderman is a Realtor for the Higgins Group based in Westport and the owner of the 2,600-square-foot ranch-style home where the audit was being conducted.

He spends around \$300 a month in electricity bills, and they always seem to keep going up even though he and wife don't leave things turned on when not in use.

"They're like taxes that just keep going up," he told Baker during a brief questionnaire that preceded the inspection.

Connecticut's taxes are often considered high, and electricity rates are not exempt. For the last few years, the Nutmeg State has had some of the most expensive rates in the country.

According to Baker, the rates in Connecticut are two and a half times above the national average. The reason for this, he said, is that is that the energy is "hard to get here."

"We don't have a direct feed, so the problem is we have to use more electricity on this side [of the country]," he said.

With concerns about the steadily rising prices, Sneiderman opted to get his home, built in 1923, audited in order to save on gas and electricity and to do his part to help the environment.

As a realtor, he has first-hand experience with what people want in a home, and he's been seeing that energy efficient homes are becoming a marketable feature, while those requiring lots of resources are losing favor.

"I think it could be killer. I think it could be a deal breaker rather than a deal maker," he said.

After the questionnaire, Baker used one of his high-tech tools to get the first readings.

He took his particle meter outside to gauge the air quality. While he acknowledged that the meter is more of a guideline because the particles can vary day to day, he saw that there were more than five million per cubic foot outside.

Worst of all, there was approximately the same amount inside. He recommended some air filtration for the home.

Another tool in his arsenal, although this one comparatively, is a smoke stick. By igniting this object, which looks like a cigarette but is odorless, air leaks in the windows can be found. The new windows were perfect, and to Baker's surprise, even the old windows in the living room fared well and wouldn't be worth replacing.

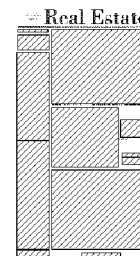
Throughout the audit, Baker mostly provided tips of the do-it-yourself variety, such as unplugging things not in use and using foam sealant in the basement.

He also recommended more expensive investments, such as programmable thermostats. Baker predicted that this could reduce oil consumption by up to 10 percent annually and provide a return on the investment within three years.

Baker believes that despite all his recommendations, the house is in good shape from an energy standpoint.

"You always base it on the age and... for a house built in 1932, it's done very well," he said.

Even before he spent a dime on any of the big fixes, Sneiderman was impressed with the money he'll be saving based on the information that Baker passed along.



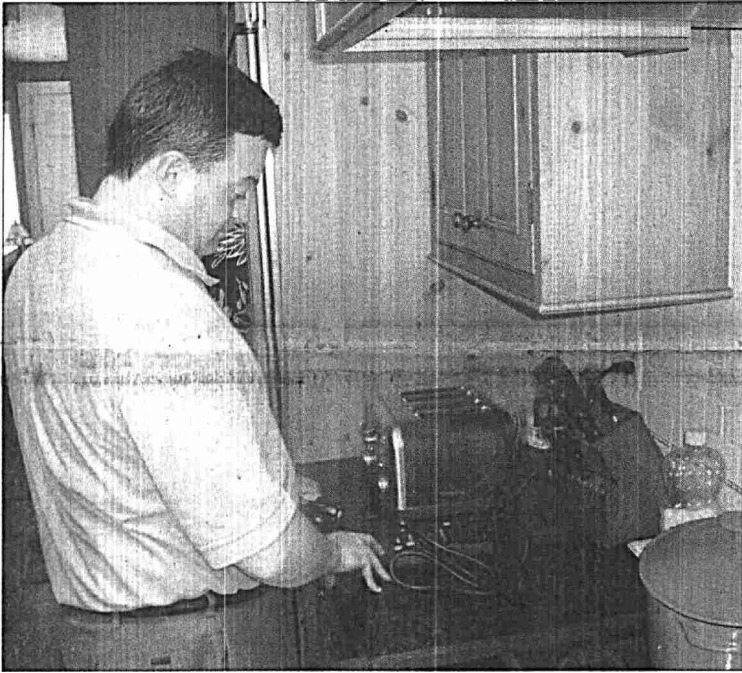
“It’s more about being a smart homeowner rather than being in a smart home,” he said. “Fifty bucks here and 80 bucks there, so I’ll outsmart the next increase in electricity rates.”

An energy audit from Gault, Inc. costs \$89.95 and can be scheduled by calling 227-5181.

Calculated savings

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Anthony Karge / Staff reporter

Jim Baker of Gault, Inc., at left, uses various instruments to conduct an energy audit of a 2,600-square-foot home in Westport. Built in 1932, the home is owned by Lewis Snelderman, below, a Realtor with the Higgins Group in Westport.

