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Efficiency in heating homes gets A in Maine

Federal stimulus cash helps cut costs in half

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Staff Writer

GARDINER -- When Karen Tucker moved into her 19th-century cape on Harrison Avenue in 2004, she soon realized it was not well insulated.



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UPGRADE: Plumber and heating technician James Weymouth installs a new boiler Wednesday at the residence of Karen Tucker. The new, efficient boiler was installed with a state loan as part of energy retrofit of Tucker's residence.

Staff photo by Andy Molloy



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UPGRADE: Contractor Bo Jespersen speaks with homeowner Karen Tucker Wednesday outside her Gardiner home. Jespersen, the proprietor of Maine Homeowner Solutions LLC, is over seeing the energy retrofit at Tucker's residence.

Staff photo by Andy Molloy

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"I moved in in November and could tell it was cold up in my bedroom, excessively cold," she said. "I had the home energy audit done ... and was shocked to find out I had absolutely no insulation in my walls whatsoever."

That's changing.

Tucker, 57, a project coordinator with Healthy Communities of the Capital Area, is the first local homeowner to be approved for federal stimulus money for weatherization, according to Efficiency Maine.

She received a \$3,000 rebate. Efficiency Maine received \$9 million from the federal government for this program, which kicked off in January.

(Tucker is also one of the last homeowners to receive a Home Energy Loan through the Maine State Housing Authority -- she qualified for a \$25,000 loan at a rate of 3.9 percent, over 15 years. That program ended Feb. 28 and has not been replaced, according to Efficiency Maine.)

The rebates have local contractors expecting an influx of demand for efficiency work. Bo Jespersen of Maine Homeowner Solutions in Manchester said it is now his prime focus.

Jespersen is Tucker's contractor, and started work on her home this week.

"It's a new industry, there's not many companies out there like us that can deal with basement moisture, insulation and ventilation problems," Jespersen said. We really now just deal with energy efficiency. It's such an infancy industry."

Charlie Holly, a certified building analyst and owner of Kennebec Home Performance in Waterville, echoed Jespersen's expectations of more business; he's brought on board two more energy auditors.

Insulation is a big piece in energy efficiency, he said, along with air leakage and heating systems.

"Those are the three big things where we can save energy and we have various tools like an infrared camera and a blower door to find leakages," Holly said. "The blower has a powerful fan that goes in a doorway and sucks air in through all the cracks so you know where the air leaks are coming from."

It all starts with an energy audit, which cost around \$400. After an audit is complete, homeowners can apply for loans and rebates from Efficiency Maine.

Jon Hill, a technical field representative with Efficiency Maine, said homeowners must meet certain criteria to qualify for the rebates.

Homeowners that reach an energy savings level of 25 percent with improvements can receive up to \$1,500. With an energy savings level of 50 percent, he said, they could get up to \$3,000.

"It's surprising how many houses in Maine still don't have insulation in the wall cavities ... we're finding them," Hill said. "If that's the case it seems the houses could easily get to the 50 percent levels very cost effectively. And certainly most houses can get to the 25 percent level with cost effective improvements."

Hill said the annual cost of heat and hot water for an average home is about \$2,800 a year. With the improvements done to Tucker's home, her costs of heating and hot water usage should drop by 50 percent, or \$1,400, he said.

"Presently, there's a limited amount available for those incentives so people should take advantage of it," he said. "The exciting thing is we're showing people that there's a lot of savings involved. When you look at how much a person's going to save in dollars per year, the incentives are important. The dollars saved is much, much bigger in a few years time. These savings are real and add up to a lot of money."

So far, Hill said about two dozen people have applied for rebates. Others are in the process of ordering energy audits.

Tucker's energy improvements includes waterproofing her foundation, insulating exterior walls, attic and rafters, sealing air throughout the house, installing a more efficient boiler and super-insulated hot water tank, and testing both the work and house air tightness with a blower door and infrared camera.

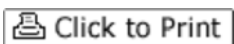
"It's really great that I could do this," Tucker said. "I basically have to knit a brand new sweater for my house, buy it new galoshes and get a new oil boiler. I'm not married and have no kids . . . my house is my baby. I want to have it paid off in 10 years and retire and have a home that is snug as a bug in a rug that I won't have to worry about it."

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