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Party on ... for energy efficiency

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Contributing Reporter

Eight years ago Oak Parkers Monte and Kathy Lewis purchased a charming, century-plus-old "transition-style" house on the 200 block of South Ridgeland Avenue in Oak Park. It was big, drafty and close to Oak Park and River Forest High School, which their teenagers, Emma and Drew, would be attending.

That house, an architectural mish-mosh of a Victorian and Arts & Crafts design, was also extremely energy inefficient — as many vintage Oak Park homes are. That first winter, Monte Lewis recalled, their heating bill was breathtaking.

In response, the couple hung darker curtains over the windows, closed off many of the doors — turn-of-the-century Victorians tend to have lots of them — and Lewis "threw" some insulation in a basement crawl space directly under his home office.

"Each time we have done something like that, it did reduce our energy bills," he explained during a recent free energy assessment of their house, just prior to the Lewises hosting an Energy Impact Illinois "house party" for about 18 neighbors and friends.

For hundreds of Oak Parkers, these "Tupperware party-style" events have become popular and productive.

Since July, Pamela Brookstein, a regional lead field organizer with Energy Impact Illinois, says she has scheduled and facilitated more than 50 events like this in private and public spaces in the area, with many more to come. It is Brookstein's job to spread the word that there is money out there to make residential properties more energy efficient — from Nicor and ComEd, the other utilities in the region, as well as from the U.S. Department of Energy.

"Oak Park homes are very well built, but many were constructed before any codes were created and are lacking some of the very basic things that would make a huge difference in keeping us warmer, or cooler, like proper insulation levels," Brookstein said. "Then, we have made holes all over the place, for things like dryer vents, TV cables and new plumbing stacks — without properly sealing the openings. These holes are letting air leak out constantly. Having people host these house parties is all about letting their family, friends and neighbors know



Eye-opener: Michael Ruehle, a BPI energy analyst, left, uses a thermal imaging camera to detect air leaks in the house of Monte Lewis during a recent energy assessment of his Oak Park home. Ruehle told Lewis he found areas where insulation could be improved and an energy savings of 15 to 30 percent could be realized.



House Detectives: Michael Ruehle, a BPI energy analyst, in an attic crawl space of the Lewis home in Oak Park. Ruehle uses thermal imaging technology to determine air leaks.

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that there is a lot of money out there to help make existing homes more energy efficient."

A real deal

Because of those pools of money, and for a limited time, Energy Impact Illinois is offering rebates of up to \$1,750 to help single-family homeowners lower their energy bills and financing solutions when appropriate. Part of the stimulus is a reduced fee of \$99 — or for free if a homeowner agrees to host a house party — for a certified contractor to come to a property and identify issues (i.e. conduct an energy assessment), and then provide a bid detailing the most cost-effective energy improvements for that home. The program, she adds, is focusing on adding insulation and air sealing to reduce a home's heating and cooling costs.

For example, the average cost of a basic energy upgrade comes in at about \$2,500 but will cost the homeowner about \$750 with the rebate, Brookstein says.

Larger projects, of course, can cost more, depending on the size and age of the house. The average price range for these projects is between \$2,000 and \$4,000, she says.

Making an impact

In essence, Energy Impact Illinois is an alliance of nonprofit groups teaming up with Nicor, ComEd and a few other utilities, who were brought together because of the Dept. of Energy funds, says Brookstein, whose "territory" is Oak Park, River Forest and Forest Park and a few other nearby municipalities.

"At these house parties I try to succinctly explain the Energy Impact rebate program, and then one of our contractors explains building science and then uses his really cool high-tech tools to show exactly how leaky or tight a house is, and pinpoint where a home is losing energy."

In their preliminary free energy-assessment session, the Lewises learned the scope of their energy loss — and it was extensive, starting with a poorly insulated basement and attic, along with unsealed windows and doors. On a high-tech device, they watched the energy seep out.

"For demonstration purposes, I used a back blower to depressurize the house, and an infrared camera to determine where the infiltration issues were. The Lewises," says Michael Ruehl of Energy 360 Solutions, a certified contractor with the program, "had quite a large volume of air infiltration, partly because theirs is such a large, old house, which I'm speculating is about 4,500 square feet."

If they act on his bid, the Lewises air sealing and insulation improvements will have a major impact on their utility bill, not to mention helping the environment, and enabling them to access available funds that have already been deducted by the utility companies (an energy-efficiency fund) from their utility bills for this purpose, said Ruehl, who is BPI (Building Performance Institute) and LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified.

Time is running out

Brookstein pointed out that the current stimulus, a free energy assessment for people who agree to host a house party of five homeowners or more, is set to expire on May 18, though she says her group is trying to secure an extension to that. However, Nicor and ComEd have been offering homeowners a rebate of 50 percent on projects at or below \$1,250, which will continue.

Last year, Brookstein hosted a house party in her old Oak Park bungalow, then followed through with the suggested energy-efficiency upgrades.

"Now I love coming home to a warmer house, and my kids do, too," Brookstein says. "If you reduce your home's energy loss by 15 percent by air sealing and insulating, mainly along the attic floor and around the rim joint in the basement, you can potentially save about 4,000 pounds a year in greenhouse gases from going into the environment, which is permanent change."