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Ahern: Energy-saving improvements can mean more cash for homeowners

By Patti Ahern Citizen Journalist/pattirma@aol.com February 7, 2013 1:28PM



Infrared photos show where buildings lose energy as a result of poor insulation and drafts. Dark colors indicate cold spots, and a well-insulated house will look cold on a cold night because it won't be conducting heat to the outside. | Supplied Photo

Updated: February 10, 2013 2:30AM

Want to save some money?

This question possibly is a no-brainer. Who doesn't want to save money? And, in this case, the savings can be in the range of about \$400 a year.

Sound like a come-on, a scheme, a get-rich-quick plan? It isn't. In a nutshell, Energy Impact Illinois, in partnership with ComEd, Nicor Gas and other natural gas utilities is offering homeowners a combined rebate of up to \$1,750 for energy-saving improvements homeowners are willing to make.

Leslie Proudfoot, a field organizer for Energy Impact Illinois, said arranging for various home improvements is easy and affordable, and the savings in energy costs make the program worthwhile.

"Energy Impact is funded through the Department of Energy's Better Buildings Neighborhood program as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act," Proudfoot said. "Homeowners just contact us, and then one of our companies does a test — an assessment — to see where improvements can be made for energy savings.

"One test, for example, is when all the windows are closed and all the interior doors are opened. A large computerized fan then sucks air out of the house to determine the approximate amount of air leakage. They can measure if there is significantly more air or less air leaking out than there should be."

Proudfoot said there also is an infrared camera test that will show where buildings don't have adequate insulation, or where cold or hot air is entering.

Once various trouble spots are detected, one of Energy Impact's contractors will come to the house and do any number of improvements, such as air sealing, caulking or adding spray foam insulation, for example.

Matt Walsh, of Chicago's Beverly community, is the executive director for the Beverly Area

Planning Association. He recently had his home inspected through the Energy Impact program. He said air flow tests revealed the equivalent of a 2-by-3-foot hole in one of his walls.

“Our insulation was not as good as it should be, so we need to replace insulation and then seal off cracks and do other little things,” Walsh said.

“I think most people would benefit from this, and I think people should take advantage of this program while money is available to people,” Walsh said. “Our area is a very ecologically friendly neighborhood; it’s a great neighborhood with a great ecological attitude. We are one of the best neighborhoods in terms of recycling, and this will make homes more energy efficient.

“I think this will pay for itself in about three years.”

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act was signed into law in 2009, and according to the program’s website, the act provided funding for the weatherizing of 75 percent of federal buildings, as well as more than 1 million private homes.

While the Recovery Act has no end date, Proudfoot said funds for this particular program are limited, which is why homeowners should act this winter to receive the Energy Impact Illinois portion of this rebate.

More than 20 contractors who are certified by the Building Performance Institute and approved by Energy Impact make improvements that can run on average between \$2,000 and \$4,000. Energy Impact and its utility partners, however, will provide a rebate to homeowners for insulation and air sealing.

“The Beverly area is a great neighborhood with its older and historic homes,” Proudfoot said. “We are talking about 100-year-old homes in the area that have a very characteristic look.

“A retrofit will make these homes stick around a while and will lower heating and cooling bills, making the homes more comfortable.”

Scheduling an appointment is easy, according to Proudfoot. Homeowners can just contact Energy Impact, and in general, appointments can be made fairly quickly. The cost for an assessment is \$99, but that fee is waived when homeowners agree to host an assessment “party” for friends and neighbors.

“Everyone shares a love of older homes and this helps preserve people’s buildings,” Proudfoot said. “People who do this program get an Illinois Home Performance with Energy Star certificate, and this information can be added to a listing report if people want to sell their homes. It makes the home more attractive.”

Proudfoot will give more information about Energy Impact at two public meetings scheduled this month.

The first will be held from 3 to 4 p.m. Feb. 24 at the Ridge Historical Society, 10621 S. Seeley Ave. The second will be held from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. Feb. 28 at the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences, 3857 W. 111th St.

Information: (855) 946-7228 or www.energyimpactillinois.org.