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Home energy Questions & Answers

By Ken Sheinkopf
McClatchy-Tribune News Service

Q: I have been reading your column for years and there's one thing that I frequently wonder about having read about the many products and building strategies that can save energy. How come all builders and contractors don't put energy-savings standard in their homes? Why do they still build homes that have so much room for improvement?

A: Between you and me, I wonder the same thing. It's really so easy to design and build a home that is comfortable, good-looking and has lower energy costs. There are so many products on the market today — from the basic building materials that are used to heating and cooling systems — that are designed to operate efficiently and at lower energy usage.

I think the main answer is that the problem comes back to the economics. In this case, it's the economics of the builder, not the homeowner. Many of these features add to the cost of the home, some with only minimal cost but others with fairly significant cost. Upgrading an air-conditioning/heating system to a highly efficient unit can add several thousand dollars, for example. This raises the cost of the home, pricing it above comparable models that don't have these features. Never mind the fact that over time, the utility bill savings will pay back the homeowner with more than he paid for the extra cost when buying the home.

But part of the problem is simply that people don't seem to get as concerned about the utility bills they pay as the price of gas at the pump. Newspapers carry banner headlines as gas prices shoot upward on a regular basis, and you hear people talking about the cost of a barrel of oil like they were discussing milk prices in a supermarket. But you don't (at least I don't) hear many people complaining loudly about an increase of a penny or two in their utility kWh charges — pennies that can add up very quickly as energy use increases. Consumers need to take the lead and urge their builder or contractor to put in energy-saving features.

If you want to read about the importance of using contractors who are knowledgeable about energy efficiency, check out www.ecw.org/prod/e2/jun2006.pdf. It's a great article about a staff member of the Energy Center of Wisconsin who added 500 square-feet of living space to his 1920s home with the goal of keeping his energy usage the same as it was before the remodeling. The story highlights the importance of the homeowner doing his research first and then selecting a contractor who knows about energy efficiency.

Q: We have French patio doors that constantly fog up between the two panes of glass, and also have visible drip lines. I'm worried that we're losing our heated and cooled air to the outdoors. Any ways to fix this?

A: I checked with Ross McCluney, an energy researcher who specializes in windows, and he thinks your problem is that either the seals have failed on the insulated glazing units in your doors, which is allowing water vapor to seep in and condense, or the frames are not sufficiently insulated. If it's the seals, they need to be replaced. If it's low insulation, this should be fixed also, possibly by replacing the doors.

The drip lines come from a lack of sufficient insulation in the windows so the interior surfaces are exposed to the more humid indoor air in winter that drops below the dew point temperature, causing water condensation. Water is either condensing on the interior surface of the glass and dripping down to the frames, or insufficient insulation in the opaque framing elements of the doors is leading to condensation and dripping.

The effect of windows on a home's energy use and comfort level is huge, and choosing the right windows is essential. Windows used to be considered the weak link in the building envelope, essentially creating holes in the insulated walls and causing all kinds of energy problems. It's a different world out there today, with high-quality windows being made by many manufacturers and proper installation being done by knowledgeable contractors. Today's windows can actually enhance a home's level of energy efficiency. Don't delay on fixing window problems.

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