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## Blogs **Save now on energy efficiency**

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**NORTHAMPTON** - A drop in oil prices and a slumping economy are prompting many homeowners to delay making energy-efficient improvements. But experts insist that waiting is short-sighted and now is the time to act.

Incentive programs have been beefed up, waiting lists to get free estimates are virtually nonexistent and the price of oil will not stay down forever, they say. Most utilities serving Valley communities are now offering as much as 75 percent off for certain energy-efficiency measures up to \$2,000.

"The investment made in conservation and energy efficiency begins to pay for itself almost instantly," said Alan Silverstein, co-director of the Center for Ecological Technology.

Bills go down, homes are more comfortable and an "energy smart" home is better for the environment, he said.

### Earlier interest

That's exactly what many homeowners, facing oil prices that had shot up to \$4.50 a gallon six months ago, were looking for when they flooded the phone lines of MassSAVE last year looking to schedule a free energy audit of their homes.

MassSAVE is a public-private partnership of all the electric and gas companies in the commonwealth that together offer energy-efficiency programs for residential customers. In this region, those companies include National Grid, Western Mass Electric Co., Berkshire Gas and Bay State Gas. The utilities, in turn, hire organizations like CET to conduct the free audits and run the programs.

CET struggled to keep up with demand last summer and early fall, forcing homeowners to wait at least two months for an audit. The organization added 15 people to its 10-member energy staff just to clear the audit backlog and keep up with demand, Silverstein said.

Now that the price of heating oil has plummeted by nearly half, utilities and the organizations that conduct audits are working the phones, developing marketing campaigns and doing public outreach in an attempt to drum up interest for their services.

"It's ironic, because now there is so much more attention on energy and global warming," said Adin Maynard, energy-efficiency coordinator for the Harold Grinspoon Charitable Foundation in West Springfield. "The (MassSAVE) program has undergone a big restructuring and more money is being put into incentive programs."

About a year ago, the Grinspoon foundation started ener-G-save, a program that encourages energy conservation by promoting MassSAVE and shepherding homeowners through the audit and installation process.

### Group's workshops

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JERREY ROBERTS

Frank Panetta, a home energy auditor for the Center for Ecological Technology, measures the oxygen, temperature and carbon monoxide levels in emissions from an oil-fueled boiler in the basement of a Northampton home Thursday.



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GreenNorthampton.com, a local organization that advocates for the reduction of greenhouse gases, also noticed a drop in interest that coincided with the fall in oil prices. Co-founder David Starr said the organization's series of workshops about home energy conservation were well-attended in October. Plans for an ongoing series of winter meetings on the subject, however, were scrapped after interest waned.

Yet organizations like GreenNorthampton are exploring ways to get the word out about the importance of energy conservation on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis. Starr said a 2001 city study found that powering and heating buildings were two of the top three causes of greenhouse gases in the city.

"This is the time to do it, not when oil prices go back up or there is a four- or five-month wait just to get an audit," said Starr.

The free audit offered through the MassSAVE program takes about two hours and comes with recommendations for energy efficiency improvements residents or businesses can make to their homes and buildings.

Those recommendations vary but can include small-ticket items such as using energy-efficient lightbulbs, wrapping heat ducts, installing insulation and sealing air leaks to more expensive measures such as installation of a new hot water tank or heating system.

### Money available

Perhaps most important, a majority of these expenses either will be covered through discounts and rebates, or are available through no-interest loans, said Silverstein.

For example, the utilities that are part of MassSAVE recently upped discounts on "energy smart" projects from 50 percent to 75 percent on jobs that are \$2,000 and less. That means a \$2,000 insulation job would cost a homeowner \$500.

"If someone is waving \$2,000 at me, as a homeowner, I'm not going to turn that down," said Starr.

Homeowners who sign up with the Grinspoon foundation's ener-G-save program can get an extra \$100 on top of the utility incentives if they install insulation in their attics following the audit, Maynard said.

Homeowners also can be eligible for zero percent loans for more expensive upgrades.

Maynard predicts that the Green Communities Act will require electric and gas utilities to invest even more resources in energy efficiency during its next three-year deal that begins next year.

The utilities fund the program through a conservation charge on each customer's monthly bill, plus monies that come from the state's Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative.

"The state understands that efficiency is the foundation of what makes our homes use less energy, and they are increasing resources to do that," said Silverstein.

There are no income-eligibility requirements to take advantage of the MassSAVE program, although eligibility does depend on where people live. Municipalities that supply their own power, such as South Hadley, Westfield, Chicopee and Holyoke, are not required to participate in the program, but most are offering free audits and a limited discount program, said Maynard.

In addition to the utility programs, there are private sector contractors that also conduct energy audits and complete installation work. They often go much deeper into energy efficiency opportunities of a home or business than the utility programs, Maynard said.

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