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Unitarians hold forum on energy efficiency



CAPTION: Garrett Neese/Daily Mining Gazette

Zack Wisti (saxophone) and Oren Tikkanen (guitar) play during a Keweenaw Universalist Unitarian Fellowship meeting in Houghton Sunday. Tikkanen tailored the songs to fit the forum's theme of energy efficiency.

By GARRETT NEESE, DMG Writer

HOUGHTON — From plugging drafty holes to unplugging unused equipment, there's a lot you can do to make your home more energy efficient, a local construction expert told the Keweenaw Universalist Unitarian Fellowship Sunday in Houghton.

Dave Bach, who has been constructing energy-efficient buildings since 1980, was the featured guest at the Fellowship's forum. Bach teaches construction management at the Michigan Tech University School of Technology.

Energy-efficient measures, Bach said, will save money, reduce the ecological footprint, improve indoor air quality and increase property value.

Conserving energy accounts for the large chunk of savings, Bach said. There are more than a few ways to do this, he said: Turn down the heat. Wait until the dishwashers are full to do a load. Take shorter showers.

Another culprit? "Phantom loads," the small energy charges incurred by electronic devices on stand-by, such as computers or TV sets.

"All these little charges, when they're plugged in, they're using energy," he said. "It's only a little bit of energy, but a little bit of energy adds up."



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Bach said the key is prioritizing these uses and finding the ones most convenient to eliminate.

“A lot of people would shut off their furnace before they stopped taking longer showers,” he said.

Handwashing dishes, viewed by some as a better alternative to the dishwasher, might not be; a study in Germany found handwashing dishes took almost seven times as much water to clean a 12-place setting as an energy efficient dishwasher.

About 20 percent of heating and cooling costs can be attributed to leaks in walls, floors and ceilings.

“We want to make the house so tight that if you slam the door, your eardrums will burst,” Bach said. “That’s my goal.”

For better or worse, few houses meet eardrum-bursting standards. Blame trouble spots like attic hatches, window frames and recessed lighting. The latter category leaves a tell-tale mark of poor sealing; large patches on the roof without snow.

Other small-cost solutions include programmable thermostats, cleaning furnace filters and fixing dripping faucets.

For new windows, buyers should look for low conductance gas fills, low-emissivity or solar control coatings, and insulating spacer between glazings.

Despite some problems with influence-peddling, Energy Star-certified appliances are usually more reliable, Bach said, with oil and gas furnaces up to 15 percent more efficient than standard models.

As for alternative energy, options run from wood/pellet/corn heaters, which are cheap but high-maintenance, to solar electricity, which has high up-front costs but can be helpful in areas more than a mile off the grid.

Bach also directed the crowd to <http://hes.lbl.gov>, which allows people to plug in potential upgrades to see how much they’d save on energy costs. Also, he said, the federal government offers tax credits on things such as insulation, solar heating and water heaters.

Before and after the forum, Zack Wisti and Oren Tikkanen played a selection of hymns with lyrics tailored to the forum’s theme of energy efficiency.

Phyllis Boutillier has already taken some steps with her partially renovated 1940s-era home, such as adding insulation and the replacement of every window, and plans to do another radon check at her house. She said the presentation was “absolutely great.”

“I thought he did an excellent job, especially for the novice,” she said.

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