

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

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Realty and remodeling companies offering ways to fight global warming

Last updated June 25, 2007 7:32 p.m. PT

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From the hybrid Honda Civic in their driveway to the organic rice milk in their pantry, Junko Kikuchi and Don Farrell fit the image of an environmentally conscious Seattle couple.

But their 1953 Pinehurst house has swelled their environmental footprint and fouled the air they breathe.

"You're heating the city of Seattle with your duct leakage," Tom Balderston, a building-performance consultant with Seattle's Conservation Services Group, told them while evaluating their house earlier this month.

Kikuchi and Farrell bought their home in February through Seattle's GreenWorks Realty, a real estate brokerage that provides its buyers with a free green assessment, like the one Balderston provided, along with coupons for and a directory of green products and services. It's one way to attack some chief contributors to global warming.

Homes account for about 22 percent of total U.S. energy consumption, 21 percent of carbon-dioxide emissions and 9 percent of water use, according to the U.S. Green Building Council, a nonprofit group that promotes and sets standards for green building.

But while new green homes can be 30 to 50 percent more efficient than older ones, according to the council, they also tend to be more expensive, hard to find in fully developed cities like Seattle and lacking in the character of older houses.

"Often times clients don't buy green homes because they're not in the right location or they're not the right price or they fall in love with something else," said Eva Otto, a GreenWorks real estate agent. "There's also not that many green homes to buy."

Farrell said he and Kikuchi couldn't afford a new home -- at least not one they liked.

Buying an older house can be environmentally responsible in many ways. They don't require new resources, since they're already in place. They are generally smaller and more densely packed, saving on material and land; and they're typically closer to stores, offices and transit, making it easier to drive less.

But they often have little or no insulation, drafty windows and doors and leaky ducts -- particularly in temperate Seattle. And many otherwise environmentally conscious homeowners haven't done much about these issues.

"There was a disconnect for a long time," said Thor Peterson, Seattle's residential green-building specialist. "People thought about how long and far they drove their cars, but didn't necessarily think about the effect of their homes."

But people recently started paying more attention, Peterson said. Built Green, a green-building program the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties launched in 2000, is one of the few green-building programs with standards and certification for remodeling. It certified no green remodels

until 2002 and has totaled 35 since -- 21 since the start of 2006.

In September, the National Association of the Remodeling Industry, a professional association based in Des Plaines, Ill., launched a program to teach contractors how to improve indoor air quality, cut waste, and save energy and resources in remodeling projects. The group does not have statistics on green-building's share of the remodeling industry, which was worth about \$291.5 billion last year.

According to a survey the association cited, 46 percent of American homeowners say they would be eager to incorporate green principles into their homes, especially if it would save them money.

While the list of possible improvements to older homes can be lengthy, many are relatively cheap and easy, and some pay for themselves much more quickly than others.

"Part of the process is to kind of prioritize," GreenWorks owner Ben Kaufman said. "It can feel overwhelming."

Homes Balderston evaluates generally could save 20 to 30 percent on energy costs with \$4,000 to \$8,000 worth of work, he said. Replacing heating systems and windows cost much more, and take longer to pay themselves back, he said, but those improvements also add to a house's resale value.

As Balderston walked Kikuchi and Farrell's property earlier this month, he pointed out poor insulation, and leaky ducts -- some wasting heated air and some pulling air into the house through attic insulation and the sooty outdoor furnace closet. He tested how leaky the house was by using a large fan that sucked air out through the front doorway.

Farrell said he wanted to go green for health reasons and to help the planet.

"It seems like a small drop in the bucket," he said. "But if we don't take steps, how can we expect anyone else to?"

In fact, more than one-third of the typical American household's carbon emissions are attributable to home-energy use, according to the Nature Conservancy, a nonprofit environmental group.

After his visit, Balderston sent Kikuchi and Farrell a list of 21 recommended steps, with 14 marked as highest priorities. Some were as simple as using compact-flourescent light bulbs and regularly replacing the furnace filter. Other steps included weather stripping, sealing and insulation.

Balderston estimated recommended improvements at \$3,786, with a savings of \$1,225 a year in energy costs.

Despite such savings, most people don't launch projects just to make their homes more efficient, Peterson said. He tries to concentrate on including green feature in remodeling projects people plan for other reasons.

"That's inherently easier than trying to get them riled up enough to just do energy efficiency on its own," he said.

Pat Franklin and Darrell Syferd, who bought their 1942 Victory Heights home through GreenWorks in February, are planning a remodel to include efficient kitchen appliances, furnace and water heater, double-pane windows, insulation and the most sustainable kitchen flooring, cabinets and countertops they can afford.

After that, they'll see how much money they have left for other green improvements, Franklin said.

Kikuchi and Farrell bought new, efficient appliances, replaced some old windows and caulked around

others and painted with low-fume paint soon after moving into their house. Two weeks after getting the assessment, they had already sealed some ducts and were planning to do more.

But some things will have to wait, Farrell said. "There's a lot of stuff that we'd like to do that we really can't afford to do."

Here's a list of resources

- Seattle: offers guides on green building, including information specific to home remodeling. Go to seattle.gov/dpd/ and click on "Green Building" under the "What's Hot?" heading.
- Seattle City Light and Seattle Public Utilities let Seattle residents create a customized profile of their power and water use, with recommendations for savings. Go to seattle.gov/consERVE/homeprofile/.
- Puget Sound Energy offers rebates for many energy-efficiency measures. Go to pse.com or call 800-562-1482.
- Savingwater.org, a site sponsored by King County utilities, includes information about water-saving measures and rebates.
- The Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratories' Home Energy Saver, hes.lbl.gov, allows people to get customized information on energy-saving measures and estimated payback times.
- The federal government's Energy Star site, energystar.gov, offers information about efficiency measures and federal tax credits for certain improvements.
- The Nature Conservancy allows people to calculate their personal and household carbon footprint by source. Go to nature.org and click on "Climate Change," then "Carbon Calculator."
- GreenWorks Realty: greenworksrealty.com.

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