

The Gazette

Area experts say going green doesn't have to put you in the red

■ Increased property values,
lower bills among
long-term benefits

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Even as energy-efficient windows and top-of-the-line "green" heating and air-conditioning systems become increasingly trendy, area design and real estate experts are encouraging the less-publicized, and often more effective, measures to greening one's home.

Silver Spring resident Doug Horgan, for instance, cut his monthly gas bill by 20 percent and has seen at least a 15 percent drop in his monthly electric bills thanks to a one-time home-energy audit and air-sealing. In the audit, inspectors identify areas in a home where the most energy leaks out, typically from cracks in the attic, and seal them with extra insulation.

Horgan, a certified green-building architect and green-renovation mastermind, conducted his own audit and spent only about \$1,100. But a typical audit and sealing could cost up to \$2,000. Pocket change when one considers the \$1,800-plus Horgan and his wife save in energy bills each year.

"It's paying for itself in our energy and gas bills each month," he said. "[Green] windows often aren't that cost-effective. ... The No. 1 way to improve a home's energy use is to have



JEREMY ARIAS/THE GAZETTE

Doug Horgan, a green-building specialist with D.C.-based BOWA Builders, has made numerous eco-friendly renovations to his home, including installing solar panels to his roof and sealing cracks in his attic to prevent energy leaks.

a professional energy audit done. Fortunately, it's [also] one of the most economically affordable options."

Takoma Park resident Sat Jiwan Ikle-Khalsa owns the city-based Truthful Living building-and-design company, which conducts energy audits and provides consulting advice for residents looking to meet eco-friendly standards in home-construction projects.

He only pays \$25 a month in electric bills thanks to the solar panels he has installed on his roof, and he saves hundreds of dollars a year in

gas bills by heating his home with a corn stove.

"All of those can be done without doing a [structural] renovation," he said of his savings. "It's getting up into your attic and filling up cracks and leaks; if you have a proper roof, putting in some solar panels."

While the panels Ikle-Khalsa installed cost about \$28,000, he received a \$5,000 state grant and another \$2,000 in federal property tax credit available to homeowners making energy-efficient home improvements. He expects the panels will have

FOR MORE

■ Looking to make your house more environmentally friendly, or just trying to save a few bucks on your monthly energy bills? Check out some of the property-tax credits available through the Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection's energy-efficiency incentives.

■ For more information, including links to state and federal incentives programs, visit the county Web site, www.montgomerycountymd.gov/deptmpl.asp?url=/content/dep/Energy/incentives.asp#MC.

paid for themselves in the next 15 to 20 years, making them a long-term investment but, eventually, a sound one.

While experts like Horgan and Ikle-Khalsa have more access to the information and skills needed to make meaningful green renovations – and reap the financial benefits of them – even the thriftiest of homeowners can cash in on the green craze, often without spending a dime.

"The thing is, green is not a well-defined term; there are shades of green," said Takoma Park real estate agent Robbi Kimball. "For example if you were rehabbing your kitchen, you might go to Ikea and buy all new cabinets, or you might go to a salvage yard and use all used

cabinets. That's one form of being green."

Kimball also mentioned the hidden perk to noticeably environmentally friendly houses: the increase in property values for these residences on the often unpredictable housing market. Many buyers looking to move into eco-conscious havens like Takoma Park are aware that green houses tend to cost more upfront, but they also account for long-term energy savings and the economic stability of their purchases.

"Prices [for houses] in Takoma Park have gone down since 2006 anywhere from 4 to 7 percent," Kimball said. "But in Silver Spring, prices have gone down by 20 percent, so there's stability of investment here, and part of that is because of the shades of green issue."

Ikle-Khalsa agreed that eco-friendly options are often associated with higher price tags, but he added that for each individual homeowner, energy auditors would have to compile different recommendations with varying price estimates.

"Start with an assessment, both of the person and the household, in terms of their priorities and their budget," he said. "From there, you decide what's affordable, what's accessible, how long they plan to live in the house. ... Some people get solar panels in their house, and that's all they want to do. I hope that they want to go further."