

Program assists with energy audits
Anne Danahy

UNIVERSITY PARK — Joel Morrison wants to make buying a house more like shopping for a car.

Not necessarily haggling over the price, but letting the buyer know how efficient a prospective home is and how much fuel it takes to run it.

“The problem is energy efficiency is very abstract,” Morrison said.

Morrison, who is director of the West Penn Power Sustainable Energy Fund, is hoping to change that. The fund is managed in Penn State’s Energy Institute. About nine months ago, the fund started PA Home Energy, a program that aims to help residents find ways to reduce the amount of energy they use.

PA Home Energy is certified to award the national Energy Star label, which means that a new building has met stringent efficiency requirements. And, PA Home Energy is spearheading efforts to get builders and contractors in Pennsylvania certified to inspect new and existing homes to learn if they’re using more energy than they need to and to make sure they’re safe.

Morrison said the reward for home buyers and homeowners is not just lower energy bills, but more comfort. Owners of new homes can get the Energy Star label, which could help them sell their houses in the future.

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Allegheny Power customers who have an audit by one of PA Home Energy’s service providers can get help paying for it. They can receive between \$200 and \$1,000 back, depending on the steps taken after the audit.

Barbara Robuck, who handles marketing and communications for the fund, said most people are familiar with the Energy Star logo and know that if a product has one, it will be more energy efficient.

“But most people have no idea that now you can get that label on a new house, or that we have Energy Star programs to help with existing homes to make them more efficient,” Robuck said.

To be part of PA Home Energy, contractors have to get certified by both Residential Energy Services Network, a nonprofit organization that sets standards for energy efficiency ratings systems; and by the Building Performance Institute, which has building performance certification programs.

That dual certification means the inspections cover home safety, energy efficiency and water use. New homes that are certified receive the national Energy Star label. Owners of existing homes that follow the recommendations produced by the inspections receive a certificate from PA Home Energy with a list of the improvements made.

“Imagine the power that label will have as home energy costs increase,” Robuck said.

Right now, Envinity is the only company in Centre County approved by PA Home Energy to perform audits of both new and existing homes. MHP’s PA Energy Audits in Bellefonte is an approved provider for existing homes, as is Energy Professionals Insulation in Lock Haven.

There are 17 providers in Pennsylvania that are part of PA Home Energy, but that number may soon rise. Robuck said about 175 contractors and businesses people turned out for the recent PA Home Energy conference.

West Penn Power Sustainable Energy Fund was created by West Penn Power when deregulation in Pennsylvania was approved in the 1990s. Penn State’s Energy Institute was selected to administer the fund, which was incorporated in 2000. It serves a 23-county region, including most of Centre County.

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