
Watt's Happening? How to Find an Energy-Efficient Home



DWELLING ON DWELLINGS:

By **Brad Boisvert**

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (www.eia.doe.gov) and the Safe Energy Communications Council (www.safeenergy.org), New Hampshire businesses and residents pay for some of the most expensive electricity in the country.

As such, energy efficiency should be a top concern for homebuyers in this area. But how can you tell if a house is efficient?

The prove is in the billing. Ask the selling agent for a month-by-month summary of the past two years' utility bills. Unusually high heating bills can merely be indicative of some extravagant living. But chances are it demonstrates some poor insulation.

Another tip is to look at the house in winter. (Or ask for winter photographs.) If eaves are draped with icicles, and there is little snow on the roof, it could mean that heat is escaping through the attic. If the roof is piled high with the white stuff, it's a good sign that the attic is well-insulated ... or that a blizzard occurred!

For a first-hand and better idea of how well a house saves energy, you have to play home detective and keep your eyes open. Here are a few things you should pay close attention to when reviewing homes:

Windows: Look for insulated double- or triple-paned windows. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, insulated windows can reduce heat loss by 25 to 50 percent!

Insulation: Proper insulation is key to both heating and cooling. Insulation is measured by an "R" value, the "R" representing the insulation's resistance to heat flow. The higher the "R" rating, the better. For New Hampshire, the U.S. Department of Energy recommends insulation levels of R-49 for attics and R-18 to R-28 for exterior walls. To estimate R ratings for standard fiberglass insulation, 3 inches equals about R-10; a foot of insulation is approximately an R-36.

Admittedly, for older homes, it's tough to verify insulation R-factors without actually peeking inside a wall, crawl space, or attic.

Ventilation: When examining a house, get a feel for how well it's ventilated. Consider window and door placement and if there are any ceiling fans or attic fans. Proper ventilation in the living areas makes a house more comfortable, reducing the

need for air conditioning in the summer, and possibly eliminating cold spots in the winter.

Heating systems: Without a doubt, newer furnaces -- whether oil-, wood-, gas-burning or electric -- are much more energy-efficient than their older counterparts of yesteryear. The most energy-efficient heating systems are geothermal heat pumps and radiant floor heating systems. When looking at homes, consider the age of the heating system and look for an Energy Star label. (Energy Star is a program managed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that enables consumers to identify energy-efficient appliances and systems.) The average rating for today's high-efficiency heating systems are better than 93, which means that for every dollar spent in operation, 93 percent is put back into the home as warm air.

Other considerations include the age of the water heater, the availability of programmable thermostats, and the existence of fireplaces or stoves that may augment the heating system.

Fireplaces, however, don't always help a heating system's efficiency. Without properly installed flues, fireplaces can waste energy as heat rises up and out the chimney.

Landscaping: Your house's surroundings and orientation also play a big role in energy consumption. For example, a house surrounded by trees will be better protected from chilling winds than a house in the great wide open. On the other hand, a preponderance of tall pines may shade your home from winter sun. In this respect, deciduous trees are better on the south side of the house than are evergreens.

Appliances: Depending on your lifestyle, the energy-efficiency of your appliances can save you a lot of money each month. If refrigerators, dishwashers, ranges, washers, and/or dryers come with the house, look for the Energy Star label to see how well the included appliances compare to other models. In the end, you may want to buy a new appliance anyway, rendering included appliances moot bargaining tools.

Weather proofing: Inspect the condition of caulking and weather stripping around doors and windows as well as insulation around hot- and cold-water pipes. Look for gaps and see if you can feel drafts around windows and wall outlets. (However, when it comes time to make an offer and negotiate, remember that these things are the easiest and often cheapest things to do yourself.)

For more information on energy-efficiency, visit the EPA's online Home Energy Advisor at <http://hit.lbl.gov>.

Brad Boisvert is a real estate professional with RE/MAX Coast to Coast Properties in Portsmouth. Call him at 431-1111 ext. 3812 or e-mail bradb@worldpath.com.

