

HOME HEATING

Energy costs on the rise, time to warm up

BY KATHY FLAXMAN

It's cool in Wayne Morrow's Moore Park home – about 18, maybe 20 degrees. He keeps his thermostat low, a practice that no doubt keeps his heating bills in line. But it also speaks to his concern for the environment, something that has been heightened by his experience working on the corporate side of a major bank.

“Our house, about 89 or 90 years old, has a gas-fired boiler and cast-iron radiators,” he says. “It's hard to keep it heated evenly and comfortably. But the reason I am careful about turning on the heat is that in doing consulting work with companies in the energy sector, such as coal-burning plants, I've seen how home power is generated, and it isn't pretty. I know society has to consume less energy.”

According to Enbridge Gas Distribution, the price of gas for home heating has gone up 40 to 50 per cent in the past year. And people who live in houses constructed before 1980 may have even more to worry about. Lots of these homes were constructed with little effective insulation.

Take the home Mr. Morrow shares with his wife, Sandra Hamilton, and their six-year-old twin boys, Ethan and Mal-

colm: It may have nothing more than some very old newspapers for insulation in the unrenovated parts of the ground floor. Older houses such as theirs – poorly insulated or not insulated at all, and with hot-water radiators – tend to be out and out energy gobblers.

The Ontario Energy Board requires companies in the energy business to promote measures that help the environment and the consumer. As an example of this, Enbridge supplies radiator heat reflectors for homes that qualify, charging only a \$25 delivery fee. The devices have been tested and are already in use in 5,000 Ontario homes.

Frank Snyder, president and general manager of Novitherm Canada Inc., the distributor of the panels, estimates that they save consumers approximately 4 per cent on their heating costs yearly.

“Enbridge pays Novitherm for the reflector panels to help its gas customers be energy-efficient,” Mr. Snyder says. “When Enbridge's customers consume less energy, it enables the company to stretch resources and serve more people. They've done a good job setting up programs like this one.”

The devices are installed be-

hind radiators next to poorly insulated exterior walls, Mr. Snyder explains, and reflect heat back into a room, preventing it from escaping through the wall.

“The panel will form a barrier to thermal transfer,” he says. “They are moulded to a saw-tooth shape, which causes the air to spin, sort of like a passive fan might, and the turbulence helps the air circulate.”

While the cost savings aren't enormous, the panels will make a house more comfortable. “People tell us that within a day or two [of installation], it feels warmer in the house,” Mr. Snyder says.

“Homes with a hot-water [heating] system may have one room that is very cold. That can be because the boiler heats the water, but doesn't heat enough to last until the last room; the water may be cold by the time it gets there. But with the heat reflectors, this problem can be alleviated and the home will feel warmer all over.”

Enbridge, like other such companies, also offers advice to homeowners on how to save energy. Caulking and sealing a house to get rid of drafts is strongly recommended, and cleaning the furnace and changing furnace filters is a



Frank Snyder installs heat reflector panels behind a radiator in a Toronto home. FERNANDO MORALES/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

must-do on a yearly basis.

Dave Walton, director of home ideas for Direct Energy, says that while a furnace works the hardest when it's the coldest outside, if the filter is dirty, it has to work even harder.

But, as any self-respecting utility company will point out, there are high-efficiency furnaces on the market, not to mention, programmable thermostats, many of which come with rebate offers.

“Most consumers want to help with environmental concerns,” Mr. Walton says, “but they do like to see some payback. A furnace that is more than 20 years old is sending 40 cents out of every dollar up the chimney.”

In the short term, homeowners with radiators can opt for heat reflectors, and those who aren't Enbridge customers can purchase them. For more information and an estimate, see Novitherm's website (www.novitherm.com).

Mr. Morrow may be checking out radiator reflectors himself. “Sandra and the kids definitely complain about being cold, especially when the heating season gets under way,” he reports. “If the heat reflectors can help us feel warmer, they're worth trying.”

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