

The Green Committee recently began an initiative to help neighbors reduce home energy consumption. For most of us that means using less electricity and gas. But what can or should you do? What can you afford? Will there be enough payback on the money you invest? Read the story below to learn how one neighbor (and Green Committee member) assessed her energy use and took action.

## **Energy Wise in Washington Heights by Melissa Scanlan**

### **It's Cold in Here!**

Ever since moving into our drafty, yet beautiful, Washington Heights home last year, I'd been wondering how to make some adjustments to our home and our energy usage that would reduce our family's impact on climate change, reduce our monthly utility bills, and enhance the value of our home. I know we're not alone in struggling with high energy usage because a new study that came out in October of 2008 shows that homes in the Milwaukee area require more energy to heat and cool than all but one major metropolitan area in the nation.

I was fixated for awhile on the windows. This was where I could literally feel cold air coming in during last year's harsh winter. But windows are expensive to replace, and it is hard to replace them with something that maintains the historic character of the house.

I decided to do a little investigating before taking the plunge, and I'm glad I did. First, I went to our energy supplier, We Energies, and used their internet tools to assess the past year of our energy usage and get ideas for easy and cheap ways we could reduce our bills and impact on climate change. Based on what I learned, I went around the house replacing standard incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescents, unplugged or turned off the power strip on appliances that were constantly sapping energy (who knew?!), and vigilantly turned off unnecessary lights. I wondered if these simple steps would really make a difference. The next month I checked our We Energies bill, which has a handy comparison to energy usage and costs from the same month a year ago, and was happily surprised to see that even these simple steps made a big difference: we saved almost \$60 in one month and reduced carbon dioxide emissions by half a metric ton!

### **Assess the Condition of Your House**

Encouraged by the **results from my first** steps, I wanted to see what else I could do. I found that Focus on Energy has a program **to improve** the energy efficiency of homes throughout Wisconsin. They have a directory of consultants who perform Home Energy Audits as well as a list of contractors who can carry out the needed improvements. (Visit <http://www.we-energies.com/residential/ecosts/ecosts.htm> to assess your home and [www.focusonenergy.com](http://www.focusonenergy.com) for more information on energy efficiency resources.)

From the list, I chose Keith Williams, a consultant from Building Services & Consultant. **Keith has years of experience in home energy savings and only performs the audit and reporting services. Because he does not install the products he recommends, he has no**

**financial interest in the improvements you chose to make.** Keith has been doing home energy audits for 7 years and spent 25 years prior to that as an insulation contractor. He offered to do the audit on my home as a demonstration project and share the results with the newly formed Green Committee of the Washington Heights Neighborhood Association. Keith also has a special reduced rate offer for Washington Heights residents as part of the Green Committee's efforts to reduce Washington Heights energy usage and help residents save money on utilities.

### **The Energy Use Audit**

The audit took a couple of hours, and included an evaluation of the home as an entire system of air flowing in and out. He used an infrared camera to see where insulation existed (and more often where it was lacking) on the entire shell of the home including the attic. Then he conducted a safety test to verify that combustion appliances, such as the furnace and hot water heater, are not exhausting carbon monoxide. What followed was a written report detailing the test results, showing an estimated cost and benefit analysis of recommended changes, and including requests for proposals that can be used to seek bids from contractors to undertake the work. Once any of the work is undertaken, Keith will return to make sure the contractors installed the improvements as specified in the proposal and do a follow up combustion test to make sure the appliances are still operating safely. Lastly, Keith will apply on your behalf for Focus on Energy cash back rewards or income-based assistance programs for completing the energy efficiency improvements.

Now back to those drafty windows ... The results of the audit showed that replacing the windows came in 6<sup>th</sup> place in terms of energy savings for each dollar spent, after insulation, caulking, and other modifications. The next step for us will be to implement the recommendations and measure the results.

The Green Committee will be tracking the collective efforts of residents of the Washington Heights neighborhood to reduce energy consumption and will report back on the impact we can all have on making our neighborhood a greener, more sustainable place to call home.

### **What's Your Carbon Footprint?**

Simple changes to electric usage for us resulted in:

- Electric usage for month compared to same month one year ago
  - Used 605 kWh less (equates to a reduction of .5 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>)
  - Saved \$59 on We Energies bill
  - Slashed actual energy usage to 383 kWh for the month, as compared to the national average of 750 kWh

\*To measure your carbon footprint, one tool is at [www.carboncounter.org](http://www.carboncounter.org)

### **Special Offer for Washington Heights Neighbors**

Keith Williams, Building Services and Consultant will charge Washington Heights residents \$275 for the energy audit (\$100 discount off the regular price). Call Keith to set up your audit: 414-431-2174 (Be sure to mention you're a Washington Heights resident!)

For residents who meet income qualifications, the audit and the recommended energy efficiency improvements are FREE. Example: For family of 5, if income is \$62,000 or less you qualify for assistance. Landlords with qualifying tenants can receive partial financial grants for the rental property. Check income eligibility at <http://www.focusonenergy.com/Residential/Targeted-Home-Performance.aspx>

### **About the Author:**

Melissa Scanlan lives with her husband, 3 small children, and Siberian Husky in Washington Heights. She is the Founder and Senior Counsel for Midwest Environmental Advocates, Wisconsin's only non-profit environmental law center.