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Happy spring, subscribers and customers:

### **Getting with the Program(s)**

To paraphrase the great Leonard Cohen, “Everybody knows...that their house is leaking.” Everybody also knows that, really, they ought to do something about it. Excuse time should be now be officially over for us all--never before has there been such a mighty array of forces to help us stop heating and cooling the great outdoors, wasting fossil fuel, and spending dough we don’t have to. The utility companies have been joined by the Federal government in offering up money for energy-efficiency upgrades—and so much is sloshing around that the worry on the street is that there aren’t enough skilled energy-efficiency retrofitters to handle the demand.

But where there are economic incentives, you can be sure there are entrepreneurial Americans trying to help spread the wealth. Two such groups in eastern Massachusetts are Next Step Living ([www.nextsteplivinginc.com](http://www.nextsteplivinginc.com)) and the Green Guild of Massachusetts ([www.GreenGuildofMass.com](http://www.GreenGuildofMass.com)). Both provide blower-door tests (in which a powerful fan is mounted in a building’s front door, blowing air out and lowering air pressure inside, revealing how leaky the structure is and where those leaks are) and infra-red camera analysis (in which a heat-sensitive camera shows what parts of the building envelope are contributing to energy loss). They also perform on-the-spot weatherization (quick fixes involving air sealing, pipe insulation, and the like). Such a visit, plus a report outlining further strategies for efficiency improvement, costs about \$500.

I recently arranged for a “blower-door party” in my neighborhood, conducted by Green Guild on an older home whose energy efficiency its owner had already worked long and hard to improve. Nonetheless, the building was shown to still have leaks and cold spots, and my neighbor was sent a report on various levels of retrofitting he could do, with estimated costs and projected payback periods for each undertaking. The neighbors who attended all left impressed and eager to have their own places tested.

Our local utilities, NSTAR and National Grid, offer up to **75% cash rebates** for such tests and accompanying weatherization, up to a total rebate of \$2,000. That points to a sweet spot of, to be precise, \$2666.67 of improvements for a maximum immediate return on investment. ( $\$2,666.67 \times .75 = \$2,000$  rebate)

On the Federal front, **tax credits are available at 30% of the cost**, up to \$1,500, in 2009 and 2010 (for existing homes only) for things like windows and doors, insulation, HVAC systems, water heaters, and even asphalt roofs (some are now Energy Star rated for their reflectivity). Similar credits, but with NO upper limit are available through 2016 (for new and existing homes) for geothermal heat pumps, solar panels, solar water heaters, and small wind-energy systems. Check [http://www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?c=products.pr\\_tax\\_credits](http://www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?c=products.pr_tax_credits) for details.

Finally (do you need any more prodding?), local utilities also give cash rebates on energy-efficient equipment like thermostats, boilers and furnaces. I recently had an indirect hot water heater installed (replacing my old gas-fired one). It cost \$2800, will save me lots of fuel over time, and, with a form I easily downloaded from NSTAR's website, I got \$300 back.

### **(Yet Another) Note on Windows**

Readers of this newsletter know that I do go on about the inadvisability of replacing original wood windows with modern thermal-pane units. An old window, properly weatherstripped and in combination with a good storm window, comes very close to equaling a modern window's energy efficiency, so why pay to tear one out and replace it with something that looks wrong on the building and will probably fail long before it pays itself back?

I was recently contacted by a contractor in Texas who read my comments on Consumer Reports' website (<http://blogs.consumerreports.org/home/2008/06/this-old-house.html>). Although he undercut some of his points by calling me an idiot and letting on that I made him vomit, he did point me towards a gentleman at the U.S. Department of Energy who he said would set me straight. So I called Marc LaFrance, the manager for Building Envelope and Windows R&D Programs at the DOE's Office of Building Technology. We had a great chat wherein he agreed with me on some points and argued for modern windows on others. (He is especially excited about triple-pane windows, specifically those developed by a company called SeriousWindows [<http://www.seriouswindows.com/>]. They have an R-11 rating, about four times better than a typical Energy Star-approved unit.)

In agreeing with me that old windows often deserve preservation, he did recommend that the storm windows that make them an efficient system be as airtight as possible and have a low-E coating. Low-emissivity glass essentially bounces heat back into the building.

- Harvey Industries makes a great storm, the Tru-Channel, at about \$120 for an average 3' x 5' window—and for an extra \$20, you get low-E glass. You'll have to get them through a contractor, as Harvey doesn't sell direct to consumers.
- For a lower-profile look (and at least twice the cost), check out units that mount inside the window's exterior frame—the best-known maker is Allied Window ([www.alliedwindow.com](http://www.alliedwindow.com)).

If your storms are old, or you don't have them at all, this spring would be a great time to get some good new ones up.

### **A Piece of History**

As millions of viewers have seen on the *New Yankee Workshop*, Norm Abram builds very nice furniture. However, it's been nearly impossible to get ahold of anything he's made—the pieces have all gone to...well, I'm not at liberty to say. There have been a few lucky *This Old House* homeowners who've received a Norm-crafted item, as we always tried to work a signature piece into each project, but for the public at large, forget it. Until now.

Working with the good folks at the Trustees of Reservations, Norm is building a press cupboard (<http://www.newyankee.com/getproduct.php?9911>) from pine boards extracted from the Old House at Appleton Farms. Located in Ipswich, Massachusetts, Appleton Farms is a remarkable spot: a land grant dating from 1636, it's the oldest continuously operating farm in America, with a thriving community-supported agriculture program and 1,000 acres of rolling land open to all ([http://www.thetrustees.org/pages/249\\_appleton\\_farms.cfm](http://www.thetrustees.org/pages/249_appleton_farms.cfm)).

Norm's piece will be auctioned at the Farmhouse Formal, a dinner-dance fundraiser on June 13, 2009, at the farm. Proceeds from the event will go to the establishment of the Appleton Farms Center for Agriculture and the Environment, which will be based in the renovated Old House. For more information, visit [www.appletonfarms.org](http://www.appletonfarms.org).

### **For Anyone Who Has Ever Loved a Kitchen**

I gave a talk at the Residential Design and Construction trade show in early April with cabinetmaker Paul Reidt and architect Tim Techler, two guys who knew a lot more about our topic, "The Modernist Kitchen," than I did. Paul's firm, Kochman, Reidt, and Haigh (<http://www.cabinetmakers.com/>), makes some of the finest custom kitchens in the country, and Tim designs beautiful contemporary homes (<http://www.techlerdesign.com/>). Both have reported an upsurge in client interest in new kitchens in the modernist style.

They recently worked together on an original modernist kitchen on Six Moon Hill in Lexington, in the former home of one of this trailblazing community's founders, Norman Fletcher. I once wrote a magazine article about Six Moon Hill (<http://bruceirving.biz/news.html> --click on "Bauhaus in the 'Burbs"), but I was not deep on the kitchens of the period--that is, until I got my hands on a new book, *America's Kitchens*, published by Historic New England. It's a great and accessible historical overview of the most important room in the house. A showcase of technology, a reflection of social conditions, and a repository of some of our fondest childhood memories, the American kitchen has followed a fascinating road on its way to becoming the most expensive room in the house. I learned a lot from the book. Highly recommended: [http://www.historicnewengland.org/resources/Americas\\_Kitchens.asp?Sect=6](http://www.historicnewengland.org/resources/Americas_Kitchens.asp?Sect=6).

### **Self-Promotional Bits**

A recently completed project of mine was shown on NECN's *New England Dream House*. I helped two young homeowners put together a winning team of architect and builder to transform an old Tudor Revival outside of Boston into a crisp, clean new home with a modern feel inside its traditional exterior. <http://www.necn.com/New-England-Dream-House/Saving-Money-on-Large-Projects/1238294995.html>

I'm quoted in the May issue of *Consumer Reports*, which has an interesting survey of 17,000 readers, asking about 18 common home improvement projects, from painting a room to putting on an addition. One of the findings: More than 25 percent of respondents said they paid for poor planning—a median of \$625. Even seemingly simple projects such as interior painting cost CR readers a median of \$280 extra because of various issues they hadn't thought through. Since I help my clients think renovations through, please keep me in mind for when you or someone you know starts contemplating a project of any size.