

Nonprofit helps homeowners go green and save 'green' too

By CODY KRAATZ

Sunnyvale residents Mike and Jean Somlo are green, but they could be greener. Tim Sutton and Lori Meyers, volunteers trained through environmental nonprofit Acterra's Green@Home program, can help.

Acterra recently began offering its free HouseCall service in Sunnyvale. A two-person team comes to your home at your convenience for a roughly two-hour visit.

They offer tips and give you tools to increase energy efficiency—some of them simple, like a free retractable clothesline, and some of them detailed, like making sure the water heater and refrigerator are at the right temperature.

As it turned out, Mike Somlo already knew what he needed to do next.

"We lose a lot of energy heating our water on the other side of the house," he said, explaining how long it takes for hot water to get from the water heater tank to the shower or sink. He plans to buy some insulation to install on the hot water pipes under the house, he said. "My guess is I could save a lot of energy and water by doing that."

Meyers, a Palo Alto resident, took it a step further when she checked the Somlos' water heater. "Basically you can just wrap it in a blanket," which poses no fire hazard, and then put inexpensive insulation around all of the exposed copper pipes that are warm to the touch, she said. Heat loss is inefficient.

The Somlos, however, are doing most things right.

They have solar panels that supply more than their total electricity usage. They turn down their water heater when they go out of town. Their hot water and refrigerator were at just the right temperatures when Meyers checked them.

They've installed sun tunnels that channel and magnify sunlight from the roof,—so much light, in fact, that they easily illuminate a dark room and can be mistaken for electric lights.

Their small lap pool remains a major consumer of natural gas to heat it, but with three layers of pool covering and a greenhouse-like cover it's about as efficient as it's going to get while preserving its exercise value.

Some homes could use major overhauls, such as double paned



Photograph by Jacqueline Ramseyer

Lori Meyers with Green@Home checks the water temperature of the garage sink and water heater in Mike Somlo's house during a free energy audit.



Photograph by Jacqueline Ramseyer

Tim Sutton (left) and Lori Meyers, with Green@Home, interview Mike Somlo about places of concern to him and his wife, Jean, in their home before conducting a free energy audit to determine where the couple can save money.

windows or better insulation, but usually "we're more about the small changes, a lot of little things they can do that make a huge difference," said Meyers.

For now, the Somlos are eyeing the low-hanging fruit of simple efficiency.

Generally, the people who have signed up for the 40 HouseCalls so far have been very environmentally conscious people who were somehow connected with Acterra already, said Liz Muir, the Green@Home program coordinator.

Increasingly, Muir said the program is reaching out to the general public, and more people are setting up appointments because they want to save money.

The program is also active in Redwood City, Menlo Park and Palo Alto, where Acterra is based, and wants to expand into other cities. There are plans to set up a contract with the city of Cupertino.

Energy—and money—conservation tips

Turn down your water heater when you go on vacation, wrap it in an insulating blanket and insulate all the hot water pipes.

Keep your refrigerator full—it's most efficient then, plus there are more snack options. Run the dishwasher and washing machine only when they're full, too.

Install compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs).

Turn off your computers, TVs and other devices completely by using a power strip with a switch. Even in standby, many electronics use a lot of electricity.

Install low-flow showerheads.

The big-ticket item on Acterra's basic Green@Home checklist was inflating car tires to the proper level—an estimated savings of \$31 to \$124 and 371 pounds of CO₂ per year.

For more information or to sign up for a HouseCall, visit www.acterra.org or contact Liz Muir at lizm@acterra.org.

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