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Chevy Chase man is town's energy auditor

Resident oversees home improvements to save on heating, cooling costs

by Andrew Ujifusa | Staff Writer

One of Mike Whelan's primary concerns during his workday is insulation. But during a recent home energy inspection in Chevy Chase on a warm Thursday morning, Whelan himself looked a little too insulated, as he extricated himself from a sweaty full-body cotton suit that he wears as a home energy consultant.

"Every house has its own unique characteristics," Whelan said.

A Town of Chevy Chase resident, Whelan has been conducting home energy audits and overseeing energy efficiency improvements for roughly nine months, performing on average 10 home audits per month as part of the business he runs out of his home, Live Green.

Although his environmentally-friendly service is not unique in the county, Whelan is the only contractor in Chevy Chase participating in the Maryland Home Performance with Energy Star program, which is sponsored by the Maryland Energy Administration. The program trains and certifies contractors to perform home energy audits and install whole-home energy improvements.

He has also volunteered time to the town's Climate Protection Committee and helped to start the town's Climate Corp, which plans to send young people on free home energy inspection tours. His energy audit demonstration at a home last July drew about 20 residents; he also hosted a free workshop at his home last November about how to install weather stripping, which is used to seal air leaks around windows and doors.

"He's like our point man on all of the technical stuff," said town resident Judith McGuire, chair of the Climate Protection Committee, which seeks to limit the town's impact on the environment. "He really keeps us up to date on what's really the reality of home energy efficiency."

Using a wide variety of tools — from an infrared camera that analyzes heat disparities between a home's interior and exterior, to a "blower door" fan device and pressure gauge that show how much air is flowing through a home — Whelan tries to maximize home energy efficiency wherever possible.

"I think there's a lot about our homes that most of us don't know," said Suzanne Parmet, Whelan's wife, who keeps the books for Live Green.

A registered architect, Whelan knew that when he moved to the town about two years ago that he did not want to go work for an established company, and wanted to start his own business.

During the past winter, Village of Martin's Additions resident Jackie Roberts became tired of her family room and kitchen getting too cold. After seeing Whelan's service advertised at a discount in a local newsletter, Roberts called him for help.

"We were really trying to figure out where to get the biggest bang for our dollar," she said.

Whelan noted that many of the homes in Chevy Chase are relatively old, like Roberts' house, with several built in the 1920s. Many homes also have additions, he said, which create additional efficiency problems.

During his inspection, Whelan also studies mold buildup, appliances such as furnaces and hot water heaters, and the structural integrity of the house. He then consults with the homeowner on the best improvements and provides a follow-up test after any upgrades are installed.

Roberts said that she had a 20 percent reduction in her March energy bill from February because of Whelan's recommendations regarding insulation and caulking.

"I can actually walk on my kitchen floor without needing to wear socks and shoes," she said.

McGuire, meanwhile, is focused on Whelan's potential to help the town meet its pledge to cut its carbon emissions 12 percent by 2012. She said 75 percent of the cuts are slated to come from increased home energy efficiency.

"He's absolutely critical to our whole success," she said.

For his part, Whelan said even newer homes have not solved problems with home energy waste.

"We still have a long ways to go," he said.