

House & Home

From blighted to energized

Foreclosed home gets efficiency upgrade

By Thomas Content of the Journal Sentinel

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This is no typical Milwaukee bungalow.

From the solar panels on the roof to the wall-mounted boiler in the basement, this bungalow in the city's south side Silver City neighborhood is being billed as an energy champ.



Boosting confidence in city neighborhoods and promoting energy efficiency to reduce energy costs are dual goals of a new initiative launched by the Layton Boulevard West Neighbors in Milwaukee.

Tapping into a coalition of businesses that donated equipment and services, the nonprofit organization is looking to tackle the foreclosure crisis, one house at a time, block by block.

"It's solid housing stock in that neighborhood, but if you start getting one (foreclosed home) and another three doors down, it starts that downward trend, so that's their mission - neighborhood stabilization," said David Ciepluch, energy efficiency project strategist at We Energies.

"We're calling it the turnkey renovation program," said project coordinator Jeremy Belot of Layton Boulevard West Neighbors. "We're turning the blighted houses in the neighborhood into assets."

The Silver City home, now vacant, has been renovated since last summer by a group led by Belot, with financial support from We Energies and its foundation, Johnson Controls, Focus on Energy and others.

Silver City is a neighborhood centered along National Ave., south of the Menomonee River Valley and near the Mitchell Park Domes.

A key improvement in energy efficiency came from replacing the old boiler with a highly efficient Munchkin boiler that provides heating and serves as

backup to the Johnson Controls-installed solar hot water system with new panels on the south-facing roof.

The donation helped Johnson Controls provide a project for renewable-energy installers who needed training, and it turned the project into something more than just shoring up the house's insulation.

The project supports the community and serves to educate people about renewable energy in an urban setting - and the fact that solar energy can be effective in Wisconsin and not just far-flung sun-drenched locales, said Don Albinger, Johnson Controls vice president of renewable energy solutions.

"It also helps make people aware there's a greener future out there in the marketplace," Albinger added.

The energy-efficiency home concept is designed to help people with limited incomes afford not only to buy a home - but to be able to handle monthly energy bills after they move in. The target is a first-time home buyer, and the non-profit group is offering \$2,500 down payment grants to qualified first-time buyers.

Several people have expressed interest in the home, which has two bedrooms and one bath, Belot said. The house is on the market for \$117,000

"We hear from people in the neighborhoods who are paying \$500 or more on their utility bills. If we do our homework, we don't want to add to that," said Charlotte John-Gomez, Layton Boulevard West Neighbors executive director.

Through the renovations, the home's original character was retained, including old woodwork, plaster walls and crown moldings. But this isn't your average fixer-upper.

New Pella and Silverline Energy Star windows were added, and Energy Star T9 Circline fluorescent lighting fixtures were installed, along with compact fluorescent bulbs in other spots. Lagina Plumbing installed water-saving low-flow plumbing equipment.

Energy audit found leaks

Energy efficiency advocates consider the home a model because the energy upgrades were all done at once, in comprehensive fashion, after an audit used a blower door test and infrared analysis to determine how and where the home was leaking heated air.

Put simply, experts say, if a home is drafty, it costs a homeowner money.

A typical century-old Milwaukee bungalow loses plenty of heated air in the winter through leaky spots in the attic and through poorly insulated or non-insulated walls.

"This is a home that has increased its efficiency by greater than 50%," Ciepluch said. "Even if it's 80 degrees in a home like that, it's not that comfortable because the wall cavity is 0 degrees. The air temperature may be warmer, but it's continually being sucked out."

The infrared and blower door test by energy consultant Keith Williams of Building Services & Consultant found the home needed all sorts of insulation, including low-technology measures such as insulation blown into the walls and a layer of foam insulation added to the exterior wall of the basement by the foundation.

"That's one of the areas where a lot of energy escapes the home - where the brick is exposed to the air," Ciepluch said. "They had to do some foundation work, so while they were doing that foam was added to the exterior wall. It goes down 2 or 3 feet below the surface of the ground."

Clearly the new furnace and solar hot water system will help reduce energy costs, said Belot, who said the project would not have come about without the help of its partners who helped to keep the costs affordable.



"A lot of the things you can't see are not popular," he said. "Everybody wants a solar panel, and they think that's what's going to get the efficiency rating on the house. It's the non-sexy things that probably are more important than any other features you see on the home."

That includes, first and foremost, insulation, whether added to the attic, the walls or the foundation, but also air sealing and caulking of any air gaps where air is leaking out of the house. Start by dealing with "all the nooks and crannies and top plates in the attic," Ciepluch said.

The proof is in the latest We Energies bill, which came in at \$121. Though abnormally low because the house is vacant and the thermostat has been set low, the change is still dramatic, falling from \$430 the previous month.

Belot already has his eyes on other foreclosed homes nearby in the Silver City and Layton Boulevard West neighborhoods that he hopes to renovate once the one on S. 29th St. is sold. But Tri-City Bank wants to get this foreclosed home sold first before moving onto another energy-minded renovation.

One house at a time. Block by block.



MaryJo Walicki

EHOME, BIZ - Jeremy Belot, left, explains to Rick and Natalie Schild, the efficiency of a new thermal water heating system installed in a newly renovated house in Milwaukee's Silver City neighborhood. The Schild's are considering purchasing the home from the Layton Boulevard West Neighborhood Association. The house had been vacant and foreclosed when renovations started, and project managers turned the home into an airtight model of energy efficiency and renewable energy.