

Good news: You're being audited!

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Unlike the IRS version, a home-energy audit can save you money. It provides a comprehensive assessment of your home's heating, cooling, and distribution systems; an insulation checkup; and a review of your energy bills. A well-trained auditor will also interview you to correct any inefficient behaviors. Audits have proven so effective at curbing energy use that Austin, Texas, requires home sellers to share their results with buyers.

Costs vary

Certified auditors charge from \$300 to \$800. But you might not have to pay anything. Some local utilities offer free audits. If not, consider doing it yourself, especially if you think your home is relatively efficient. The Department of Energy's Web site, at www.energysavers.gov, has detailed information on do-it-yourself energy audits and links to finding local auditors. If the results of your DIY audit look bad, hire a professional for a more detailed assessment.

Check credentials

Those who are certified by the Building Performance Institute (BPI) or the Residential Energy Services Network (RESNET) have undergone thorough training and will probably use a calibrated blower door and an infrared camera. Those tools enable the auditor to quantify the amount of air leakage and the probable effectiveness of any air-sealing job.

Though RESNET stops with the audit, BPI also has certified contractors who are trained to make necessary fixes, plus third-party inspectors who ensure compliance with BPI standards.

Bottom line

Not all energy-saving projects are equal. So have the auditor prioritize any suggested work by savings and payback time.

Also remember that not everyone who hangs a green shingle has the training to identify inefficiencies. There are eco-consultants, who might charge \$99 for a 60-minute walk-through of your home, pointing out leaky faucets and inefficient lightbulbs. Then there are general contractors who see energy efficiency as the one bright spot in an otherwise shrinking industry. Last but not least are single-product salespeople. "Homeowners have been hearing forever that replacing their windows can save 40 percent," says Chandler von Schrader, head of the Environmental Protection Agency's Home Performance with Energy Star program. "These claims aren't justified and they create a false expectation."