

ED VOYTOVICH

His, HERS, Ours

A guide for the perplexed



we hear about home energy audits the way we hear about the weather. The Home Energy Rating System? Not so much.

HERS raters have traditionally worked in new construction. They, like auditors, use technical equipment and a sophisticated software such as REM/Rate to model the energy use of a home before it's built. This energy model produces a HERS index similar to the miles-per-gallon rating for automobiles and compares the energy use of the rated home to a comparable size home built to the 2004 International Energy Conservation Code.

RATE, TEST, ADVISE

HERS raters determine whether the home will meet certain standards above and beyond code and visit the project during construction to verify that key details are properly handled. They test it when it's done to verify that it performs to the level projected in the model. Only a HERS rater can determine whether a new home qualifies for the Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star Home label. The best raters become regular advisers to the contractors who rely upon them to be well informed and current in their knowledge of building performance.

HERS raters are certified by HERS providers who qualify them by reviewing their computer models, mentoring them, checking their work in the field when they first seek certification, and conducting rigorous annual quality assurance procedures on their work. HERS providers are responsible for the quality of the raters' work.

Residential Energy Services Network (RESNET), accredits the providers. Think of RESNET as the Pentagon; HERS providers are the commanding officers in the field.

The HERS industry was always intended to play a much larger role. Many municipalities now regard a HERS rating as demonstration of energy-code compliance. This only makes sense, so expect to see more code-compliance ratings in the future.

But wait, there's more: Only HERS raters can do the computer modeling and testing for Energy Efficient Mortgages (EEMs) and Energy Improvement Mortgages (EIMs). EEMs and EIMs are great selling resources for remodelers, and you may want to connect with a rater in your area. You might even want to become one.

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KIA RICCHI

The Gift of Knowledge

Help your clients make educated decisions



Homeowners often are asked to make important decisions without having the tools to do so. When hiring a contractor, they sometimes make price — instead of professionalism — a top priority. As a result, many homeowners go with a low bid from a less-qualified contractor who often is not licensed or insured. To grumble that the homeowner "should know better" doesn't serve anyone — and doesn't enhance the general public's opinion of contractors.

TRUST BUT VERIFY

To improve your odds of winning a bid, consider giving the gift of knowledge. Let potential customers know that although they are wise to obtain several quotes, they must also confirm

that each contractor meets the state's requirements for contracting. This is easily accomplished by using the Internet to access government websites. From contractor licensing to workers' compensation insurance, homeowners can learn not only what is required of contractors but why it is important.

Additionally, these government websites contain databases that allow the public to verify a contractor's compliance. Every homeowner should know that government databases are the most accurate means to verify a contractor's professional license and workers' comp insurance. If a contractor has been disciplined by a regulating authority, this information may also be viewable on government websites.

EXPLAIN & DEMYSTIFY

Homeowners should also be aware of other criteria used to determine professionalism in our industry. Real pros don't try to hide the finer points of contracting. *continued on page 26*

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Rather, they demystify the contracting process by explaining legalities to potential customers.

- Contractors who educate prospects establish themselves as experts and keep homeowners out of trouble. Here's the information I give to homeowners when submitting a bid.
- States that require contractor licensing do not allow a licensed construction company to pull a permit for an unlicensed entity that has contracted directly with the homeowner. In short, an unlicensed tradesperson cannot do business under another person's license.
- Contracting with an individual in contrast to a business entity may require the homeowner to withhold payroll taxes and fulfill other obligations as an "employer."
- Consistency is king. All contracting documents such as the license, certificate of insurance, contracts, and checks should contain the name of the business entity.
- Ensure that the contractor pulls a permit for the work as required by the building department. If a contractor asks the homeowner to pull the permit, it may signify that he or she does not meet the state's requirements for contracting. Additionally, when the owner pulls the permit, he or she may assume additional responsibility and liability.
- A homeowner may have no legal recourse if he or she does not follow the law.

Today, obtaining information is not as difficult as it was in the past — especially when an expert guides the way. If you step into the homeowners' shoes, they will start off on the right foot and not trip up when the job is under way.

—Kia Ricchi is a Florida-licensed building contractor and author of Avoiding the Con in Construction, thecontractress.com.



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TED CUSHMAN

Becoming Energy Wise

It's up to us

If you read the papers, you see a continual tension between the demand for energy and the supply. In Japan, homes go dark while utilities struggle to control nuke plants. Meanwhile, here at home, people feel a less catastrophic pinch: Houston and El Paso, for example, had rolling blackouts in February because of a cold snap.

SUPPLY & DEMAND

Energy companies are pouring megabucks into power systems. But progress comes at a heavy price — and not just in dollars. BP's disastrous Deepwater Horizon spill made us all stop and think about the true cost of our fuel. In Pennsylvania, companies hydrofracking the Marcellus Shale for gas have dumped uncounted gallons of contaminated water into rivers; state authorities report 2,258 environmental violations to date (source: marcellusgas.org).

That's just the big stuff. There's also the little, local stuff. Traveling in the Florida Panhandle in March, I saw Progress Power placing giant steel power poles along Highway 98; in Apalachicola, some townsfolk are fighting to keep the huge power towers out of their historic downtown.

That's the supply side. What about the demand side? Florida Solar Energy Center's Phil Fairey told me in 2009 that the energy we could save by improving the performance of Florida's existing homes far exceeds the energy we could pump from under the floor of the Gulf. And that's just Florida. But no giant enterprise is

pouring billions into upgrading American houses. Why not? Well, remodeling happens on a different scale. Remodeling's Big50 are companies that gross a million, 2 million, maybe 5 million bucks a year. Friends, we are not billionaires.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

And, of course, most remodelers aren't focused just on energy. But for some, energy is a calling. Like Dave Robinson, who's upgrading and flipping foreclosed homes in Fresno, Calif., or Mike Rogers, whose company, GreenHomes America, is creating home performance franchises in several states.

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It's just a start. Robinson wants to train 1,000 energy-wise house flippers; so far, he has maybe a dozen. GreenHomes America wants to be in all 50 states; so far, I think, they're in four.

But it's growing. And the big investors on the supply side have a reason to get onboard. As Rogers said to me last month, "When the recession ends, consumption is going to surge. And the utilities are on the hook for more power than they can supply. They've picked the low-hanging fruit. They're going to have to get behind deep reductions."

But with or without the big boys, the actual work is going to get done by small enterprises, working house by house. Wise use is up to us.

—Ted Cushman, a regular Remodeling blogger, writes the Coastal Connection newsletter and frequently contributes to Remodeling's sister publication The Journal of Light Construction .