



The Balance Sheet

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Cornell Cooperative Extension's Family Economics and Resource
Management Program Work Team

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We can't state it enough! Spring has FINALLY sprung! Many consumers are chomping at the bit to get started on home improvement/repair/maintenance and upkeep projects, some of which have intensified due to property damage sustained over the winter months. It's also that time of year when we see lawn signs and posters heralding in garage sale season. Whether you're holding a sale or you like to frequent them, this issue contains information to help you get ready for both. April 15 was tax filing day. Hopefully, you filed your taxes on time and got a refund. This issue contains some ideas on what to do with that refund. ~

The FERM Program Work Team

Team members include Barb Henza, Cortland County; Nancy Reigelsperger, Steuben County; Linda Law-Saunders, Washington County; Marcia DeLucia-Evans, Albany County; Theresa Mayhew, Columbia & Greene Counties; Valle Castner, Yates County; Sean Welsh, Sullivan County; Joe Laquatra & Mark Pierce, CCE Environmental Design & Analysis, Cornell University; and community member Ann Gifford, Tompkins County.

Springtime Energy Conservation Projects

By Joe Laquatra, Cornell University,
Environmental Design & Analysis



With memories of a very cold winter fresh in our minds, the time is right to improve the level of energy efficiency in your home – not only to reduce your energy expenditures, but also to make your home more comfortable, and to reduce your carbon emissions.

Research has shown that the average head of household does not know where to begin when upgrading a home's energy performance. The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) recommends taking a three-step approach: stop air leaks, add attic insulation, and improve the efficiency of your heating system.

Air leaks cost the average U.S. household \$350 per year. They typically occur around windows and doors, where dissimilar building materials meet, and through attic floors where holes are drilled for electrical wires and pipes. People with home repair skills can seal many leaks with caulking compounds and weather stripping, but they are unlikely to seal all of them. Many are not visible to the naked eye and can only be found through a "blower door test".

A contractor who has been accredited through the Building Performance Institute (BPI) performs this test. DOE describes a blower door as "... a powerful fan that mounts into the frame of an exterior door. The fan pulls air out of the house, lowering the air pressure inside. The higher outside air pressure then flows in through all unsealed cracks and openings." What is described as a smoke pencil, but is actually a fine powder in a pencil-shaped stick, is used to detect leaks while the fan is operating.

Most New Yorkers are eligible for a free energy assessment of their home, including a blower door test, through the **Home Performance with ENERGY STAR**® program. Find out more about the program at this link: <http://www.nyserda.ny.gov/All-Programs/Programs/Home-Performance-With-ENERGY-STAR>

DOE recommends adding attic insulation because most attics are accessible to homeowners and are not adequately insulated. Attic insulation recommendations are based on climate zones. New York State has two climate zones where R-values for attic insulation vary between R-49 and R-60. You can view the climate zone map and insulation recommendations here:

http://www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?c=home_sealing.hm_improvement_insulation_table

After air leaks are sealed and insulation is added to the attic, it is time to improve the efficiency of your heating system. Since the building enclosure has been made more efficient, your furnace or boiler is likely to be oversized, or producing more heat than your home needs. Oversized heating systems make homes uncomfortable and waste money. The problems of an oversized heating system can be partially corrected by derating. This refers to adjustments that reduce the rate at which fuel is burned. In an oil-based heating system, a smaller nozzle is installed in the burner. A gas-based heating system is derated by reducing the burner orifice size or by decreasing the pressure in the manifold, the pipe that distributes gas to the burners. Derating a gas system also involves installing a fixed flue damper to modify the flue opening.

Spring is the perfect time to have your furnace or boiler serviced by a trained technician who can make sure the unit is operating safely and at peak efficiency. In addition to these issues, you can ask the technician to check if the unit is properly sized for your house. You can learn more about heating system efficiency at this link: <http://www.human.cornell.edu/dea/outreach/upload/OilGasCentralHeating.pdf>

Preventing Home Improvement Nightmares

By Barb Henza , CCE Cortland County



Spring is finally here. After this tough winter, thoughts of home repair and improvements may be on your mind. Here are some tips from the New York State Attorney General's office to protect you when you work with home improvement contractors.

Never agree to have work done on the spot. Special caution should be taken with door-to-door sales. Be especially leery of "I was in the neighborhood" sales pitches, special deals for each additional customer you obtain for the contractor, or suspiciously low prices. If the person offering to do the work insists that it be done right now and that payment be made in cash, politely decline their offer. A reputable contractor will be glad to give you time to think things over before deciding to go ahead with the work.

Shop around. Get at least two estimates — three on big jobs. The estimate should include specific information about the materials and services to be provided. Take the time to learn what's involved in the type of home improvement you want. When you are talking with potential contractors be as specific as possible about what you want the finished work to look like.

Check out potential contractors thoroughly before you hire them. Call someone who has worked for you before or ask friends, neighbors or relatives for the names of contractors who have done satisfactory work for them. Ask if the contractor did quality work and stayed within cost estimates. Look for signs that the contractors you are considering are reliable. These can include: having an established place of business, a valid license if it's required to do this type of work in your area, no outstanding Better Business Bureau complaints against them, and that they have a good reputation with local bankers, suppliers or the government agency that inspects home improvements needing a permit. You want to be sure that if something does go wrong, you will be able to find the contractor and get it fixed.

Garage Sale Season is Here

By Theresa Mayhew,
CCE Columbia & Greene Counties

Whether you call them rummage, tag or garage sales – they're a great way to help you declutter and make some extra money. Here are some things to consider about having a garage sale:

- Check to see if you need a permit
- Fridays and Saturdays are popular days to hold sales
- Canvas neighbors to see if they'd like to join in.
- Start cleaning out your closets, attic, basement & shed
- Make sure items are clean and in good working order
- Go through pockets, bags and books for money, receipts & jewelry
- Remove potable items from your garage that aren't for sale
- Start saving bags and newspapers
- Have change on hand to deal with ATM twenties
- Keep your cash box hidden; use a fanny pack to make change
- Have a calculator, tape, scissors, and tape measure on hand
- Price everything!
- Place larger items on your driveway to draw folks in
- Keep breakables out of the reach of children
- Place electronics and appliances near an electrical outlet
- Keep valuables near the check-out area
- Have a "guy" table featuring tools and sports gear
- Advertise your sale via newspapers, online sites, and signs
- Recruit a friend to help out the day of the sale
- Do not accept checks UNLESS you know the person well
- Keep pets inside. Lock your doors.
- Know where other sales are in your area
- Offer a "free" box filled with odds and ends
- Once your sale is over, take down your signs
- Donate any leftover items to charity or box them up for your next sale

Insist on a written contract that includes the price and description of work needed. The contract should also include the name, address, telephone number and license number of the home improvement contractor, the estimated dates when the work will begin and be completed, a specific description of the work to be done, and a schedule of progress payments if the contract calls for them. Call the Building Department of the city or town to find out what permits, variances or inspections are required for the job. Make sure that all permits and inspections are obtained, even if this is the contractor's responsibility.

Never pay the full price of the home improvement up front and never pay in cash. Negotiate a payment schedule tied to the completion of specific stages on the job. Any progress payments that you do make must bear a "reasonable relationship" to the work done.

Be a Clutter Buster and Get Organized!

By Nancy Marie Reigelsberger, CCE Steuben County



Did you ever feel like "it's all too much"? Clutter can be very sneaky, creeping into our homes and our lives until we feel overwhelmed. Clutter causes us to show up late, to avoid having guests over, to search for missing items, and to pay bills late (plus late fees). Piles of paper, overflowing closets, garages that don't have room for cars, old magazines, expired medicines in the cabinet, and keys and remotes we can't seem to find — sound familiar?

We have many excuses for the excess items in our homes such as "I might need it someday" or "It brings back memories" or "I paid good money for this". If your space isn't giving you the peace and calm you'd like for your life, it might be time to start decluttering.

Take it one step at a time. You can start decluttering with one drawer, closet or cupboard. The important thing is to decide to decide. You have to determine what is valuable to you, what is no longer serving you, what can be donated or sold, and what can be discarded.

You can also start a "maybe" box in which you can put items you are just not sure you're ready to part with yet. Put a date on the box and store it away. If you haven't gone to the box to retrieve any items within six months, it might be time to let them go. Experts say we use 20% of our things 80% of the time. Letting go of those items we no longer use can set us free.

An important tip to remember is "a home for everything and everything in its home". It's helpful to take that extra few moments to put things back in their place instead of leaving them "just for now". This can help with locating things instead of spending tons of time searching for lost items.

Think about the purpose of each room in your home. The kitchen is meant for cooking and eating, for example, so why is the counter filled with books, magazines, papers, keys, phones and the like. Remember, "A home for everything and everything in its home". Once you've tackled your clutter, have people over more often and enjoy your home. Live like you really appreciate your newly beautified haven, and you'll be more likely to keep it that way!



Extension Education Center

479 Route 66
Hudson, NY 12534

Tax Refund Time: Build Savings and Pay off Debt

by Maria DeLucia-Evans, CCE Albany County



As of February 2015 the average tax refund was \$3,034, an increase of three percent over refund amounts from last year at the same time (www.irs.gov). Before we spend our refund money on items we may not really need, we should think about how we can use these hard-earned dollars more effectively.

Make a Plan!

Before you receive your tax refund dollars, make a plan for how you want to use your money. Having a plan in place ahead of time will help control impulse spending you may regret later. If you make spending decisions with another person, have a conversation with your spouse/partner and determine what makes the most sense, keeping in mind shared family financial goals.

Build Savings

It's recommended that our savings account cover roughly three months of living expenses. Having an emergency savings fund will help protect us from unexpected expenses that are bound to occur. Job loss, serious illness, or car repairs are just a few life events that can create personal financial hardship. We may need to rely on credit cards (and pay more in interest) if we don't have money set aside in a savings account. Take a portion (or all) of your tax refund, and either begin or add to an emergency spending fund. As you are able, add to the fund and watch it grow. You will have peace of mind knowing you can cover unexpected expenses.

Pay Off Debt

Tax refund time can also be a good time to pay off/down any existing debt. As of last year, the average American household has roughly \$7,280 in credit card debt. (www.dailyfinance.com). That number grows considerably when we factor in other consumer debt, or outstanding accounts. If you have fallen behind on paying bills, use a portion of your tax refund to get caught up with your accounts. If you have debt to pay down, you can reduce or eliminate your interest charges by paying off the principal on a credit card or balance on a loan. Remember to pay down accounts that have the highest interest rates first, to save the most amount of money.

We have many options when it comes to using our tax refund dollars. Before we splurge on items we want, make sure your savings account is healthy, your accounts are paid in full, and you're paying down any consumer debt. Use your tax refunds as an investment in your future.