

# Making rentals energy efficient good for business

**DEAR MR. ENERGY,**

You give a lot of advice for homeowners who want to save energy and money on utility bills, but as a renter, what can I tell my landlord? My bills are really, really high and I want to find a way to convince my landlord that energy efficiency improvements won't only benefit me, but will benefit her as well.

—Help Me in Hillsborough

**DEAR HELP ME,**

This is a wonderful question for which Mr. Energy, sadly, doesn't have a very good answer. As the person paying the utility bills, you are painfully aware that the space you're renting has energy inefficiencies, but since you don't own the property you are obviously not in a position to put money into it. This is a classic renter/landlord dilemma, and one which is very difficult for the average renter to solve.

One argument is that if a landlord tightens up a home to make it more energy efficient, he or she can benefit by raising rent to cover the improvements. The money the renter saves should then cover the extra rent. That's not really a win-win for the renter, obviously, since the bills remain the same, and who's to say the next renter will value an energy efficient space, which makes this a tenuous proposition for the landlord. You could appeal to your landlord's conscience, helping him or her understand that saving energy is helping the environment. This is a noble idea, but Mr. Energy doubts it will be very effective. You could also try to explain that the kinds of home improvements done to make a house or apartment more energy efficient will also increase the property's

**ASK Mr. Energy**



durability – taking care of air leaks and moisture problems are maintenance tasks we all need to be doing on our real estate investments. Let me know how that works out for you.

Given all that, Mr. Energy thinks the best argument may be this: a happy tenant who has manageable utility bills is a tenant who will occupy the space for a much longer time than would a tenant whose money is (literally) floating out the cracks in the windows. And a happy tenant equals an occupied rental property which equals rent that's paid every month. That is a very good thing, indeed. And many of the utility rebate programs are also ones for which landlords can qualify. The Home Energy Improvement Program offered through Progress Energy is a good example. The renter may have his/her name on the account, but the landlord will qualify for the rebate. A win-win for both sides!

**DEAR MR. ENERGY,**

What is a closed crawl space? Do I need one?

—Crawling around in Chapel Hill

**DEAR CRAWLING,**

A closed crawl space is a crawl space (the area found underneath your house

and which is typically floored with dirt and vented to the outdoors) that has been air-sealed. A closed crawl can provide moisture control, help mitigate pest problems, provide safety measure for combustion appliances, radon, and potential fire hazards, and can make homes more energy efficient.

Think of what your crawl space is made of: dirt, primarily, but also insects, insect body parts, rodent excrement, and who knows what else. If you have any leaks in your ductwork, this is what's blowing in your house. If you have any leaks in the part of your house that separates your crawl from your living space, this is the air that's being drawn into your house. And the crawlspace naturally contains moisture, which evaporates from the ground into your house every minute of every day. Sealing the crawl keeps all of that from coming into the conditioned living space of your home.

For many years it was believed that the crawl space needed to be vented in order to "breathe" – especially in a humid climate like we have in North Carolina. But research in building science has actually shown the exact opposite – that if the living space of the home is on top of space that has been sealed off, it will actually make the house last longer, make its residents more comfortable, and make the house easier to heat and cool. Mr. Energy has installed many closed crawl spaces and he can attest to their benefits for homeowners.

Now, as to your second question, whether or not you should get one: how would Mr. Energy know the answer to that question without actually visiting your home and doing a thorough

energy audit? He is not about to start flinging around recommendations that everyone needs this or that (although he does believe that everyone needs a professional energy audit and practically everyone needs their ducts sealed. But that's just based on personal experience). But he can tell you this: if you are worried about your crawl space and worried that it's causing health, safety, or energy efficiency problems, then it may be something to consider.

"Mr. Energy" is the collaborative effort of Mark and Adrienne Bashista, co-owners of Home Performance NC, an energy audit and weatherization contractor serving the greater Triangle area. Contact them at 919.360.1570 and see their website at [www.homeperformancenc.com](http://www.homeperformancenc.com)

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