

Radon

Discovery of radioactive gas prompts local home testing

By Carolyn Smith
special writer

Lon Grossman, president of Technhouse Inspections Inc. in Bloomfield Hills, may get busier in the months ahead.

Selected as a professional inspector by the Radon Testing Corp. of America of Elmsford, N.Y., Grossman will be looking at private homes for conditions that could contribute to the presence of radon gas, a deadly radioactive substance linked to lung cancer.

Radon, which has no odor, color or taste, is a natural product of decomposed uranium, a radioactive substance found in soil, rock and water. The gas seeps into homes through pores and cracks, loose-fitting pipes, mortar joints, water and exposed soil.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which took notice of the gas two years ago, is about to launch an \$11 million, five-year program to lower the health threat by strengthening prevention measures. The EPA guideline for a safe level of radon is below four picocuries (a measure of radiation) per liter of air. Breathing air this contaminated would give the equivalent of 200 chest X-rays a year.

In a yearlong test concluded in September, the University of Pittsburgh sampled air in 52,000 American homes in 10 states. In 34 of the 348 homes tested in Michigan, the radon levels were above the EPA safety guideline. Amounts ranged from four picocuries per liter in a Farmington Hills home to 58 in a home in Ann Arbor. Each homeowner paid \$12 for the test.

Robert DeHaan of the division of radiological health of the Michigan Department of Public Health, said 2,700 homes in the state will be randomly selected for radon tests beginning next month. Of Michigan homes already tested, he said, "I don't see any results that are really alarming."

THE PART OF the state most likely to have high levels of the gas is the western Upper Peninsula, where there is a heavier concentration of uranium than elsewhere, DeHaan said.

Shale, granite and phosphate-bearing soils are substances most likely to bear uranium, said Bruce Davis, assistant director of environmental health for the Wayne County Health Department. Most of Wayne County, he said, has a clay foundation, a tight soil that normally resists formation of uranium. Until test results are in, Davis said "radon is not a significant problem."

County public health departments in Michigan are unaware of the criteria the EPA will use to determine which homes will be tested for radon, he said. Even when that information becomes available, a county's role will be limited to delivering a testing device to a homeowner, picking it up, then sending it to an EPA-approved laboratory.

GROSSMAN IS the only inspector in Oakland County to be approved by the Radon Testing Corp. of America, one of 50 laboratories nationwide on the EPA's "approved" list.

Treasurer of the Washington, D.C.-based American Society of Home Inspectors and a Detroit Free Press columnist on home repairs, Grossman prides himself on being a home inspector in the private sector.

"There is a big difference between public and private inspectors," he said. "Let's say the city inspector comes in and inspects only to find that the roof leaks. It's not a violation unless there's an immediate health risk such as the roof falling on the inspector's head. We give people peace of mind," he said of himself and inspector

Stan Ducher, a six-year work associate.

"I've inspected very few homes for radon, but I don't think homeowners are as aware of it as they should be," Grossman said. His company provides a test and a complete inspection at an average cost of \$200. He offers some advice to homeowners who happen to test positive on presence of too much radon gas:

- Make sure exhaust fans in the kitchen and bathroom vent to the outside;
- Caulk interior of basement walls, especially near utility entrances and cracks, between floors and walls and over sump-pump openings;
- Ventilate the house by opening windows.

Most radon tests, Grossman said, are done in a home's lowest level, typically the basement.

BRUCE MATKOVICH, a Westland-based health physicist of the division of radiological health of the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration, said, "There is too little awareness of amounts of radon gases in Michigan or anywhere else in the country. So the potential health risk is anybody's guess."

The EPA has attributed 5,000 to 15,000 lung-cancer cases per year to indoor radon. About 120,000 lung-cancer deaths are recorded annually in the United States and attributed to all causes.

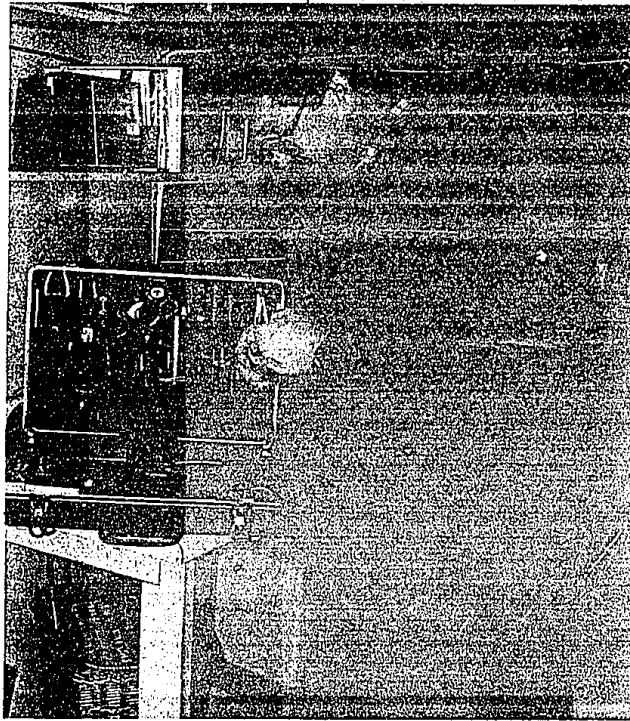
A survey of home inspectors in Wayne and Oakland counties supported Matkovich's belief that few people know about the potential health hazards of radon. Though some inspectors had received a call or two about it, none had inspected a home for it.

"It's so new, I really haven't given it much thought," said Marty Golden, owner of Total Check International Inc. in Southfield.

"It's a question of time," said Eric Hermann, vice president of Amerispec Inc. in Livonia, which specializes in pre-purchase home inspection. "We don't have the time to do radon inspections."

Depending on the device used, test results take 30 to 90 days and cost \$10 to \$50 per test.

EPA officials learned about the dangers of radon in 1984 when Stanley Watras, an engineer from Boyertown, Penn., realized that radon was setting off sensitive alarms in the Limerick nuclear power plant where he worked. Unlike his neighbors, Watras had a high level of radon gas in his home.



BILL PARKER/staff photographer

Lon Grossman is the only inspector in Oakland County to be approved by the Radon Testing Corp. of America.

Resolve to start a budget

Amid the flurry of holiday festivities, we have a tendency to let the little things get ahead of us. But no matter how hectic the season, now is a good time to get your financial records in order so you can be properly prepared for the new year.

The first step should be the preparation of a written budget. This is one of the most effective ways to keep track of your financial records. Doing this will help you to organize your income and outflow on a continuing basis and to direct your spending toward necessary expenses instead of splurging.

Set the pace by outlining your income. This will include items such as your net salary and that of your spouse, interest, dividends, Social Security, etc. Make a list of all these items and total it on a monthly and yearly basis.

Next, detail your expenses. These will fall into three separate categories: fixed, variable and optional expenses. Fixed expenses include things like rent or mortgage payments, taxes, insurance, loan payments — anything that you must pay for on a regular basis at a somewhat fixed rate. Categorize expenses monthly and annually.

Variable expenses include anything that you must pay, but the amounts may differ from month to month such as expenses for food, clothing, utilities, charitable contributions, savings, club dues and home repairs. To get a feel for these costs on an annual basis, go through your checkbook or your credit card receipts. This will give you a rough estimate for budget purposes.

THE THIRD group of expenses will be items that could be termed the wish list. They may include such items as a new car or an expensive piece of jewelry. These are the expenses that your could forgo to make your budget balance.

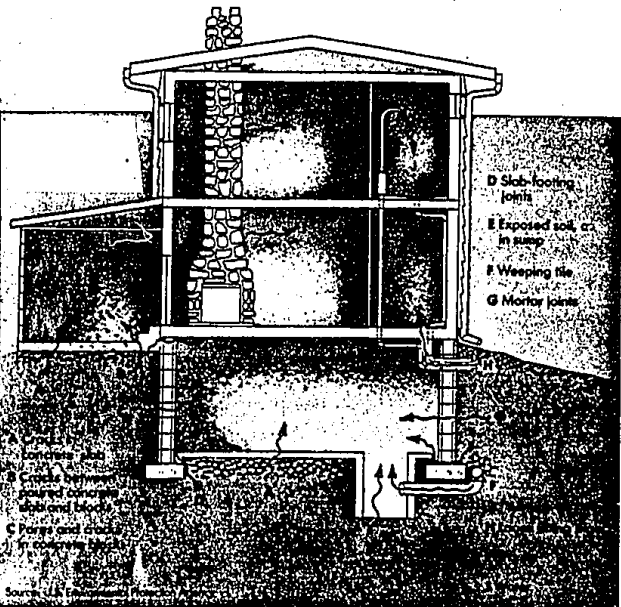
Go over your expenses for the past year and categorize them in the areas which you have outlined. Separate outstanding bills from those that have been paid.

If you haven't done so already, compile receipts, cancelled checks or yearly statements that would substantiate your claim for a deduction on your income tax return. After the first of the year, you should receive statements from your employer, your bank and your creditors which outline your income or interest payments for 1986. Compare these to the receipts you have compiled to be sure they match and save them to prepare your tax return.

Now that you have all the information gathered, keep it organized by using an accordion file so you can separate items by category. Once you have filed your tax return, you can keep them organized for future reference. You'll need to keep these records for at least three years in the event you are audited; some may have to be kept longer.

Now that you have gotten yourself organized, budgeting should be handled on a monthly basis. Organizing your finances will make it easier for you to manage your money throughout the new year.

— Michigan Association of CPAs



Drawing shows where radon is most likely to seep into a home.

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