

# Keep up furnace to cool down fuel bill

By Sue Buck  
Staff Writer

**B**uying a new energy-efficient furnace is not the only way to save energy and cut heating costs.

Upkeep through annual heating and cooling inspections to maintain high-energy efficiency also is recommended by area heating contractors.

But beware of telemarketers who claim they will clean and inspect your furnace for \$19.95, said Fred Angell, service manager for S & M Heating Sales in Southfield.

"It's a come-on," Angell said. "There's no way possible."

Both Angell and Deb Dodd, a public information specialist with Consumers Power, which also does cleaning and inspections, quoted estimates at \$50 and \$49, respectively, Mich Con customers can get the same for heating only at \$28; after 4 p.m. and Saturday service calls are available for \$42, said Bob Sirkle, field service operations director.

"Common sense dictates that if you have a \$60,000 truck with \$30,000 worth of material, you can't make a service call that cheaply," Angell said.

Disreputable heating contractors use low prices to get in the house, then either charge the customer for an exorbitant amount of parts or recommend buying a new furnace entirely, Angell said.

"It's like an operation," he said. "Always get a second opinion. Call the city and get a reference."

Sirkle and Dudd recommend calling the Better Business Bureau. "Be suspicious of anyone calling or leaving a handbill," Sirkle said.

Some homeowners elect to install a new thermostat to save energy dollars.

Digital setback thermostats allow the homeowner to set a different temperature for morning, afternoon, evening and night. The settings can be different for a two-day weekend as compared to weekdays. Savings can amount to 10 percent

for each 10 degrees the heat is set back, according to the White Rodgers thermostat manufacturing company.

For instance, setting the thermostat back from 70 to 60 degrees for eight hours every day can reduce the monthly fuel bill by 10 percent.

This kind of savings will soon pay for the thermostat itself, which costs about \$200 installed, said Tom Leckie, vice-president of Bergstrom's Inc., a Livonia-based heating, plumbing and air conditioning supplier.

Two-person working households can save even more by setting back the temperature for two consecutive eight-hour periods, with about 20 percent savings.

For air conditioning, a set-up of five degrees — from 75 to 80 degrees — for eight hours each day can result in a 12 to 14 percent saving.

A 10-degree set-up can result in savings of 19-22 percent, according to Honeywell, Inc. another thermostat maker.

These thermostats can be installed with new or existing furnaces.

Sometimes, something simple, like dust, can affect a thermostat's performance, Angell said.

With computer-age furnaces that light themselves and automatically control heat levels for cost efficiency, the only weak link left in the system is the human who is supposed to clean the filter.

Dirty air filters are the top cause of furnace complaints today.

The old top problem — "The pilot is out and it won't light" — has been virtually eliminated by the new electronic ignition systems.

Dirty filters slow down the air flow and prevent the house from heating sufficiently, which also puts a strain on the blower motor.

Although the average life of a furnace is 15 to 20 years, a blower motor typically



**Filter watch:** Consultant Don Ritenour of Bergstrom's Inc. in Livonia shows four types of furnace filters: (from left) electronic, high-efficiency throwaway, paper media and (in his hands) washable.

only lasts about seven, said heating and furnace expert Don Ritenour of Bergstrom's.

With dirty filters, the motor life can be considerably less. "And it usually burns out on one of the coldest nights of the winter since that's when your furnace has to work the hardest," Ritenour said.

In addition, if the house has central air conditioning, the evaporator coils in the furnace can become clogged with dust if filters aren't kept clean.

Ritenour recommends cleaning or changing furnace filters at least every two months during the heating and cooling season. Angell recommends that electronic air cleaners be cleaned once a month, especially if an asthmatic resides in the house.

Filters come in three basic types:

- **Throwaways** — These are the cheapest to buy, just a dollar or two each, depending on size, but are the most expensive in the long run. Ritenour recommends buying four or six at a time, so you don't have to run to the store for a new filter each time.
- **Washables** — These cost slightly

more, \$5 to \$7, depending on size, but are more convenient because you don't have to run to the store for a replacement. They also eliminate the waste factor of throwaways.

- **Paper media** — These cost \$30 to \$35 each but are more efficient at collecting dust than the throwaways and washables. They fit into a filter frame, which cost \$300 to \$350 to install in the furnace.

- **Electronic** — Although costing \$500 to \$600, these are a must for allergy sufferers. They use electronically charged wires to collect the fine dust and pollen from the air as well as containing washable filters to collect the larger dust particles. In many cases, with a doctor's prescription, the cost can be deducted on your income tax.

A non-electronic air cleaner also is available for about \$275 installed. These don't require frequent washings like the electronic air cleaner. To maintain, you just install a new \$32 cartridge filter annually, Angell said.

"Too many companies have lost the idea of what service is," Angell said.



WILLIAM HANSEN

**On the job:** Fred Angell, service manager for S & M Heating Sales in Southfield, is shown in the company's sheet metal shop, where ductwork is made.

## FALL HOME IMPROVEMENT

WHETHER YOU do it yourself or call in professionals, home improvement projects are a high priority for many folks before Ol' Man Winter blows in.

Fall is an excellent time to get your house ready to do battle with the winds, rains and snows of winter. Routine maintenance now can mean a saving on energy costs later.

This easy-to-read home improvement guide serves up a variety of ideas and tips for giving the guts of your house a fall face-lift.

O&E assistant managing editor Bob Sklar, with assistance from staff writer Sue Buck, oversaw this special supplement, appearing today in all 12 editions of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. O&E creative services supervisor Glenn Merillat designed the cover. O&E sales representatives David Baker and Heather Paddison-Muir coordinated advertising. Copley News Service provided the stories from writers whose bylines carry the special writer designation. Direct queries to Bob Sklar: 953-2113.