

Newfield launches informational campaign on heat pumps

By David Durrett on April 21, 2021

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Heather McCarty, Newfield Town Board member, stands next to her family's air-source heat pump. These quiet units provide heating and cooling for the entire home. Her house was previously heated by propane and cooled by window units. Photo by Jeffrey Feirman.

On April 7, the town of Newfield began an informational campaign to spread awareness of heat pumps, a more energy-efficient way to keep homes at the right temperature.

Heat pumps heat and cool homes by transferring heat from one place to another and can double as a heater or air conditioner as necessary.

There are two major types of heat pumps — air- and ground-source pumps. Air-source pumps transport heat between the air inside a home and the air outside, while ground-source pumps transport heat to and from the ground outside the home.

Lisa Marshall, program director of HeatSmart Tompkins, said that while ground-source heat pumps are more efficient than air-source heat pumps, both are much more efficient than heating with propane.

"If you compare to propane, you're going to cut your heating bill at least in half if not dramatically more," Marshall said.

Marshall said using heat pumps greatly decreases one's carbon footprint and is, therefore, better for the environment than propane or electric heating.

"The most promising pathway for meaningful greenhouse gas emissions reductions is building electrification, and heat pumps are a really big part of that," Marshall said.

Marshall said heat pumps have been in use for a long time, but until recently, most people believed that they were not effective in cold climates. It is easier for a heat pump to keep a house's temperature at 70 degrees if it is 90 degrees outside than if it is 10 degrees outside. She said the misconception has faded in the past few years.

"People, only a few years ago, thought that solar panels wouldn't work in New York state because we didn't have enough sun," Marshall said. "And now, you see solar panels everywhere, and it's sort of the same thing. People just didn't have the right information. They had outdated information or misconceptions, so we worked really hard to overcome those."

Marshall said it is difficult to tell how many Tompkins County residents are using heat pumps, but she estimates less than 5% of county residents have adopted them. Despite the low adoption rate, she said Tompkins County has the highest

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seen with other technologies people aren't as familiar with."

Marshall said the cost of installation is the main barrier to people adopting heat pumps, but she believes that the savings more than outweigh the cost, especially for homes that use propane for heating.

"If you're heating with propane now, you can't really afford to not get a heat pump," Marshall said.

Marshall said heat pumps are not only more energy efficient and cheaper than other methods, but they are also less labor-intensive than wood-fired stoves. She said she has spoken to some people who heat with coal or wood who are concerned that they will no longer be able to chop or carry wood or transport bags of pellets as they get older.

"The idea of being able to have the convenience of turning on your heater air from your armchair with a remote control is very appealing to those folks," Marshall said.

Thom Mayo, a member of HeatSmart Tompkins' Board of Directors, said that while heat pumps can double as air conditioners, the best way for people to save money on heating their homes is by making sure they are properly insulated.

"Most houses can save a greater deal of money by just air sealing and insulating the home better," Mayo said. "There are a lot of homes that just do not have proper insulation. They're really easy to identify — all you have to do is drive around in winter and see the ones that have snow on the roof."

Mayo said that while there were incentives for heat pumps, there are not enough qualified contractors to meet the rising demand for heat pumps. He is working on developing a training program for TST BOCES to help train contractors in installing heat pumps, a class that he will teach in the fall, in order to address this problem.

Marshall advises people who are considering installing heat pumps to get home energy audits to see what improvements could be made and to hire experienced contractors to put in the heat pumps, even if those contractors are expensive.

"It's important for people to understand the benefits, but also the limitations, of what a heat pump can do," Marshall said. "And we believe, of course, it goes without saying, that benefits far outweigh the limitations."

Kitty Gifford, coordinator for the Climate Smart Communities Task Force, said helping people understand how heat pumps work is crucial to convincing them to accept the technology.

"Adoption of any new technology requires a time period for people to learn about it, ask questions about it, get more comfortable with the idea of it," Gifford said

Heather McCarty, a member of Newfield's Town Board, said that while most people would likely ignore information postcards from organizations they had never heard about, they would likely listen to the Town Board, which is why the town launched its informational campaign.

"I think that knowing that the town is promoting this and thinks it's a good idea will be encouraging to residents who might not have paid attention to other promotions they might have seen already," McCarty said.

According to McCarty, the methods used to spread information will include postings on the town website and social media pages, information on the water bill Newfield residents receive and providing flyers and information tables at local events while meeting COVID-19 social distancing rules.

Mayo said that many people still have questions about heat pumps or the incentives that can make installing them easier.

"Most people I've talked to are not aware of all the savings, all rebates, all the grant money that's available," Mayo said.

Gifford said that communicating with consumers and helping them understand how heat pumps can meet their needs and have a positive environmental impact is important. She said such conversations should be about the consumers' experiences and how to solve the consumers' home-related problems.

"Any time you're trying to help people make some kind of change, it starts with a conversation," Gifford said

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The Town of Newfield will host a webinar with HeatSmart Tompkins and Get Your GreenBack Tompkins at 7 p.m. April 26. The webinar will focus on heat pumps and home energy efficiency.

To register for the webinar, visit t.ly/oJmU.

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