

**SPIKE IN THE ENERGY BILL?** A big difference in your home's temperature? It may be time to take a look at - and possibly replace - your heating and cooling system.

# TO SERVICE OR REPLACE? THAT IS THE HVAC QUESTION.

UNCOMFORTABLE rooms. The sound of booms. The question looms: What's up with the heating and cooling system, and how does one make decisions about repairs, replacement, products and service providers?

"If you're noticing a discernible difference in temperature," a decrease in performance or comfort "or a spike in the energy bill," something's likely wrong, said Terry Gearhart, a 32-year veteran of the building industry and a building/real estate consultant in Hampton Roads.

But that doesn't necessarily mean the system has to go, he added.

Common issues should be assessed, such as rust or deterioration on the unit and leaky or improperly sized duct work. Some problems can be fixed easily by homeowners; others require service.

An honest professional will clue a consumer in and not try to sell a new unit that's not needed, Gearhart said.

"Get multiple diagnostics, a second opinion," at an average of less than \$100 per call, advised Sarah Kellam of Kellam Mechanical in Virginia Beach.

Tag along on the inspection, ask questions and take notes. Ask to see photos of issues in hard-to-see spots.

"We want the homeowner to be involved in that whole process," Kellam said. "Don't take our word for it; take a look." Then compare information.

How does a homeowner know if it's time to replace a unit?

"Age can be an indicator," Gearhart said.

HVAC units typically last 10 to 12 years, with longevity op-



NORA FIRESTONE PHOTO FOR THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

**Sarah Kellam of Kellam Mechanical in Virginia Beach touts the benefits of this geothermal heating and cooling system but also recommends that consumers compare fuel types, equipment, energy efficiency, service providers, cost and detailed job proposals before finalizing a decision about replacement.**

timized by annual tune-ups and maintenance. Consider the cost of repairs and the expected longevity of the unit compared to the replacement cost. Factor in the expected energy savings with a properly installed modern unit.

Efficiency standards change regularly. Replacing an old electric system, for instance, can save a homeowner up to 30 percent in energy costs, Gearhart said.

He suggested getting bids from three reputable companies, observing the behavior of representatives and asking questions. Check references and speak with the owners of each company.

Be sure the ductwork's

evaluated, too, Kellam advised, then compare "apples to apples" on detailed, itemized bids that include equipment sized according to Air Conditioning Contractors of America Manual J and Manual D calculations.

Options in equipment and fuel type vary, and prices range accordingly, said Chuck Sandford, retail manager at Kellam.

Geothermal is the best choice for its cost to operate, energy efficiency, life expectancy, lack of by-product emissions and 30 percent government tax incentive, he said. But it can be an expensive up-front investment, especially if converting from another type.

Other options include oil, natural gas, electric, propane and hybrid models. Napoleon just introduced the Hybrid 150, a triple-fuel furnace that switches from wood to oil to electricity. Changing fuel types is a matter of preference and logistics.

A basic system of any kind will require less investment up front. Be sure it meets current standards. Learn more at [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov).

The best decision "depends on what fits your application (property) and budget," Sandford said.

Keep in mind that "we have more heating hours than cooling hours (in Hampton Roads)," he added, and that overall, the

higher the efficiency rating, the more efficient the unit.

When considering cutting-edge technology, Gearhart recommended researching the availability of proper parts and service locally.

Homeowners can check a company's record and license at the Virginia Department of Professional and Occupational Regulation's website: [www.dpor.virginia.gov](http://www.dpor.virginia.gov).

All service and installation technicians should be licensed, insured, factory-trained regularly and certified by North American Technician Excellence, Kellam said.

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