WHAT TO DO WHEN CLOSING OFF AN ENTIRE HOUSE DURING WINTER

If you plan on going south during the cold winter months of our northern climate, be aware that you can save significant amounts of energy if you close off your entire house during the months you are gone. To do this, you must perform a number of chores; otherwise, you may lose far more than you will gain in energy savings.

If you are closing an entire house down all winter, important considerations include the following:

• Most or all of the plumbing system must be protected. All hot and cold plumbing supply pipes must be drained. Many times supply pipes are not pitched to allow them to drain via gravity. Therefore, it is often necessary to use an air compressor to blow water from supply pipes. Licensed plumbers have the necessary equipment and knowledge to do this. Water should also be drained from the pressure tank (if the home has a private water supply), water heater, and ice-making refrigerator.

Homes heated with hot water or steam boilers will also need to have those systems winterized. Given the high expense of replacing a boiler system, it is well worth the money to hire a professional heating contractor to do this job.

Drainpipes are easier to winterize than supply pipes. Only the traps within the drainpipes need to be protected from freezing. Pouring an environmentally safe antifreeze solution into all drains (the trap for a toilet is located in the bowl) will keep the water inside traps from freezing. A typical septic tank needs no protection if it is completely below the soil surface.

Some houses may require a small amount of heat in the basement to prevent frost heave, which may occur when there is no heat in the basement, to prevent frost from getting below foundation footings. Frost heave can cause foundation walls to move up or be pushed in. In some houses, the circulation of warm air, steam, or hot water from the central heating system may be regulated to place more of the heat in the cellar area and less upstairs.

• If a hydronic heating system[1] will be left operating at a low level, water-carrying pipes may need to be protected by adding an anti-freeze solution to the boiler water supply. Special steps may need to be taken to protect the heating system and the water supply. Consult a heating system technician for further information.

• Make certain the fireplace damper is closed.

• During cold winter months, the air inside of an unheated and unoccupied house is likely to be very dry, and may cause checking and cracking of wood. For this reason, don't leave fine furniture in the house.

• If a house will be vacant for only a few weeks, it is usually advantageous to turn thermostats down (50º or 55º F) and leave the heating system on. A *little* heat in the house maintains a more constant level of humidity, allowing for less swelling and shrinking of wood floors, furniture, and cabinets.

• For reasons pertaining to both utilities and vandalism, ask a neighbor to stop in once or twice a week to check for possible damage. Tree limbs can break windows, and high winds can damage shingles or shutters. Inexpensive timers with multiple programs can control lights and make a house seem occupied. Make arrangements to have mail and other deliveries stopped, or have someone pick up deliveries regularly.

• If a fire hydrant is in your yard, ask someone to keep snow cleared away from it in your absence.

Usual procedures for protecting against vandalism are needed such as:

• Have someone pick up mail, or request that deliveries be stopped.

• Use a timer to activate one or more lights at night in different rooms or outdoors.

[1] A hydronic heating system uses hot water heated with a boiler as opposed to a furnace, which heats air.

Reviewed and revised by Mark Pierce - 2000, Department of Design and Environmental Analysis, Cornell University, 607-255-0431.