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Thinking about solar? OPU offers guidance

BY JONI HUBRED

If you're thinking of installing solar panels, Owatonna Public Utilities (OPU) Energy Conservation Officer Jared Hendricks has some advice: Do your homework.

"My first step when somebody starts with solar is to figure out where they're at with their research," Hendricks said. "I meet them there, wherever they've left off."

Some customers who contact him know very little, while others have done extensive research. Either way, he directs them to a couple of resources that offer neutral information: the Clean Energy Resource Team (CERT), under the umbrella of the University of Minnesota research office, and pvwatts.nrel.gov, which offers an online calculator to estimate how much energy an array will generate in each month of the year.

PVWatts is part of the national laboratory of the U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy and operated by the Alliance for Sustainable Energy. The calculator takes into account information about the array itself as well as weather and solar radiation in the area.

Customers can also compare figures in the

report with their annual energy use, to ensure they are installing the right array for their needs.

"Solar is a large dollar investment," Hendrickson said. "It doesn't make sense to over-size your array."

Hendricks said CERT offers a wealth of resources; the team works with those involved in all aspects of clean energy. He is also a resource for those looking into solar and—without recommending a

contractor—can help customers understand quotes for the work. He suggests getting two or three, as with any large home improvement project.

Solar "is not right for everybody for a number of reasons," he said. "All I can do is guide them on the right path."

Once a customer has decided they're on that right path, they can work directly with their contractor or, as is often the case, choose OPU serve as

the "application agent". OPU departments review a required application to ensure it is complete and that the OPU system is capable of handling the array once it's hooked up.

If, for instance, the array will be among several connected to a transformer, OPU may determine that it would overload the system. In that case—and there haven't been any yet in Owatonna—the homeowner might be required to pay at least some of the

cost for necessary upgrades, Hendricks said.

Even as they're working with OPU, customers installing solar also must apply for city permits. The building department, for instance, will check to make sure the roof will still meet snow loading capabilities once the array is installed. One customer, Hendricks said, had to upgrade a garage roof before installing solar panels.

Hendrickson said OPU installs a dual meter that

measures OPU power going into the home and one to measure solar power. Customers will see both on their bills and pay—or be paid—based on the difference between the two.

Because it's a costly investment, Hendrickson sees solar as the top of an energy conservation pyramid. Before taking that last, large step, he suggests asking a contractor to conduct a "site assessment" to look at opportunities for energy conservation and efficiency.

The first layer of the pyramid, he said, is reducing wasted energy—turning off lights, adjusting the water heater temperature, washing in cold water, and other measures that cost nothing.

"That's the most cost-efficient way to reduce your energy bills," he said.

Next, homeowners can look at energy efficiency: sealing and insulating the attic, installing better weather-stripping around doors and windows, and purchasing energy efficient appliances, which have a much shorter pay-back window than solar.

"Some contractors will refuse to bid a job if the customer isn't willing to reduce waste," Hendricks said. "Wasting solar energy is still wasting energy."

For more information about solar, reach out to Hendricks, 507-451-2480 or jared.hendricks@owatonnautilities.com.



PHOTO COURTESY ENERGY.GOV



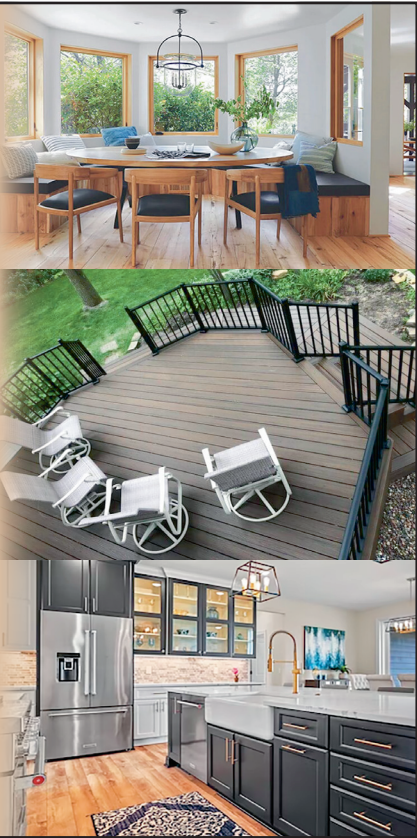
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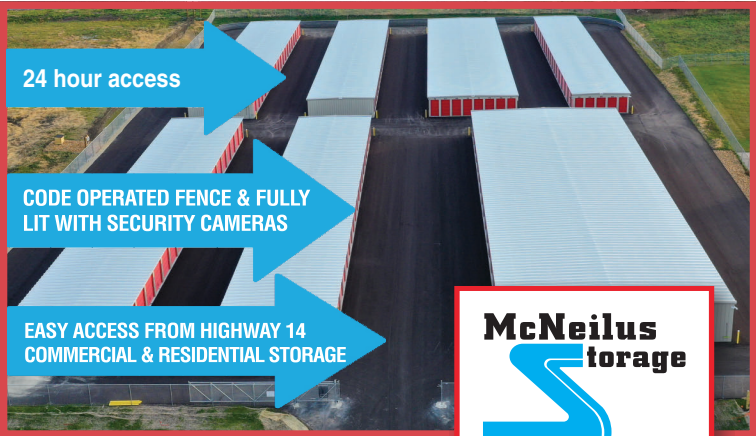


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For many projects, hardware store is the place to go

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Home improvement projects can be varied and while bigger jobs, such as installing a deck or landscaping a yard, may involve a professional, many other projects can be accomplished by the homeowner. And that is where the neighborhood hardware store can help.

While these projects don't involve major construction, there are still many things the homeowner can do to, said Greg Kuball of Hardware Hank in Kasson. Hardware stores do not carry building supplies, he said, but they do have many of the things needed to improve the looks of your property and home.

Inside the home, he said, a simple project can involve painting. And that is not necessarily painting an entire room or the whole house. You can change the look of a room, he said, by simply changing one wall. The cost can be less than \$1 and the paint and the supplies can all be found at the hardware store.

Another inside project, he said, while it may not be a home improvement in the traditional sense, involves things like ants. These insects turn up inside when the weather warms and the resident needs to find a proper chemical that will be safe to both kids and pets. Mites on house plants can

be a problem as spring arrives.

Kuball said that by explaining what the situation is they can offer you suggestions as to the solution.

It's a similar situation for your outside spring work.

For the person who would like to improve the look of their yard and eliminate weeds and unwanted grasses the answer is not always a weed killer, Kuball said.

The better answer, he explained, is often fertilizer. Applying fertilizer consistently can make for a healthier, stronger grass. A stronger grass acts as a weed killer too and gradually will choke out the weeds. It's not as quick as applying a chemical weed killer, he said, but in the end it results in a better looking and more lush lawn.

Also on the subject of planting, he said, there is no one type of soil that works for all types of growing plants.

Raised beds, trees, shrubs, potted plants, they all do better in different kinds of soil. Kuball said that they carry a variety of these soils and can help you pick the right one depending on how and what you plan to plant.

Kuball says he also carries a variety of other outdoor items to make your yard more livable, including bird feeders, bird seed, lawn ornaments, flower and vegetable seeds, and a limited number of plants.





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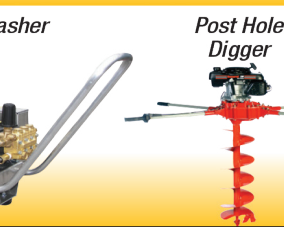


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- If you need to use a generator, keep it outdoors and away from windows.
- Use surge protectors, or disconnect appliances and electronics to avoid damage from electrical surges.
- Have portable power banks charged and ready for cell phones.
- Prepare an emergency kit with flashlights/candles and a weather radio.

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'It was time'

Byron family completes \$120K remodel

BY RENEE BERG

For Terry and Denise Borgschatz of Byron, it was time. Past time. Long overdue.

"It needed to be done," Terry said of the couple's \$120,000 remodel of their 32-year-old, three-bedroom home. "We'd put it off long enough."

It was "absolutely" a good investment, he said. "We love it."

The couple did some of the work themselves but hired Caps Kitchen & Bath locally to handle the bulk of the improvements, including two remodeled bathrooms, hardwood floors throughout the upstairs, and a complete kitchen remodel with one wall taken out and an island feature added.

Their remodel was completed in the fall of 2022 and was timed for when their four adult children were out of the house and on their own, Terry Borgschatz said.

The rooms were dated and needed to be redone. Among the improvements were a shower with three jets, an enlarged closet, new sink and vanity cupboards in both the upstairs and downstairs bathrooms and the "pop-

corn" ceiling was removed in every room except the bedrooms.

In the master bath, the couple chose to put in a whirlpool tub instead of a regular tub.

As for home improvements, Terry said that is "it for now," though the couple may at a later date decide to remodel the three bedrooms as well. He said he wanted to support local in hiring Caps.

"He's right here in Byron," Terry said. "And I had heard good things from other people."

Also trending in home improvement projects right now is installing insulation, said Lucas Burnham, COO at Home Improvement Professionals in Byron.

"Energy efficiency and heat loss and things of that nature, on the insulation side seem to be popular," he said. "You get the value through the money you save in your heating bills."

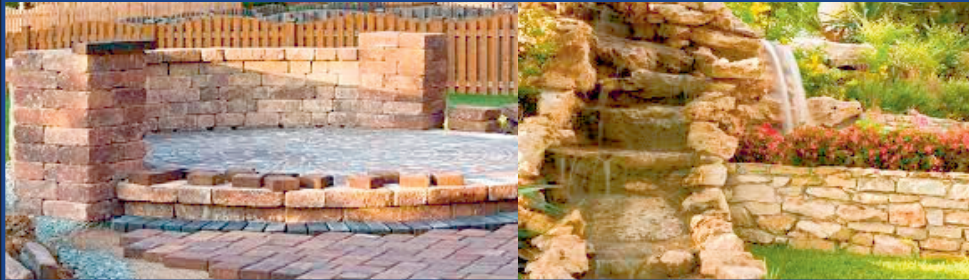
Just because winter is past doesn't mean it's no longer time to properly insulate your home.

"It's not time to forget about your energy efficiency," Burnham said. "People think about it during the winter, but they seem to forget about it in the summer time."

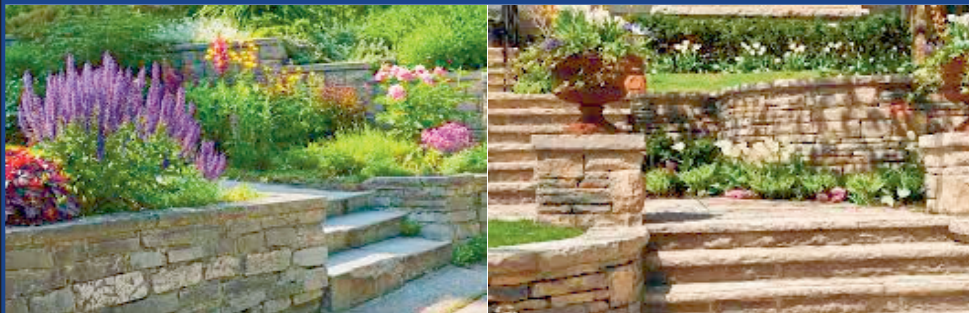




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Factors to consider before renovating a driveway

Driveways are oft-overlooked components of home exteriors. But driveways provide functionality and points of egress to a home. Industry experts estimate that a new driveway costs between \$5,000 and \$7,000, though the price will vary based on the materials homeowners choose and the square footage of the driveway.

When deciding whether or not to renovate their driveways, homeowners can review these considerations.

Materials

Driveways can be made from a variety of materials, even grass or soil. The following are some driveway materials homeowners may choose from:

- Gravel
- Chip seal
- Concrete
- Asphalt
- Rubber
- Exposed aggregate
- Pavers
- Permeable pavers
- Heated

Repair or replace?

Nearly any size crack can be patched with concrete or cold-patch asphalt, or specialty materials, according to This Old House, an online home improvement resource. Repairing and resealing a driveway can help prolong its longevity. Plus, this is a more cost-effective option for homeowners on a budget who want to improve



curb appeal and safety.

Large holes or unsightly damage may require a driveway replacement. This also will be the case if a homeowner hopes to expand the driveway. Replacing a driveway requires a time commitment. The existing driveway needs to be demolished and removed. The ground underneath typically is smoothed and tamped down. Substrate or wire mesh also may be installed. After the new

material is laid, there may be a period of time for setting and curing, during which use of the driveway is prohibited.

DIY or professional?

While sealing and minor repairs generally can be handled by a homeowner who has researched the process, large repairs or driveway replacements should be left to professionals for the best results. Driveway slope needs to

be considered for proper rain runoff, and the professional will understand the thickness and preparatory steps necessary to ensure driveway durability. Installation of a heated driveway requires a specific skill set and this is a job best left to professional driveway contractors.

Driveway enhancements

The options do not end with the driveway materi-

al. There are other ways to boost aesthetics.

- **Illumination:** Homeowners can install recessed LED lights into the driveway to define the edges and add aesthetic appeal.

- **Stamped texture:** Homeowners opting for the affordability of concrete can ask for a stamped design that mimics the look of stone or pavers.

- **Gates:** One doesn't have to live in an exclu-

sive community to have their property enhanced by gates. Gates can give a home a distinguished look.

- **Edging:** Driveways can be edged with another material to create definition between the driveway and lawn, or to provide the perfect spots to plant beds.

Driveway renovations can add curb appeal and improve the functionality of a home. TF234821

Small renovations that can make a big impact

Home renovations provide a host of benefits. Such projects can increase resale value and improve on the safety, aesthetics and functionality of a home.

Some homeowners may employ the mantra “go big or go home” when they embark on home improvements, thinking that only the largest renovations produce noticeable change. But that’s not the case. Various smaller renovations can provide a lot of bang for homeowners’ bucks as well.

• **Countertops (and hardware):** A complete kitchen overhaul may stretch some homeowners’

budgets. However, changing an older countertop for a new material can provide the facelift a kitchen needs. And while changing the cabinets may be homeowners’ ultimate goal, swapping hardware in dated finishes for newer handles and pulls can provide low-cost appeal.

• **Paint:** Painting a space is an inexpensive improvement that adds maximum impact. Paint can transform dark and drab rooms into bright and airy oases. Paint also can be used to create an accent wall or cozy nooks. Homeowners also can showcase their personal-

ities with their choice of paint colors.

• **Lighting:** Homeowners should not underestimate what a change in lighting can do. When rooms or exterior spaces are illuminated, they take on entirely new looks. It’s worth it to invest in new lighting, whether it’s a dramatic hanging light over the dining room table or task lighting in dim spaces.

• **Weatherproofing:** Improving windows, doors, weatherstripping, and insulation in a home can offer visual appeal and help homeowners save money. The initial investment may be significant, but

those costs will pay off in energy savings. According to One Main Financial, space heating is the largest energy expense the average American homeowner has, accounting for around 45 percent of all energy costs.

• **Mudroom:** Turn an entryway into a more functional space with the addition of cabinets, benches or custom-designed storage options that perfectly fit the area. Cubbies and cabinets can corral shoes,

umbrellas, hats, bags, and much more.

These subtle changes will not cost as much as full-scale renovations, but they can still help homeowners transform their homes. TF233745

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Quick and easy ways to give your kitchen a new look

Kitchens are often described as the busiest rooms in a home. Kitchens are where meals are prepared and tend to be go-to gathering spots on holiday get-togethers and during other events when homeowners host family and friends.

With so much time spent in the kitchen, it's easy to see how homeowners might grow a little bored by these rooms. The cost of a kitchen remodel won't be cheap, as the home improvement resource Angi.com notes that the typical cost of such a project in the United States is between \$13,000 and \$38,000. Angi.com estimates even indicate that a high-end remodel could cost homeowners as much as \$61,000. That's beyond many homeowners' budgets. But the good news is that there are many quick and easy, not to mention less expensive, ways to give a kitchen a new look.

• **Repaint and restyle the cabinets.** Cabinet space is an undeniably precious commodity in a kitchen, especially as more and more homeowners embrace their inner chef and cook more complicated meals at home. After all, the more expansive a home chef's culinary repertoire, the more space that person needs to store all the tools of the cooking trade. A full cabinet replacement is un-



necessary if the cabinets are still functional and not overcrowded, so repainting them can be a great way to give the kitchen a new look while keeping costs reasonable. During the painting project, homeowners can install new cabinet knobs and/or drawer pulls to freshen up the style of the cabinets even further.

• **Install under-cabinet lighting.** Another inexpensive way to give a kitchen a new look is

to install under-cabinet lighting. Under-cabinet lighting serves both an aesthetic and practical purpose. From a purely aesthetic standpoint, under-cabinet lighting can make a kitchen feel more warm and keep the kitchen illuminated when meals aren't being prepared and homeowners don't want to have their overhead lights on but still want to be able to navigate the kitchen safely. During meal prep, under-cabinet

lighting can illuminate counters so it's easier to chop, peel and perform other prep tasks.

• **Replace existing backsplash.** Replacing backsplash is another simple, inexpensive and effective way to give a kitchen a new feel. Homeowners can opt for something neutral that won't upset their existing decor or go with a more bold backsplash that immediately draws the attention of anyone who enters the room. This simple

job can be done by the average do-it-yourselfer and the cost of new backsplash won't break the bank.

• **Replace existing seating.** Whether you have an island countertop with bar stools or a breakfast nook with cushioned seats, replacing the seating is a budget-friendly job that can create a new look when entering the room. Countertop bar stools come in many styles, so giving this area of the kitchen a new feel can be

as simple as shifting from classic, high-back stools to more modern swivel stools with a chrome base. For the breakfast nook, replacing a light-colored bench cushion with a bolder alternative can instantly transform the look of the space.

Kitchen remodels can break the bank. But there's a host of budget-friendly ways for cost-conscious homeowners to revitalize these popular spaces in their homes.

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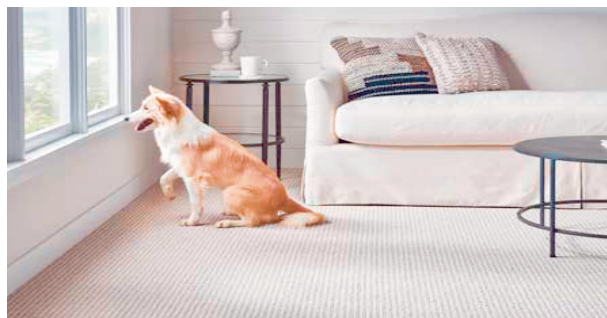
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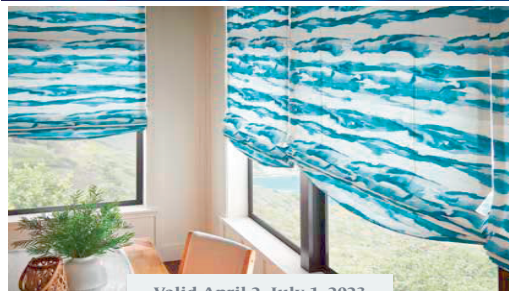


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