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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

This Old Wasteful House

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NEVER before has America had so many compelling reasons to preserve the homes in its older residential neighborhoods. We need to reduce energy consumption and carbon emissions. We want to create jobs, and revitalize the neighborhoods where millions of Americans live. All of this could be accomplished by making older homes more energy-efficient.

Let's begin with energy consumption and emissions. Forty-three percent of America's carbon emissions come from heating, cooling, lighting and operating our buildings. Older homes are particularly wasteful: Homes built in 1939 or before use around 50 percent more energy per square foot than those constructed in 2000. But with significant improvements and retrofits, these structures could perform on a par with newer homes.

So how does a homeowner go green? The first step is an energy audit by a local utility. These audits can be obtained in many communities at little or no cost. They help identify the sources of heat loss, allowing homeowners to make informed decisions about how to reduce energy use in the most cost-effective way.

Homeowners are likely to discover that much of the energy loss comes down to a lack of insulation in attics and basements. Sealing other air leaks also helps. This can be done by installing dryer vent seals that open only when the dryer is in use, as well as fireplace draft stoppers and attic door covers.

Experience has shown that virtually any older or historic house can become more energy-efficient without losing its character. Restoring the original features of older houses — like porches, awnings and shutters — can maximize shade and insulation. Older wooden windows perform very well when

properly weatherized — this includes caulking, insulation and weather stripping — and assisted by the addition of a good storm window. Weatherizing leaky windows in most cases is much cheaper than installing replacements.

The good news is that the administration is taking steps to help homes save energy with a program that will invest almost $8 billion in state and local weatherization and energy-efficiency efforts. The Weatherization Assistance Program, aimed at low-income families, will allow an average investment of up to $6,500 per home in energy efficiency upgrades.

My organization is also working with the Natural Resources Defense Council and members of Congress on legislation to help cover the costs of making all older homes more energy-efficient. Under this proposal, a homeowner would receive a $3,000 incentive for improving energy efficiency by 20 percent, and $150 for each additional percentage point of energy savings. If 300,000 homes could be retrofitted each year, we estimate that after 10 years we could see a reduction of 65 million metric tons of carbon emitted into the atmosphere, and the equivalent of 200 million barrels of oil saved.

The labor-intensive process of rehabilitating older buildings would also create jobs, and this labor can't be shipped overseas. The wages would stay in the community, supporting local businesses and significantly increasing household incomes — just the kind of boost the American economy needs right now.

Before demolishing an old building to make way for a new one, consider the amount of energy required to manufacture, transport and assemble the pieces of that building. With the destruction of the building, all that energy is utterly wasted. Then think about the additional energy required for the demolition itself, not to mention for new construction. Preserving a building is the ultimate act of recycling.

Richard Moe is the president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.