

Zoned heat is on where you choose

BY STACIE CARLSON
Special to the Record-Eagle

For the vast majority of people, colder weather means that home furnaces get clicked into high gear. But what happens when people want one area, like bedrooms, to be a different temperature than another?

"With conventional furnaces, moderating temperature can be challenging," said Jim Rupert, president of Generations Electrical Services, Inc. in Lake Leelanau. "Essentially, conventional furnaces heat all areas of the home to the same temperature. Zoned heating lets people decide what areas will be cooler or warmer than others. That means that storage areas can be cooler than living areas."

Conventional furnaces typically consist of a large furnace unit and ductwork that heats air and forces it throughout the home. According to the book, Prescriptions for a Healthy House, these forced-air systems are the most common form of heating throughout the country. They need regular maintenance, including cleaning the ductwork to prevent mold and dirt buildup. Conventional furnaces can cause a continual supply of dust in the air.

"Forced warm air systems are considered standard," said Max Strickland, general manager of Burkholder Construction Co. in Traverse City. "These furnaces typically use oil, gas or propane as fuel. They heat the air rather than objects in the home and are considered less comfortable than zoned heating systems."

In addition to being able to regulate temperatures in different areas of the home, zoned heating offers a more comfortable heat.

"Radiant floors (a type of zoned heating) actually offer the most comfortable heating source on the market," added Strickland. "Essentially, plastic tubes are set into one-and-a-half inches of concrete flooring and carry hot water. The water heats the flooring and as a result, the area is heated from the feet up. It's easily zoned and it's by far the healthiest way to heat a home. It heats objects rather than blowing around hot air, and it's 30 percent less costly to operate than typical warm-air systems."

For those wondering why all homes are not installed with radiant floor systems, they can be costly initially.

"They're more expensive to install, but they're less expensive than conventional furnaces to operate in the long run," said Rupert. "With the Earth's finite resources, it's everyone's responsibility to reduce consumption and overall use of resources regardless of the costs involved. Right now, people who are involved with the building process are the primary consumers of these systems, but the system's becoming more and more popular."

Also, there are several options for zoned heating beyond radiant floor systems, and combinations of radiant and traditional systems are available.

"There are several options available for people who can't do radiant floor systems," said Strickland.

Geofurnaces use the heat stored in the Earth to heat homes through a system of loops that tap into the ground and run into the house. Compressors are used to make the heat usable in the home.

"People can do zoned heating with geofurnaces, too," added Strickland. "Basically, a system or dampers, or valves, can be installed to close off areas and make air go where people want it to go."

Another system uses a series of registers move the heat,

causing warm air to rise and cool air to drop. According to Strickland, it's easily zoned through the use of a thermostat in the boiler area.

Electric heat systems are options, as well.

"Electric heat systems are the least expensive to install and the easiest to control because every room has its own zone," said Rupert. "The only drawback is they're very expensive to operate."

Another electric heat system is similar to radiant floors, using electricity through the tubing.

"For people who want to do renovations to their homes, the electric tube system, also called a dry system, is an option," said Strickland. "Tubes are stapled to the bottom of the floor sheeting and insulation is added to drive the heat up. Like other electric systems, the only drawback is the operating expense."

Area experts have some suggestions when it comes to choosing a heating system.

"Without a doubt, in floor radiant systems are the best on the market," said Framo Rimoni, owner, of Aloha Heating & Cooling in Big Rapids. "After that, baseboard hot water heat is next and forced air conventional systems are third."

Baseboard hot water heat can be added to homes during renovations, by running copper tubing through the baseboards and then pumping hot water throughout.

Also, Rimoni notes that there are some conventional systems that are better than others.

"Some conventional systems offer variable speed fans with a blower that continually monitors to keep the home at a constant temperature," added Rimoni. "These systems are quite cost-efficient. The system below that doesn't have that smart blower."

In addition to zoned heating systems, there are thermostat options to help people monitor their heat levels who have conventional furnace systems.

"We work with two-way communicating thermostats installed in conjunction with a home automation system that allows home owners to monitor and control their heating systems,"

added Rupert. "These thermostats can be programmed to respond to room occupancy, outdoor temperature, adjust the heat or cool setting if windows or doors are open or closed and can be remotely accessed. They're great. We can also program them as freeze alarms that will call out an alarm if the temperature drops below a present point, and they can even turn the water off."

Also, many people opt for a combination of both zoned and conventional furnace systems.

"Radiant floor systems don't provide cooling for homes, and many people opt to do a radiant floor in the basement slab and a conventional system for the upper floors of a home,"

said Strickland. "That way, they can run a cool air system also."

Stacie Carlson is a local freelance writer.

Record-Eagle/Meegan M. Reid

Top, this large local home has the zone heating system. Right, the system has a water storage tank and water heater/furnace. Below, the temperature controls and thermostat.





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