

Alaska HomeWise: Ask a Builder
By Cold Climate Housing Research Center Staff

The "Ask a Builder" series is dedicated to answering some of the many questions Fairbanks residents have about building, energy and the many other parts of home life.

How often should I get my septic system pumped? It seems like everyone has a different opinion.

That's a tricky question because there are so many different variables. If it's a house with lots of people staying in it, then you're using the system a lot, especially if people use a lot of toilet paper or there are other waste systems, like a garbage disposal. These will result in a lot of solids in the system and you may want to pump it every year or less. A house with fewer people, that does not pump a lot of detergents, bleaches, or cleaners in the tank may be able to get away with years of not pumping, because the solids in the tank degrade at a quick rate in comparison to how fast it's filling up.

Your safest option would be to have it pumped every year, but you may be able to get by with every two years, possibly every three years at first. Talk to the person doing the pumping to get an idea of what is coming out of the tank. From there you can make a judgment on how often you need to pump your system, and adjust accordingly.

I am looking at putting in some wind turbines, but I hear they can be noisy. What are my options?

That's a good question and a good thing to be concerned about. There are some wind turbines that are noisier than others. A lot of it has to do with the speed at which the tips are spinning (revolutions per minute, or "rpm"). The specifications of each turbine will tell you the rpms. Generally speaking, the more rugged turbines spin at a slower speed, last longer, and are easier on the ears. Noise is a legitimate concern, so gauge how much noise you tolerate, and speak with your neighbors too.

I'm looking at buying new windows. There are many different types of gas fill you can get between panes. What's the difference, and what's the best?

The two most common options after air are Argon and Krypton. As long as the seals between the panes hold up and the gas stays in, it will provide more resistance to heat transfer than air. Krypton performs slightly better than Argon which performs slightly better than air. Krypton is currently priced out of the market in most cases so Argon is what you will typically find in windows nowadays.

The gas fill is really only part of the big picture. Every thing matters when it comes to cold climate window performance: the quality of the seals, what kind of spacers are being used between the panes, whether the window is a double pane or triple pane unit, etc.

The bottom line is the overall R-value or U-value for the window. For our climate, you want a window with an R-value of at least four and a U-value of no more than .25, which is basically a triple pane window. Either fiberglass or vinyl will do just fine, but find a company that stands behind their product with a warranty and be sure the window is designed to perform in extreme cold.

Alaska HomeWise articles promote home awareness for the Cold Climate Housing Research Center (CCHRC). If you have a question, e-mail us at akhomewise@cchrc.org. You can also call the CCHRC at (907) 457-3454