

Daily Southtown

Fight ComEd bills with energy efficiency

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The end of July in Chicago usually means hot, steamy weather and this year is no exception. And when you have a hot summer in Chicago, you know those big electric bills can't be far behind.

There are some very simple steps consumers can take in their homes to cut energy usage—and those summer electric bills—but, surprisingly, many of us don't take them.

There also are some more difficult and complex steps the state should take to encourage smarter energy use, but, to date, there's been little progress on that front either.

Undertaking both the easy and hard initiatives will be more important than ever if ComEd succeeds with its push for a big rate hike next year. So, let's start with the simple stuff first.

Many consumers have heard of compact fluorescent light bulbs, those weird, space-age looking devices that can be installed in light fixtures throughout your home. Once only available to the most ardent energy conservationists through special catalogs and suppliers, the bulbs can now be picked up at your local hardware, grocery or drug store. The bulbs work much better than they used to and are the simplest and most effective energy efficiency improvement you can make.

In fact, CUB, through the Northern Illinois Energy Project, recently launched a program to distribute over 1 million bulbs—at a 75 percent discount—to retailers throughout northern Illinois. The bulbs use up to 75 percent less energy than a standard light bulb, last 10 times longer and can save at least \$40 over the life of a bulb. Stores

participating in the promotion so far include Family Dollar, Walgreens and Food 4 Less.

Another simple step to take is to clean or replace

your air conditioner filter regularly and have the unit serviced once a year. Keeping the unit out of direct sunlight, with trees or shades, also is a good idea since a unit in the shade uses as much as 10 percent less energy.

Just as you can use a programmable thermostat to save on winter heating bills, the device can also help save in the summer, by turning your thermostat up (rather than down) when you're not at home. Each degree you raise your thermostat can save 2 percent on your electricity bill and, remember, turning the thermostat to a colder setting than normal at first won't cool your house any faster.

It also pays to keep your house cool in the first place. Install an attic fan to draw heat out of your house and put off chores that generate heat, like baking, for cool times of the day. Summer grilling keeps heat out of the house, too, so enjoy a summer barbecue instead of turning on the oven.

Simple steps like these could cut an average household's energy use by an estimated 40 percent. That would save money for everyone because less demand should lead to lower prices.

But to maximize those potential savings for consumers, Illinois needs to do more.

For example, Gov. Blagojevich recently signed a bill that requires electric companies to offer real-time pricing to consumers. Under this program, customers pay a different price for electricity at different times of the day and can save money by changing their pattern of energy use.

That's because the price of a kilowatt-hour of electricity could go as high as 12 cents on a hot summer afternoon, but plummet to less than 2 cents later that evening. If customers have that kind of price information they can save money by postponing some energy usage—like laundry, running the dishwasher, surfing the Internet—until prices are low.

To make the law work, however, the Illinois Commerce Commission (ICC) first needs to require ComEd, on a forward going basis, to install so-called

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“smart” meters to track hourly energy usage. And customers who want to replace current meters should be able to do so at minimal cost.

Lawmakers also need to promote the development of homegrown, renewable resources, such as solar, wind and biomass power by providing financial incentives for customers to invest in that technology.

For example, solar panels can take sunshine and convert it to electricity to power homes and businesses. But to make the system work, you need to be able to connect to your local power grid and sell the

excess power you generate back to the utility’s system. In order to do this, the state needs to adopt “net metering” rules so that when you provide more power to the grid than you’re using your meter runs backwards.

There’s no magic cure for our state’s—or our country’s—energy woes. One thing’s for certain, though. We don’t have the luxury of viewing energy efficiency as feel-good measures only of concern to environmentalists. Whether it’s out of concern for the planet or concern for our pocket books, we all have to take steps to use less.