

Daily Southtown

On 'Da Bears' and rate-hike heroes

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Maybe it seems odd that the Chicago Bears' Super Bowl euphoria gives me hope in the face of ComEd rate hikes that are boosting power bills by an average of 26 percent.

It's not just because Bears heroes like Lovie Smith and Brian Urlacher help me forget ComEd's auction system—a flawed process of pricing power that opens the door to unlimited rate hikes. They also remind me that CUB has its own set of heroes who call us each day and tell us how they're fighting ComEd.

I call them “rate-hike heroes” because they know this fight is far from over and they're doing creative things to stand up to a multibillion-dollar corporation that wants to jam the higher rates down our throats. See, while CUB fights the rate hikes in Springfield, there's plenty consumers can do to fight them right in their own homes.

Take Ted and Sally Phillips, Chicago-area retirees who cut their electric bills in half by replacing two notorious household energy eaters—an old refrigerator and freezer—and using Compact Fluorescent Lightbulbs (CFLs), which burn 75 percent less energy. “I'm just a run-of-the-mill person,” Mr. Phillips said. “This is what you do.”

Here are a few other tips for “run-of-the-mill” people like you and me: Buy highly efficient appliances with the “Energy Star” label. Make sure your refrigerator door is airtight. (Close the door on a piece of paper. You should feel tension when you pull it out.) Run the dishwasher only when you have a full load—and turn the heated dry selection off. Buy a programmable thermostat. Set your water heater

to 120 degrees (the warm setting) and cover it with a special blanket, which you can buy at hardware stores.

If you follow these and other relatively simple steps, you're a rate-hike hero.

“I've never really considered myself a ‘green’ person, but I'm determined to lower my electric consumption to withhold that additional money from ComEd,” said Mark Baich, a suburban father of three who has cut energy use 25 percent by using CFLs, turning off his computers at night, and reminding his kids to turn off the hallway lights. (Remember, it's a myth that frequently turning a light on and off significantly reduces the life of a bulb. Save the energy!)

Baich and Phillips have one more piece of advice: pick up the phone! “I know with enough people calling their elected officials anything is possible,” Baich said.

Call 1-800-719-3020 to keep pushing your legislators to support an extension of the rate freeze. A bill to do just that passed the Illinois House earlier this year, so this issue isn't going away. A growing number of elected officials say Illinois' auction simply doesn't work and leaves consumers vulnerable to price gouging. Eventually, everyone, even the utilities, will be forced to acknowledge this. So CUB will keep fighting—just like the Bears.

For those skeptics who don't think consumers can beat the rich and powerful ComEd, just remember Jan. 15, 2004. That was the day a rookie NFL coach named Lovie stood before skeptical Chicago media for the first time and said he aimed to take the lowly Bears to the Super Bowl. I'm sure there were a few chuckles that day (and not just from Green Bay fans). But just three years later, nobody's laughing.

Go to CUB's website, www.CitizensUtilityBoard.com, to get more tips, as well as information on where to get discounted CFLs.