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Save money these holidays

(<http://www.southtownstar.com/business/669836,112807kolata.article>)

November 28, 2007

By David Kolata

The holidays aren't typically the time to think about saving money. But with a recent survey predicting that rising energy costs could put a damper on Yuletide spending, I thought I'd break with tradition and share some of my favorite ways to save.

Trim electricity costs

Replacing your normal, electricity-sucking bulbs with highly efficient ones could save you \$11 a year per bulb. Replace 10 of your most-used bulbs, and you could easily save more than \$100. The bulbs are available, while supplies last, at discounted prices of as little as \$1 per bulb at Big Lots, Jewel, Food 4 Less, Walmart and CVS (by the end of December) thanks to a program sponsored by the Citizens Utility Board, Chicago and the Cook County state's attorney's office.

That same program in partnership with Jewel also allows you to deck the halls and save money with discounted LED holiday lights that use 80 percent to 99 percent less energy than regular incandescent ones. Decorating your home with 500 of these lights and keeping them on for about five hours a day will save you about \$20.

Ice high phone bills

Switch to one of the Consumer's Choice calling plans for your local phone service. The CUB-designed packages, which AT&T is required to offer under a legal settlement, could save Chicago-area consumers \$100 million over the next few years. Unlike competing phone packages, the Consumer's Choice plans are a perfect fit for most consumers, and their prices are frozen through 2010.

But don't stop at local calls. Sign up for a low-cost long-distance plan such as Pioneer - call (888) 492-6878 - at 2 to 3 cents per minute for all calls beyond 15 miles. If you make a lot of international calls, check out www.EnjoyPrepaid.com for low-cost calling cards. Even better, the Internet phone service provider Jajah (www.jajah.com) offers calls to many countries for free, just by registering.

While you're at it, drop Line-Backer, the AT&T insurance plan that charges \$84 a year to cover repairs that are hardly ever needed. Confused by all the choices? Call CUB's phone savings hot line at (866) 688-4282 for help sorting it all out.

Rein in gas costs

Install a programmable thermostat and set it a few degrees cooler when you're not at home or when you're sleeping. You could shave 2 percent off your energy bill for every degree you lower the temperature for at least eight hours. So reducing the temperature from 70 degrees to 65 degrees during the day saves \$100 for every \$1,000 of heating costs.

Citizens Utility Board executive director David Kolata writes a consumer news column the last Wednesday of each month. To reach CUB, call (800) 669-5556 or e-mail info@citizensutilityboard.org.

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