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Of electric bills and bad apples

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By David Kolata

Remember when we were kids and our teachers used to bark about a few "bad apples"- spitball-shooting troublemakers - ruining it for the entire class? Turns out, our power system has its own bad apples: a handful of hot summer days that balloon our electric bills for the entire year.

These "bad apples" are the key to saving billions of dollars on our power costs.

The actual price of electricity is often quite cheap - except for those steamy, summer peak hours when everyone's blasting air conditioners and market power prices can jump by 500 percent or even more.

Part of the problem is that electricity, unlike oil or natural gas, can't be economically stored. So a second after power is generated, it's thrown onto the grid and used. That means we have to build out the whole system to meet the demand of just a few hours a year, typically a hot summer afternoon during the work week, when air conditioners are running full tilt. And the more peak electricity we use, the more we pay - through our electric bills - for power-plant construction to cover what the future demand MAY be.

That's how the game has been played for years, but the wasteful electric grid gives us plenty of opportunity to change the rules. Even a relatively small decrease in demand has a huge impact on our bills. In fact, a 2007 Brattle Group study found that the nation could save \$35 billion over two decades if we shave peak demand by just 5 percent.

That's why the Building Owners and Managers Association of Chicago, CUB, the city of Chicago, and the state of Illinois are working with the Republic of South Korea - a world leader in "smart grid" technology - to install energy-saving equipment in up to 14 of the biggest Loop buildings. Air conditioning and lighting systems, for example, will be outfitted with gadgetry to power down at peak times, transforming the buildings into virtual power plants that, in effect, sell electricity to the grid when we need it most.

Building occupants probably won't notice the changes - unless they're the ones paying the electric bills. The program is expected to spark multimillion-dollar savings, and the initiative will create jobs right here in Illinois.

But don't wait for the skyscrapers to become more efficient. Start with your own home.

CUBEnergySaver.com, for example, has been showing customers how to cut their energy use and save an average of \$200 a year. Plus, more and more people are signing up for Real Time Pricing, which has been saving participants about 15 percent on their ComEd bills by allowing them to pay an hourly price for electricity instead of the standard rate that only changes by season.

These are just a few examples of game-changers, and they're the first baby steps in a long journey. But they're key to getting the best of our power bills - and those bad apples.

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