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Oak Park 365

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Sept. 10, 2010 - Smart Grid

By [Jennifer Clark](#) on September 10, 2010 4:09 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#)

'Smart Grid' helps residents be green

Story by TODD SHIELDS
Staff writer

Photo by JOE CYGANOWSKI
For STM

From his home's back porch computer room in south Oak Park, Tom Bassett-Dilley called out to his wife in the kitchen, his finger following a wireless monitor showing real time energy consumption.

"Honey, turn on the toaster!"

The digital monitor jumped from 2 cents to 15 cents per hour in usage.

"I can look at this and see cents per hour. I think about 2 cents is about right for us," said Bassett-Dilley, a green architect.

"I can adjust monthly rate charges to see if we're doing OK. My target is \$30 a month."

An Oak Park resident since 2001, Bassett-Dilley has been participating in a pilot program overseen by Commonwealth Edison.



The U.S. Department of Energy has partially funded the \$5 million program so that ComEd can study the cost of using solar energy and its impact on the company's power grid for all customers.

Bassett-Dilley could be selected among 100 customers to be outfitted with \$30,000 each in solar energy equipment panels.

In all, 25,000 surveys were sent to ComEd's 130,000 users in the western suburbs.

Solar-use study

Bassett-Dilley hoped to be chosen for the solar-use study, which is called the photovoltaic pilot program.

"As a green architect, (I) work with people considering these photovoltaic systems," he said. "Being part of this great. I can help spread the word."

The photovoltaic project also will allow customers to sell unused solar electricity that otherwise would impact the grid.

Last week, ComEd unveiled other pilot initiatives in its "Smart Grid Corridor" -- a portion of Chicago's west suburbs. 130,000 homes and businesses were installed with digital Smart Meters.

In June, Smart Meters went live in Hillside, Melrose Park, Maywood, Bellwood, Broadview, Oak Park, Forest Park Forest, Berwyn and Chicago's Humboldt Park.

Equipped with radios, Smart Meters provide electrical consumption data back to several "intelligent" ComEd substations where one is currently being upgraded in Oak Park with automated monitoring systems.

Smart Meters will cost homeowners \$5 annually, and they can look at hourly individual consumption figures from previous day with an online ComEd account.

Goals of the 16-month pilot program, said Michael McMahan, ComEd's vice president of Smart Grid Technology, learn customer use patterns, especially during peak times in summer when consumption is highest and, therefore, costly.

"Our customers can get information on how best to manage their energy loads," he said, adding the old days of readers walking house to house are over.

"In addition, we can take Smart Meter data on electrical overloading or outages and send power to another sub-distribution, said Rich Gordus, a Smart Grid manager.

Smart Meters also feature devices called "reclosers" that automatically help maintain power flow in damaged circuits, avoiding the need for dispatching ComEd repair crews.

Plug-in cars

In preparing for electric vehicles, ComEd is studying how they can be plugged into Smart Grids for recharging, said.

"People tend to buy electrical vehicles in pockets of neighborhoods. If they all plugged in together, it would strain the system. Smart Meters need to sense this load on usage," he said, adding plug-in stations could be built at train parking lots and homes.

McMahan said the west suburbs were chosen to test Smart Grids and Smart Meters because the region is a micro-representation of serving both urban and rural customers in northern Illinois, where ComEd has 3.8 million customers.

David Kolata, executive director of the Citizens Utility Board in Illinois, said Smart Meters could be "very cost-effective" over time, but home users need plugged-in appliances that automatically shut down when not turned on, such as televisions.

"In homes where you have these vampire or phantom loads, they're sucking power from appliances. That could be 10 percent of one's bill," Kolata said. "If the Smart Grids were set up right, these appliances will automatically power down."

McMahan said ComEd is providing 8,000 in-home devices to show users daily power consumption.

Kolata said, "We're cautiously optimistic about Smart Grids. They can really benefit customers if they are designed correctly. The pilot program is well-designed; and we should learn what works and what doesn't. We're anxious for the results."

Go online to www.comed.com/Pages/smartmeter.aspx to learn more about Smart Meters.

Photo:

Rich Gordus holds a monitoring box outside the ComEd substation in Oak Park.

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