

The CUB VOICE



"Get Green" Issue 2008

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www.CitizensUtilityBoard.org

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"Gee, Gladys, you used to dream about me!"
(See pages 4-5)

Give us a break!

Despite record energy prices, utilities push for \$750 million in rate hikes

Illinois consumers are facing an \$750 million onslaught of utility rate hikes, and with gasoline and heating prices hitting record levels this year, the proposed increases couldn't have come at a worse time.

CUB has been challenging the rate hikes at the Illinois Commerce Commission (ICC) and, if necessary, in court. People can help that fight by supporting CUB's "Consumer Defense Fund," to help pay for legal battles against the rate hikes. Those battles include:

ComEd's \$270 Million Increase

As The CUB Voice went to press, CUB vowed to appeal a \$270 million ComEd increase. The ICC approved the rate hike despite evidence from CUB and the Illinois Attorney General's office that showed how ComEd had overstated its expenses by \$322 million. This was ComEd's second increase in "delivery" rates—what it charges to deliver power to homes—since late 2006. ComEd's parent, Exelon, made \$2.9 billion in 2007.

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CUB's new money-saver 'Cellphone Saver' has shown wireless customers how to save \$200+ a year

CUB has launched the Cellphone Saver, an online tool designed to save consumers potentially hundreds of dollars on their wireless bills.

The state-of-the-art tool allows users to upload a copy of their online wireless bill. It then analyzes that bill in a matter of seconds, identifying the cheapest calling plans, providing customized money-saving tips, and spotting billing errors.

The CUB Cellphone Saver has been showing consumers how to cut their bills by an average of about \$280 a year.

Any customer with online billing at AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, U.S. Cellular, or Verizon can use CUB's tool.

George Kovacs, a Verizon customer in Rock Island, said the CUB Cell-Phone Saver alerted him that he was

"We are thrilled to offer such a groundbreaking service that within seconds can cut through cell-phone confusion and show consumers how to save money."

-CUB Executive Director David Kolata

wasting more than a hundred minutes each month.

"The last several months I noticed that I always had some unused minutes," the retired marketing executive said. "This service was quite helpful as it showed me that I am overpaying."

He plans to reduce his monthly bill by downgrading from a 450-minute

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From the desk of... CUB gets 'green' to save you green David Kolata



Welcome to CUB's first-ever "Get Green" issue. It's, literally, green, but also filled with "green" tips to help you cut costs and protect the planet.

Don't worry. As you can see by our front-page headlines, CUB's not changing its mission. For nearly 25 years, our business has been, and still is, to fight high electric, natural gas, telephone, and water rates.

Unfortunately, business currently is quite good (or, for us consumers, quite bad!), with utilities fighting for nearly \$1 billion in rate hikes.

So our money-saving mission is the same, but now we have a powerful new weapon in the fight: energy efficiency.

Pages 4-7 feature a shopping guide for Compact Fluorescent Light bulbs (CFLs), which use 75 percent less energy and can cut annual power bills by up to \$10 per bulb. Fill out an entry form there to win up to 100 of the bulbs yourself.

We also list your home's top energy-guzzling items, and give you tips on how to prepare for another long winter.

There's much more. You'll always find new ways to save money in the pages of this newsletter. Just consider every edition of The CUB Voice a "green" issue—even if it's not colored that way.

CUB makes a difference

'She went out of her way to help me'

For months, Rosemary Whelan paid AT&T for services she thought were canceled. She even put up with a malfunctioning Caller ID service. But when her monthly bill hit \$107, the retiree decided she had enough.

"They were charging me way too much and there were a lot of things on my bill that I didn't pay attention to," the Chicago woman said.

Whelan called AT&T to cancel the services, but made little progress.

Sandra Marcelin-Reme, CUB's director of consumer advocacy, said it's very easy for customers to pay for unused and unnecessary services.

"No matter how informed the consumer might be, the phone company will try to sell the most expensive plan possible," she said.

When Whelan called CUB, Marcelin-Reme immediately coordinated a call with herself, Whelan and an AT&T representative. As a result, Whelan's bill was cut nearly in half.

"She went out of her way to help me," Whelan wrote of Sandra in a letter to CUB. "Just this one service was worth my \$25 donation."

Marcelin-Reme was happy to help.

"I'm glad that folks have a place independent of the utility companies to sort that out for them," she said.

Whelan is glad too.



Marcelin-Reme holds Whelan's letter.

CUB Cellphone Saver slices through cell-phone confusion

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plan to 300 minutes.

The CUB Cellphone Saver confirmed for Julissa Pedro that her current plan was the cheapest.

"I was actually thinking of switching my plan to try to save money," Pedro said. "I found out through this tool that I already have the best plan. So now I won't be switching thanks to CUB."

CUB Executive Director David Kolata said the tool is another way his group can help consumers get the lowest possible rates for cell-phone service.

"In a world of skyrocketing energy prices and a struggling economy, consumers want tools that can show them

On the web...

To use CUB's Cellphone Saver, logon to:

www.CUBCellphoneSaver.com

easy ways to protect their bottom line," Kolata said. "We are thrilled to offer such a groundbreaking service that within seconds can cut through cell phone confusion and show consumers how to save money."

CUB, partnering with Houston-based software provider Validas, Inc., is the first organization of its kind to

offer this service, so it is considered a work in progress. Consumers who have questions or comments about the CUB Cellphone Saver should use the tool's "Comments" page to let the watchdog group know.

The Cellphone Saver requires users to have online billing, which is free, with one of the five biggest wireless companies. But that doesn't mean people who use the tool have to give up their paper bills. The companies allow customers to have online billing and also get a paper bill.

The tool does not cover business bills, prepaid plans, and AT&T bills that include both wireless and land-line service.

\$3 million in savings!

Another one of CUB's online tools has now shown users how to save a total of \$3 million.

CUB's Local Phone Cost-cutter helps customers choose the Consumer's Choice plan that is right for them. Under a legal settlement, AT&T is forced to sell those local plans, which were created by CUB to save most customers money.

To find the Cost-cutter, click on the image of the calculator on CUB's website, www.CitizenUtilityBoard.org.

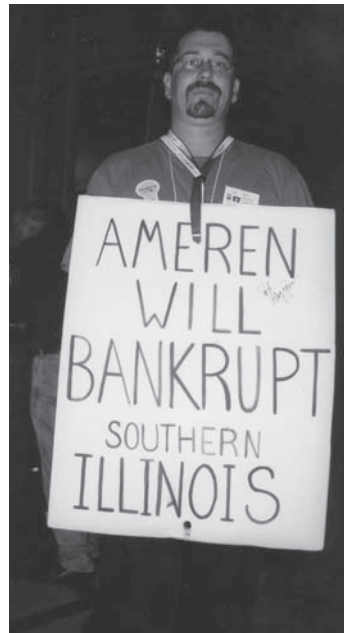


How to fight the hikes:

■ Call the ICC, 1-800-524-0795. Tell it you oppose a rate hike

■ Comment on rate-hike cases at the ICC's website:
www.icc.illinois.gov/docket/comment/

■ Support CUB's legal fight against the rate hikes. Any amount you can give to our "Consumer Defense Fund" will be a big help.



Horrible timing!

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Ameren's \$247 Million Proposal

Ameren is singing the same tune as ComEd, with a combined gas and electric rate-hike request that would boost the company's delivery rates by an average of 30 percent. CUB's experts uncovered at least \$189 million in unnecessary or inflated expenses.

Nicor's \$140 Million Proposal

Nicor's proposed delivery increase would add another \$55 to the average customer's annual gas bill, on top of the price of the actual gas used. Nicor's gas prices have been at record highs this year. CUB experts have found that Nicor overstated its expenses and inflated its profit margin by at least \$85 million.

Peoples Gas \$71 Million Increase

In February, the ICC granted Peoples Gas a delivery rate hike. That means

consumers now pay \$14.95 a month just to have service, before they even use a therm of gas. The ICC also allowed Peoples to impose a new, "Use Less, Pay More" surcharge that penalizes customers when they burn less gas, either because of warmer weather or attempts to conserve. CUB asked the ICC to reconsider the rate hike, but so far, the agency has refused. CUB attorneys have appealed the case to the Illinois Appellate court.

Illinois American \$26 Million Increase

In July, the ICC gave Illinois American Water Co. a \$26 million rate hike. Experts hired by CUB and the Illinois Attorney General challenged many of the company's claimed expenses, and the proposed rate hike was reduced by about \$9 million. Some communities got hit particularly hard, with Champaign paying 47 percent more and Pontiac and Streator about 21 percent more.



CUB clinics have shown people how to cut their phone bills by nearly \$200 a year. In Rock Island, a man (left) suddenly pulled out a tape measure to see how Policy Analyst Bryan McDaniel "measured up." In Palatine (above), Jim Chilsen and other CUB staffers helped 120 people. One cried "Bingo!" when it was finally his turn to get his bill analyzed. You too could hit the phone-savings jackpot. Get details about CUB's next clinic at www.CitizensUtilityBoard.org.

Warning! Get ready for digital TV

The federal government has mandated that by Feb. 17, 2009 most TV stations stop broadcasting analog signals and switch to digital signals.

This will affect those who use an antenna to receive their local channels, as well as dish cable customers who use an antenna to receive local channels.

On the web...

CUB has a fact sheet on the digital TV transition:

www.CitizensUtilityBoard.org

Saving money's as easy as 1-2-3

Take these steps to shrink your phone bill:

1) Sign up for one of AT&T's Consumer's Choice calling plans, designed by CUB. The rates for these plans are frozen through 2011.

2) Drop expensive long distance. Switch to Pioneer Telephone's Rate Buster plan, at 2 to 3 cents per minute. Those referred by CUB get an automatic \$20 credit, about 11 hours of free long distance.

3) Drop unnecessary features. The Inside Wire Maintenance Plan (a.k.a. Line Backer) is an expensive (up to \$84 a year) insurance plan for the wires inside your home. Also, consider dropping Voice Mail. Have callers leave messages on your cell phone, which often includes voice mail.

Call CUB's Phone Savings Hotline, at **1-866-688-4282**, for more details.

\$10 home phone service?

Dear CUB: Is there a new offer for \$10 home phone service?

Home phone service for only \$10? Pinch us, we must be dreaming.

T-Mobile is now offering a plan called "@Home," which uses Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology to offer unlimited nationwide calling, voice mail, caller ID, call forwarding, call waiting, and 3-way calling, all for \$10 a month. But there's a catch.

To be eligible, customers must have a T-Mobile single-line mobile plan of at least \$39.99 a month or a Family-Time mobile plan of \$49.99 a month. Since VoIP service carries calls over the Internet, a broadband connection is required, at an extra monthly cost of about \$20 to \$40. T-Mobile is not an Internet provider, so customers must look elsewhere for service.

Those T-Mobile customers who already have broadband escape some of the extra costs, but not all of them. Users must pay a one-time \$35 activation

Hot Tips

fee and buy a \$50 HiPort Router. The router costs \$150 for those who don't sign a 2-year contract. Also, customers have the option of purchasing a \$60 cordless phone. Beware that T-Mobile charges relatively high international rates.

Along with the extra costs, @Home users must make several changes when switching from a landline to VoIP. You must register your home address for E911 emergency service and find an Internet-based alternative for any service requiring a traditional phone line, including fax machines, DirecTV, TiVo and home security systems.

This could be a good deal for T-Mobile customers who already have broadband Internet. But, for everyone else the extra costs outweigh the low price, making \$10 phone service still just a dream.

Beware that cable companies may try to capitalize on consumer confusion over the change to sell more expensive TV packages.

Key details about the transition include:

■ Consumers do NOT need to buy a new TV. If a TV does not have a built-in digital tuner and uses "bunny ears" or antennas to pick up local TV channels, the owner will need to buy a "converter box." The general rule of thumb is that a TV manufactured more than 3 years ago will need a converter box. Consumer Reports reviewed some of the converter boxes. Check out the findings at:

www.consumerreports.org/dtv.

■ The federal government is allowing up to two \$40 coupons per household to be used for the purchase of converter boxes. Consumers can either call **1-888-DTV-2009 (1-888-388-2009)** or apply online at www.dtv2009.gov. Unfortunately, the \$40 coupons expire 90 days after a consumer gets them.

■ Digital signals are not as strong as analog signals, so consumers may have reception problems after the switch. This may require buying an outdoor antenna.

Note that a second transition will affect cable customers and will occur some time before 2012, at a time chosen by each cable company. This will only affect TVs not connected directly to a cable box. Those TVs probably will need a converter box.

Real-time pricing can slash power bills

The real-time pricing program could slash power bills for customers across the state—if they're willing and able to change how they use electricity.

While savings aren't guaranteed, a pilot program in northern Illinois did reduce bills by about 10 percent.

The program also reduces demand for pollution-causing coal-fired power plants. It helps keep the lights on by reducing stress on the electricity system.

The power companies charge their residential customers a fixed electric rate that ranges from around six to seven cents per kilowatt-hour, depend-

ing on the winter or summer season. However, customers who choose the real-time pricing program pay a market-based rate that changes each hour. In a 24-hour period, that price could dip as low as 2 cents per kilowatt-hour and soar to 13 cents per

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CUB's Money-saving



CUB Outreach Director Sarah Moskowitz (left) shows a consumer a special bike that displays just how much more energy it takes to light a regular incandescent bulb versus a money-saving compact fluorescent light bulb (CFL). CUB handed out about 5,000 CFLs recently at the Chicago Ridge mall.

CFL Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why should I use compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) instead of incandescent bulbs?

CFLs use only a quarter of the energy that incandescent bulbs do and can last up to 10 times longer. By replacing an incandescent bulb with a CFL, you can save up to \$47 over a bulb's lifetime. Remember, lighting accounts for up to 20 percent of your electric bill. CFLs generate 75 percent less heat, so you'll really notice the difference in the summer.

2. Don't CFLs have mercury in them?

Like many household items, including computer monitors and standard fluorescent bulbs, CFLs do contain mercury. The actual amount is between 1.4 and 5 milligrams—about the amount that could fit on a pinhead, at most. To compare, thermometers used to have 500 mg of mercury. No mercury is released from CFLs unless they break. Because they use much less energy than incandescents, CFLs lead to 75 percent less mercury pollution from coal-fired power plants.

3. What do I do if a CFL breaks?

To be safe, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommends opening a door or window to air out the room. Use gloves and wet paper towels or tape to collect the pieces. Double bag the bulb with resealable plastic bags. Either throw out the broken CFL or take it to a recycling facility. See CUB's Get Green page, at www.CitizensUtilityBoard.org, for full details on disposing of the bulbs.

4. **Can I throw away my used CFLs?**
CFLs should be recycled so that the materials can be reused and the mercury doesn't pollute the environment. Currently, **Ace Hardware, Home Depot, and IKEA accept CFLs. Look for other "big-box" stores to begin recycling CFLs within a year.** CUB's "Get Green" page, www.CitizensUtilityBoard.org, has a list of recycling facilities. If there isn't a facility in your area, a CFL can be thrown away. First, put it in two resealable plastic bags.

5. Does it take CFLs more time to fully light up?

CFLs take a few seconds to reach full brightness. **Continued on p. 5**

Win 100 CFLs

Fill out this pledge form to use at least one CFL in your home and send it to CUB (309 W. Washington, Suite 800, Chicago, IL, 60606).

We'll include it in a drawing Nov. 1. The name we pick will win 100 super-efficient Compact Fluorescent Light bulbs (CFLs).

I, _____, pledge to use at least one CFL in my home.

Address: _____

Phone: _____

CFL Shopping Guide

CFLs are available at almost any store that sells incandescent bulbs. They are recommended for any fixtures that are used at least 15 minutes a day, although they are most efficient when used for at least two hours.

Ideal locations include your living or family room, the kitchen, dining room, and bedrooms. Below, CUB summarizes the styles of compact fluorescent bulbs that are available and the recommendations for different kinds of fixtures.

Types of CFL Bulbs



Spiral

The most popular type of CFL, these bulbs create the same amount of light as traditional incandescents, but use less energy.



Tubed

These work well in lamps that have slender covers, such as wall sconces.



Covered A-Shaped

These bulbs combine the efficiency of a CFL with the look and feel of traditional incandescents.



Candle (Bullet)

These are ideal for decorative fixtures where you can see the bulb, and tight-fitting fixtures where a covered globe won't fit.



Covered Globe

This bulb is ideal for use where you can see the bulbs, such as bathroom vanity bars and ceiling pendants. Basically, it's a spiral bulb with a decorative cover.



Indoor Reflector

These bulbs direct light out of the fixture (think of recessed lights in a kitchen or a ceiling fan). Some can be used with a dimmer. Check the packaging.



Outdoor Reflector

These bulbs are sealed to withstand the rain and snow. Using them with timers, photocells, and motion sensors will probably shorten their life.

Images courtesy of EnergyStar.gov

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The CUB Voice

Get Green' Tip Sheet

CFL Shopping Guide



CUB staffer Bernita Lawson kept busy helping the consumer group hand out 10,000 money-saving CFLs at Union Station over the summer. CUB gave out another 5,000 at the Chicago Ridge Mall recently.

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Three-Way CFLs

Three-way light switches require three-way CFLs. Check the packaging to make sure the bulb is intended for this use. Installing three-way CFLs may require extra effort since they can be slightly larger than their matching incandescents, but they still use one-third as much electricity.

Tips on taming energy-guzzling home appliances

Don't be held hostage by your home appliances. Use these money-saving tips to tame your top energy-guzzlers.

Clothes Washer: They're most efficient at full capacity. Look for high-speed spin cycles that remove more water from fabrics, so less energy is needed for drying. Up to 90 percent of washing costs come from heating the water. Use cold water often. Studies have shown it cleans just as well.

Clothes Dryer: Separate your clothes into lighter and heavier-fabric loads and choose a cycle accordingly. Dry your loads back-to-back to take

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CFLs and Fixtures

Ceiling Fixtures

Use spiral or tubed ENERGY STAR qualified bulbs.

Pendant Fixtures

Bare bulbs work, but most people like the look of covered CFLs (A-shaped or globe).

Ceiling Fans

Use spiral or covered bulbs (A-shaped, candles, or small reflectors). A lot of manufacturers are developing other CFLs for ceiling fans.

Wall Sconces

Smaller-sized spiral or bullet ENERGY STAR qualified CFLs work best.

Recessed Cans

Indoor reflector bulbs work best. They are specially designed to withstand heat buildup in these fixtures.

Outdoor Covered Fixtures

Spiral or tubed CFLs work here. Check the packaging for starting temperatures to make sure the CFL will work properly. Check with the makers of electronic controls like photocells, timers and motion sensors for CFL compatibility.

Outdoor Exposed Fixtures

Use ENERGY STAR qualified outdoor flood CFLs, which have special cases that protect them from the weather. Placing a bare spiral CFL in an open outdoor fixture is likely to result in early failure. Check the packaging for starting temperatures to make sure the bulb will work properly.

CFL Colors

Spiral CFLs come in a variety of colors, such as soft white (what most incandescents are), natural light or daylight. Most CFLs come in "warm" colors to match the yellowish light of incandescent bulbs. These bulbs are in the 2700–3000 Kelvin (K) range.

"Cooler" colors, with whiter and bluish hues, are often used for reading and task lighting. 3500–4100K gives a bright white light and 5000–6500K is bluer and most like daylight.

For more information:

www.EnergyStar.Gov

ENERGY STAR is a program of the Energy Department and the Environmental Protection Agency. The site includes a CFL store locator and a "Choose a Light Guide."

CFL Frequently Asked Questions

Continued from p. 4

illumination. After that the light output is the same as an incandescent.

6. Do CFLs make a buzzing noise?

Unlike the old fluorescent tubes, modern CFLs do not buzz.

7. Do CFLs work in outdoor fixtures?

Most CFLs work in temperatures as low as -10 degrees Fahrenheit. It's best to use moisture-resistant CFLs labeled as "weatherproof." See our "CFL Shopping Guide."

8. Can I use CFLs in dimmer or three-way switches?

We recommend buying CFLs that

are specifically designed for those fixtures. Otherwise, the life of the bulb or the switch may be shortened. Carefully read the labels before buying a bulb for one of these fixtures. See our "CFL Shopping Guide."

9. Do CFLs cause interference to TVs, radios, cell phones and remote controls?

CFLs may cause electromagnetic interference, although bulb designers try to limit that possibility. Labels are required to state any devices that CFLs interfere with.

10. Do CFLs cause pictures to fade?

The Ultraviolet (UV) value of ANY

light bulb (incandescent or CFL) causes pictures to fade. However, CFLs generally have a smaller UV value.

11. Is the government going to mandate the purchase or use of CFLs?

No. President George W. Bush did sign the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007, which mandates that bulbs sold over the next six years meet new standards of energy efficiency. However, the law does not specify which type of bulb must meet these requirements, nor does it apply to specialty bulbs like candelabras or colored bulbs.

CUBBITZ

Is there a problem?...Hours after having new concrete poured in their gangway, a Chicago couple noticed a ComEd meter reader trudging through the wet cement. He didn't apologize, but said if there was "a problem," they should contact his supervisor, the Chicago Sun-Times reports. After weeks of wrangling and a call to the media, the couple got ComEd to reimburse them the \$350 it took to fix the problem. Now, the gangway's repaired, but we can't say the same about ComEd's reputation.

Go tell it on the hilltop?...It was pretty bad when a Sprint customer still had poor cell-phone reception after nine months of complaining. But the Issaquah, Washington resident tells The Consumerist that Sprint hit a low point when it told him to go to a high point. "Go outside, or to a hilltop to make calls," the customer rep said. That must be from the new chapter in Sprint's customer-service handbook.

Take me out to the ball game... Tucked away in Ameren's \$247 million rate-hike request was \$560 in consultant expenses for hotel rooms and St. Louis Cardinals tickets on days they weren't working, according to published reports. When state regulators suggested that wasn't the best expense to dump on customers, Ameren quickly complied. "We... appreciate that they brought these items to our attention," a spokesman said. If only the company were so agreeable with ALL its unnecessary expenses. When you're talking about a \$247 MILLION rate hike, \$560 is really peanuts, or, in this case, peanuts and Cracker Jacks.

Your Bag. Delivered...When an AT&T customer's wife called to say that a package had arrived, he expected her to find the iPhone he ordered about a week before. But, The Consumerist reports that after tearing open the envelope, she found nothing but an empty AT&T plastic bag adorned with the company's slogan: "Your World. Delivered." Well, not exactly.

'Smart' grid could brighten our future

An Illinois task force that includes CUB is studying how a modernized electric grid can lead to more reliable service, a cleaner environment, and lower power costs for consumers.

Launched in June, the Illinois Smart Grid Initiative (ISGI) is co-chaired by Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley and former U.S. Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert. It includes representatives from state and local government, as well as consumer, business, environmental and utility groups.

Over several meetings into the fall, participants, including CUB Policy Director Chris Thomas, will explore policies to improve the performance of Illinois' electric power system.

"Many residents of Oak Park are looking for better control over their electricity bills and a greener energy

future," Village Manager Tom Barwin said. "The Illinois Smart Grid Initiative is providing an opportunity for local government officials and others concerned about the quality of the power system to learn how a modern electric grid can hold down electricity costs and support sustainability in Illinois communities."

Like the rest of the U.S. power grid, Illinois' grid lacks the "smart" digital technology that can allow for a two-way flow of information between the utility and the customer. Overlaying such technology onto the existing electric grid would eventually save consumers money and reduce pollution.

Among other benefits, smart-grid technology would immediately alert utilities when disruptions occur, re-

route power so fewer customers are affected, and allow repairs to begin more quickly and, at times, automatically. It would also provide customers with real-time information so they can make more informed choices about when and how they use electricity, and in doing so, reduce their bills.

"Grid modernization should be approached in a way that provides concrete benefits to consumers," said Kathryn Tholin, CEO of the Center for Neighborhood Technology, a local organization facilitating the smart-grid initiative. "ISGI's unique contribution to the national discussion on smart grids is its focus on opportunities for consumers, including residents, businesses and institutions."

More information on the ISGI is available at www.ilsmartgrid.org.

Tame those energy-guzzlers

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For more information, see:
www.consumerenergycenter.org

advantage of the dryer's retained heat. Use a cycle with a cool-down or permanent press option at the end. This dries your clothes with residual heat. Make sure the outside exhaust is unclogged, and clean your lint screen. A dirty screen can make your dryer use 30 percent more energy.

Stove: Don't make the refrigerator work harder by putting it next to the stove. If you have no choice, put a sheet of foam insulation between them. Each time you open the stove door the temperature drops by 25 degrees, so use a timer. Glass or ceramic pans cook food just as quickly with the temperature set about 25 degrees lower. Turn off electric burners a few minutes early and they will stay hot long enough to finish the cooking. Use the microwave. It needs about 50 percent to 65 percent less energy than conventional ovens.

Refrigerator: They are the biggest energy guzzlers, accounting for about 15 percent of an average household's energy consumption. Keep the coils clean by brushing or vacuuming them to improve efficiency by up to 30 percent. A refrigerator's temperature should be between 35 and 38 degrees, and a freezer should be at 0 degrees Fahrenheit. Keep your fridge stocked; a full refrigerator retains cold better than an empty one. Get rid of that older, energy-hogging second refrigerator in your garage.

Real-time pricing

Continued from p. 3

kilowatt-hour or more.

The trick to saving money in the real-time pricing program is to reduce the use of major appliances, like the air conditioner and dishwasher, when prices are highest. The program promises to contact customers if prices the next day are expected to soar. Customers also can check estimates of what the next day's hourly prices will be so they can plan their energy usage.

However, the program isn't for everyone. People who are home all day or who cannot shift their usage to cheaper priced times should think twice before signing up.

Real-time Facts

What is it?

A program that allows you to pay an hourly rate for power. Because hourly rates fluctuate, you can save money by reducing electricity usage during "peak" price times.

How much does it cost?

The first 110,000 enrollees pay \$2.25 a month for a special meter that measures hourly power use. Later enrollees may face higher monthly fees.

Who should sign up?

The program is best for those who use more than 400 kWh of electricity per month or whose power bill is

more than \$40. Seniors, families with small children, or those with electric heat may not be able to change their electricity usage enough to benefit.

How do I get more information?

ComEd's program:
www.TheWattSpot.com
1-866-928-8776.

Ameren's program:
(Power Smart Pricing)
www.PowerSmartPricing.org
1-877-655-6028.

CUB has a "real-time pricing" fact sheet on the "electric" page of www.CitizensUtilityBoard.org.

Prepare for hard winter

Natural gas prices began to drop as summer came to an end, easing fears of a record-breaking winter, but heating prices still are expected to be high when the snow comes.

New York Mercantile Exchange prices, which just months before signaled winter gas prices at about \$1.50 a therm, now point to prices hovering between 70 cents and 85 cents per therm. It's just another sign of a volatile natural gas market, CUB Policy Analyst Bryan McDaniel said.

"Right now prices have dropped because there's plenty of gas in storage and hurricane season has been relatively mild, but this could change in an instant," he said.

CUB Board Representative Wendy Schneider, of Rockford, also added the possibility of gas-market manipulation.

"Utilities aren't supposed to make money off the high prices, but producers and marketers are laughing all the way to the bank," Schneider said.

The federal Energy Information Administration (EIA) predicted in August that Midwest homes that use gas would pay an average of \$1,214 this winter, up about 21 percent from last year.

Heating oil customers would get hit even harder, paying 26 percent more, the EIA predicted. Propane expenditures are expected to be up 13 percent. Midwestern homes with electric heat could pay about 5 percent more, the EIA said.

"Never has energy conservation looked so good," Schneider said. (See green box.)

Consumers can join their utility's budget plan to even out bills and prevent huge month-to-month jumps. Lobbying federal legislators for better monitoring of gas producers and marketers also is needed.

Saving money this winter

■ **Install a programmable thermostat.** In most homes, you can save about two percent of your heating bill for every degree you lower the thermostat. Lower the temperature at night or when members of the house are out during the day.

■ **Clean or replace filters.** Do this monthly or as needed for the furnace, heat pump and air conditioner.

■ **Caulk leaky windows.** Also, seal air leaks with weather-stripping around doors and frames.

■ **Add storm windows or use plastic film kits.**

■ **Properly insulate your attic.** Attic insulation should be at least R-30.

■ **Close doors of rooms not in use.**

■ **Set your water heater at 120 degrees.** Also, cover it with an insulating blanket.

■ **Seal your ducts.** Leaking ductwork accounts for 25 percent of cooling costs in an average home, so have your ducts tested and have any leaks repaired by a qualified contractor. The potential energy savings from reducing drafts in a home could be up to 30 percent a year.

Beware of pitfalls from unregulated gas companies

High heating prices may tempt Nicor Gas, Peoples Gas, and North Shore Gas customers to leap to unregulated companies marketing in northern Illinois. But beware of pitfalls:

Long lock-ins. The fixed price that looks so good next to record-high utility prices may not look so good two years from now. You could be locked into an excessive fixed rate for up to five years.

Deals that change. A low rate may

only last for a certain time—and during mild-weather months when usage is down. Then you could get hit with a much higher rate and have to pay an exit fee to get out.

Balancing charge blues. If a company promises savings, remember that the advertised rate probably doesn't include extra charges, such as a monthly fee or the "balancing charge," which covers costs for maintaining pressure in a utility's pipes.

Examples of offers

Company	Plan	Analysis
Ambit	Promises 1% savings off Nicor Gas price	"Balancing charge" wipes out all or most of "savings."
Dominion Retail	79.9 cents/therm through Nov.	Offer is starting to save money, with recent record-high prices. But there's a good chance Dominion will switch to a higher rate after November.
Nicor Advanced Energy (This isn't the regulated utility. It's an unregulated sister company of Nicor Gas)	"Flex Plan" promises a nickel per therm savings through Oct.	Price can change daily, and includes a markup. Savings only guaranteed during mild-weather months, when you don't use much gas. Company can't guarantee savings after October.
Nicor Advanced Energy (This isn't the regulated utility. It's an unregulated sister company of Nicor Gas)	"Lock 12" offers you a set monthly bill for a year.	There's a large markup added. CUB has yet to find Lock 12 customers who have saved.
U.S. Energy Savings	Locks you into 4-5 year fixed rate (has ranged from \$1.09 - \$1.38/therm recently).	Locks in prices at near-record levels. Historically, most plans have lost money for consumers.

Citizens Utility Board

In 1983, the Illinois Legislature established the Citizens Utility Board (CUB) to protect the interests of residential and small-business utility customers. CUB is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, overseen by a board of directors elected by its membership. CUB is funded primarily by its members. The CUB Voice is published four times a year and is mailed free of charge to CUB members.

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CUB helps nurse-to-be nurse her household budget



April Kubinski (left), here with husband Josh, is the latest winner of CUB's Get Green Giveaway. She won 50 "CFL" bulbs, and you could too.

April Kubinski is a mother of two who's working her way through nursing school, so she'll take any break she can get when it comes to the household budget.

That's why the 31-year-old Joliet woman was so happy to win a CUB drawing for 50 money-saving Compact Fluorescent Light bulbs (CFLs). The bulbs use 75 percent less energy and can cut annual electric bills by up to \$10 per bulb.

"I can't wait to call my husband and tell him," April said after CUB delivered the good news.

Her husband, Josh, is a big reason April won the bulbs. He gave her tickets to a Joliet Jackhammers minor league baseball game, where she ran into the CUB table handing out free CFLs. "Hey, that's what my husband buys," April thought.

Knowing that Josh likes the light CFLs produce, April took a bulb and signed a CUB pledge to use it. Her name was randomly chosen among

Take CUB's Get Green Pledge

Win up to 50 CFLs in a Sept. 30 drawing.

The community with the biggest percentage of pledgers will win up to 10,000 bulbs.

Go to www.CitizensUtilityBoard.org, hit "Get Green."

people who have taken the pledge. They now number more than 10,000.

April doesn't have a lot of time on her hands these days. The president of her nursing school's student association, she spends most of her time studying, hauling her 13- and 10-year-old boys to football and baseball games, and helping save lives as an emergency-room intern at Joliet's Silver Cross Hospital.

As April prepares to graduate in December from the University of St. Francis in Joliet, her future looks very bright, thanks to a lot of hard work—not to mention 50 CUB bulbs.