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Sunday, Apr 13, 2003

# The Beacon Journal

## Business

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The Beacon Journal

### Some tips can lower energy bill at home

Be efficient, say experts offering inside advice

By Betty Lin-Fisher, Beacon Journal business writer

With the deregulation of the natural gas and electricity markets, many people have been caught up in trying to find the best rates to save money on their bills, which is good.

But they can also save money by conserving energy in their homes and businesses.

That's what Richard G. Lubinski, an area energy consultant, told me recently.

“The best thing for the average commercial, industrial or residential customer is, look inside,” said Lubinski, president of Think Energy Management LLC, an energy consulting and services firm. “What can you do in your own home” to save energy?

With deregulation, many people have saved significant sums switching natural gas suppliers because that market is full of active suppliers.

But with electricity, the market has been practically nonexistent, unless you got in early. Some folks received some cut-rate electricity called Market Support Generation, or MSG, early in 2001. Other people saved by joining a community aggregation program, in which a community negotiates contracts on behalf of all residents. Still others signed up with FirstEnergy Solutions, the subsidiary of

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FirstEnergy's Ohio Edison, to receive a small discount.

For a long time, the only active supplier offering electricity was FirstEnergy Solutions. But even that company has stopped taking new customers. Its discount was about 4 percent off one-third of the bill. That saving equaled about \$16 a year. FirstEnergy spokeswoman Ellen Raines said the company decided to pull its offer because of high wholesale prices for electricity.

So that makes Lubinski's tip even more helpful.

Ohio Consumers' Counsel's Rob Tongren, the residential utility advocate, said he is disappointed that the electricity market has not developed as envisioned. Work needs to be done on the state and federal level to help the market develop, he said.

Tongren agreed with Lubinski that consumers can do other things to save money.

“You may not have choices with respect to energy companies, but you've got all kinds of choice when it comes to energy-efficient steps,” he said.

So here are energy tips from a variety of sources, including Tongren's office, FirstEnergy, Dominion East Ohio Gas and Lubinski:

- Use compact fluorescent light bulbs. These bulbs, which cost a few dollars, last six to 10 times longer and use only one-third the energy of regular incandescent bulbs. They can be bought at retail and hardware stores. Lubinski said that although the bulbs are more expensive than incandescent bulbs, the money saved on energy exceeds the cost difference.
- Alter your thermostat. Adjusting your thermostat by 10 to 15 degrees (higher in the summer and lower in the winter) for eight hours can save you 10 percent each year in operating costs, according to the Ohio Consumers' Counsel. Tongren said the change needs to go on for at least a few hours to be energy-efficient.

Not everyone agrees, though. Raines of FirstEnergy said the company doesn't recommend changing thermostat temperatures to save money. ``Find the highest temperature at which you're comfortable (in the summer). You will save some money by turning your thermostat up by a couple of degrees," she said.

- Plant deciduous trees (those that lose leaves) on the east and west sides of your house. This blocks the sun in the summer and lets in sunlight in the winter, keeping your house naturally cooler and warmer, said Raines.
  - Don't peek in the oven. Every time an oven door is opened, 25 percent of the heat is lost.
  - Wash clothes in warm water instead of hot. That can reduce a load's energy use by half.
  - Caulk and weatherstrip your windows. If a playing card fits in the crevice of an outside door or window, you need more weatherstripping.
  - Fill in spaces in outlets. Tongren said if you take the outlet plate off an external wall and can feel air coming through, you should fill the space with insulation.
  - Clean the air filters on furnaces and air conditioners, and air registers. This will help the system work more efficiently. Dominion East Ohio Gas recommends replacing a furnace filter at least three times a heating season.
  - Get your furnace and air conditioner inspected or serviced to make sure it's operating correctly before the heating or cooling season starts.
  - Keep your refrigerator between 36 and 38 degrees and your freezer between zero and 5 degrees.
  - For more information, the Ohio Consumers' Counsel has an Energy Efficiency booklet that is available online at <http://www.pickocc.org/> or by phone at 1-877-742-5622.
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