



# JUST ASKING

BY MARY KLEST

## How can I lower my electric bill cost?

We asked a heating and cooling professional and a renewable energy enthusiast home owner.

IT'S THE SEASON TO KEEP your spirits up and your electric bill down. The *Farmers' Almanac* predicts a "frigid, wet, wild, and snowy" winter season for the Great Lakes region this year. An unusual abundance of acorns and thick corn husks are just some of the signs used to predict a harsh winter, as well as early departures of geese and ducks. Predictable patterns of winter also include escalating electric bills.

According to an online calculator at Home Energy Saver, a Web site sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Energy, the energy bill for homes in the 60010 zip code averages \$2,103 per year, based on a home built in 1980 with 2,500 square feet. Energy efficient homes can reduce that amount by \$1,007.

Heating and cooling represents nearly 40 percent of the average household's electric bill. Scott Cress, a Barrington High School graduate who runs Cress Heating and Cooling, said, "Buy a programmable thermostat that includes multiple daily settings and automatically adjusts when the outside temperature changes." The cost is between \$60 and \$100. "You'll recoup that cost in just a couple of months," he said. Using such a thermostat can save as much as 20 percent to 30 percent on heating or cooling costs. Also, check for proper



*Karen Casey stands besides her basement "green" wall, which cuts the electric bill from \$750 a month to \$21.*

insulation and sealing around doors and windows.

Nearly 33 percent of kilowatt hours are used for lighting and appliances. Compact fluorescent lights use up to 75 percent less energy than standard bulbs. A 25-watt compact fluorescent bulb provides as much light as a 100-watt incandescent bulb. While a bit more expensive, they last six to 10 times longer. For outdoor lighting, rely on systems with sensors that go on after dark or only when detecting motion. Unplug appliances when not in use — they draw electricity even when turned off. These everyday choices can make a difference.

Utility companies report a \$30 million increase in revenues during the holidays. Solar powered Christmas lights are available at a reasonable cost such as an 11.9-inch string of LED mini-white lights attached to a solar panel for \$14.99 at Target. LED lights are up to 90 percent more efficient than incandescent lights, sturdier, and last up to 35,000 hours or four years of continuous operation.

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Steve Casey and his family are ready for winter in their new home that is being heated and cooled by the Earth. His wife, Karen, said they cut their electric bill from \$750 a month to just \$21. They will determine what power load they need and incorporate solar panels after three seasons in the new house. They then plan to install a birdhouse-like windmill to generate their own electricity. By relying on renewable resources for power, the Caseys are saving money and eliminating carbon dioxide emissions.

To learn more about energy efficiency and how renewable energy technology works, visit the U.S. Department of Energy's Web site at [www.eere.energy.gov](http://www.eere.energy.gov).

If you're migrating south, remember to unplug your appliances and set your thermostat.