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Green and Greener Less-power or Power-less?

By Dave Rochlin and Katy Foreman

Dave: Well it's mid summer, the time of year when many folks around Lamorinda are left shaking their heads in disgust when their PG&E bills arrive. If you decipher PG&E's complex rate structure, it gets pretty clear that they really want you to use less power. That big bill isn't profiteering-- it's a message. Building power plants and new transmission lines is expensive.

Katy: I think everyone benefits when we consume less power - especially the expensive peak power, which is what prompts utilities to build more power plants, something none of us want. Particularly coal ones! I'd rather see us meeting the state's clean energy requirements.

Dave: So PG&E has arranged it so that the more wasteful Kilowatts that you use are more costly....the last 200 Kwh you use in a month can actually cost 3 times as much as the first 200. This means that many of us can cut our electrical bill in half, just by cutting our power usage by 25%. It's almost like getting free car payments or free cell phone service, just for being aware of your energy use. Cell phone service...now there's profiteering.

Katy: Well according to Nielsen, the average teen sends 80 text messages a day...so that's another bill you can take control of.

Dave: Not likely.

Katy: Anyway, don't forget that reducing power use also helps the planet.

Dave: Of course! But whatever the motivation, we need to cut down on power.

Katy: Pools can be a killer on the power usage. A typical home pool uses about as much energy as it takes to power a home for three months (without a pool!). So it's important to look at how often you run the filter, use timers so they run off-peak, keep filters clean, and consider a solar solution for heating the water. Solar water heaters for pools can pay for themselves in five years or less.

Dave: As a former pool owner, I couldn't believe how much my bill went down by running the sweep less. Air conditioners can also push you into the higher rate tiers. Keeping the ducts and filter clean, using a programmable thermostat, and only cooling the house when you're home can help. Where we live, opening windows at night and closing them during the day can make a big difference as well. Finally, replacing incandescent light bulbs with CFLs saves on both lighting AND cooling bills, since most of the energy used by incandescent bulbs produces heat, not light.

Katy: I don't have a pool OR air conditioning! But we've replaced all of our windows with energy efficient, double pane versions, and installed an attic fan which keeps the attic around the same temperature as the outside, instead of having it become a pizza oven on hot days. The new windows have the added benefit of keeping the house quieter, and the fan extends the life of the roof.

Dave: Attic fans make a huge difference. At the Earth Day festival in Lafayette, I even saw a firm selling solar powered attic fans....you don't need any electricity at all!

Katy: Speaking of solar... I have to plug the clothesline again, especially at these temperatures. My clothes are drying faster than they would in the dryer.

Dave: I believe I've expressed my opinion on that one before.

Katy: Yes you have. If you feel like your electrical bill is out of control, write us at info@climatepath.org and we'll send you a checklist of things you can do to bring that bill down! If your bill is already low, write us and let us know what you did, so we can share it with others.

Dave: On a final note, EBMUD also charges a lot more if you go over baseline. Just like with your power bill, small reductions in your water use can lead to big savings.

Katy Foreman is a committed environmentalist who lives in Lafayette, and Dave Rochlin is a lazy environmentalist who lives in Moraga. Together they operate ClimatePath. Individuals and businesses can measure and then reduce their carbon footprints through tax deductible donations that support carbon reduction activities, renewable energy project, and forestry initiatives around the world at www.climatepath.org

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