

## **Here's \$100 in your pocket**

### **The thrifty reporter | Real-time pricing from Commonwealth Edison pays off**

December 28, 2007

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I have a \$100 gift for you.

All you have to do is do what I did and buy your electricity from Commonwealth Edison's Real-Time Pricing program. It's a bit of an adjustment, doing laundry and dishes at different hours than you normally do, but real-time pricing can bring you real savings.

My savings for the year will be about \$150.

I signed up for the program, having heard about it a year ago when it was a pilot program run by the Community Energy Cooperative that won a Chicago Innovation Award. The program was opened to the public in January.

I was skeptical that we could save money, but willing to give it a try.

In my first six months in the program, I cut my electric bill by a bit over 10 percent. And previously I had cut it by 4 percent by using compact fluorescent bulbs.

So basically, I had turned back the clock on my electric bill to where it was before this year's rate increase. ComEd originally slapped us with a 24 percent increase, its first in a decade. But after the public protest and political wrangling, we got credits that held the increase to 13 percent for 2007.

I signed up online at [TheWattSpot.com](http://TheWattSpot.com) and had to wait a couple months for ComEd to install a special electric meter that measures use on a half-hourly basis to track our usage and charge accordingly. Standard meters measure from the last time there was a meter reading.

Real-time pricing involves a change in your relationship with electrical use. We had our consciousness raised about what electricity costs at a given time by looking on the Internet at [TheWattSpot.com](http://TheWattSpot.com) to see hourly rate changes.

My wife, son and I had to make adjustments. We stopped running the dishwasher in the morning and waited until the rates fell when we got home in the evening. We made similar changes in the time we did the laundry.

ComEd calls that "load shifting." That makes us load shifters.

Our strategy was to wait until rates were below 5 cents per kilowatt hour. Consumers not in the program pay 10.5 cents per kwh, the average rate, on the *prix fixe* plan.

We held off big-appliance use if we could. Sometimes, we had e-mail warnings that electric was at 13 cents, 15 cents, even more than 25 cents per kwh because of heavy demand. At those times, we turned down the air-conditioning and postponed doing the wash.

You could become obsessed with it. For example, back on May 29, the rate was 13 cents per kwh at 4 p.m. and 7.9 cents at 9 p.m. The 9 p.m. slot seems reasonable. But you could have bought electricity for 0.71 cents -- that's a fraction of a penny -- at 3 a.m. that day.

I imagine some thrifty insomniacs were up at 3 a.m. doing the laundry. But that's too difficult for most of us to manage.

We need our beauty sleep.

In the first six months in the program, we saved during five months (\$23 in both May and October) and only lost money once (\$3.53 in July as we were up against high summer rates in the heat). The only cost for the program is \$2.25 a month for an interval meter.

"We believe this is the first real full-blown real time pricing program in the country," said Anne Pramaggiore, ComEd executive vice president of customer operations, regulatory and external affairs.

More than 3,000 Chicago area residents have joined this experiment in buying electricity in real time.

Pramaggiore said ComEd expects the program to catch on with 20,000 to 30,000 early adopters to sign up in 2008. That's out of 3.5 million residential customers in the Chicago area.

Pramaggiore says there is a learning curve about energy markets that go up and down hourly, just like the stock market does. Real-time pricing takes advantage of these price shifts.

ComEd said that 93 percent of participants saved money in 2007, on average 10 percent to 11 percent. I'd go to Vegas if they offered those odds there.

Pramaggiore said there are no guarantees that real-time pricing will save consumers money. Seven percent of consumers lost money. That's hard to do since the majority of the time real-time pricing is below the cost for electricity with the standard program.

Pramaggiore said the program simply doesn't pay for people who spend \$40 or less per month. Now you now know how you can save 10 percent or more on your bill. That comes out to \$100 or more a year.

Happy New Year!