

VILLAGE VIEW

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Concern-- indeed, considerable ire -- has been generated by recent electric bills. While nobody can be blamed for feeling dismay about power cost increases being passed through to us, the consumers, by the utilities companies, should we have been caught unawares?

Leaping heating bills, especially during this cold winter, and soaring prices for gasoline at the pumps, have taken their toll on us. Why should we expect other energy costs not to increase in the same proportions? Electricity, hitherto a relatively small item in our family budgets, is gnawing yet another hole in our already ragged pockets. It should come as no surprise.

What can be done to bring electric bills into perspective and into line with people's ability and readiness to pay them? Consuming less is the obvious solution. Before we can appreciate what that means, we must accept that electricity has taken over a huge workload from man and beast; only by replacing part of that workload with other forms of energy can we reduce electric consumption.

Look at the ordinary day in the life of an ordinary householder. Instead of a wind-up alarm clock, the alarm that wakes us is an electric clock-radio alarm that switches itself on automatically at the proper time. "But a clock-radio pulls only a small amount of juice," you say. Of course. Nevertheless, anything that's plugged in uses some. Again, and especially in cold weather, chances are good the wakening householder slept under an electric blanket in a heated room.

The inside temperature of the house may be anywhere from 30 to 60 degrees higher than that outside. Even though the heating system isn't electric, electricity is probably used to trigger it. Thermostats are electrically wired. Most heating systems, whether gas or oil fired, use power every time they start.

The householder's first move, after the alarm goes off, may be turn on a light (electric) to read the clock (electric); the second may be to switch off the alarm and the electric blanket. A conscientious observer may have turned the blanket control to low, even snapped it off entirely, immediately after retiring the night before; otherwise, the toasty blanket drew power all night.

Leaving bed and groping to the bathroom, our householder turns on a light, uses hot as well as cold water, brushes with an electric toothbrush and, perhaps, shaves with an electric razor.

In the kitchen an electric percolator or stove brews coffee; eggs, butter, milk and bacon come from the electric refrigerator, and bread goes into an electric toaster. Eggs and bacon fry in an electric pan. Breakfast dishes are rinsed in water heated, perhaps, by electricity, stacked in a machine that runs electrically, and, even if it's turned off before the drying cycle begins, if it weren't wired, it wouldn't do the job.

Laundry is tossed into an automatic washer and later dried in a dryer. Both electric. Every activity is carried out with electric lights burning. There's one over the bathroom sink, kitchen sink, stove, one in the laundry, one in the clothes closet. All are used every morning, in addition to electric appliances. Cans of dog or cat food are opened with electric can openers. Rugs are vacuumed with electric cleaners. Soups, stews, spaghetti sauces bubble over electric burners. Cakes, pies, potatoes, roasts, muffins and breads bake in electric ovens.

Now, we must remember, each kilowatt hour costs, in addition to the price of electricity, another 7 cents, the power cost. Television sets use electricity, unless battery-powered, so do radios. In my house, an electric typewriter runs several hours a day.

When each kilowatt hour costs an additional 7 cents, it's useful to know what a kilowatt is. It's a thousand watts. A watt is a unit of power equal to the current of one ampere under one volt of pressure. If that's too complicated, think of it this way: one kilowatt hour is approximately equal to an hour-and-a-half of horsepower. In other words, it would take about an hour-and-a-half for a working horse to produce the power that runs an appliance pulling one kilowatt of electric-

ity each hour it operates.

To replace the work of the horse, our society burns fuel to generate electrical energy, just as we burn gasoline to run engines. We also use wind and water to accomplish the same end. Blowing winds and flowing waters are strong enough to make electricity, run pumps and engines, and operate mills. Windmills and watermills have been helping people do work for centuries. Huge dams control the waterflow in rivers and channel water through turbines to generate power. Small dams do the same, delivering smaller quantities of energy, but energy, nonetheless.

When oil was plentiful and relatively cheap, burning it produced economical power easiest. Many wind and water energy-sources became obsolete. Now that fuel is expensive, engineers are turning back to the more traditional sources in newer and more efficient ways. The transition will take time, and meanwhile, if we use electricity, we'll have to pay for it.

Light, heat, and transportation are all becoming expensive luxuries many people are scrambling to afford; cooking and heating with wood or coal is more work for the householder; smaller energy-efficient forms of transportation are less comfortable; washing dishes by hand takes more time, as does drying clothes in the sun and air. Housekeeping with broom, duster, and carpet sweeper is more work than with a vacuum cleaner. More time and man-power is required.

Now that fossil fuels are no longer cheap, we have a choice of paying what they cost or returning to old-fashioned methods. We must either pay for the energy or do the work ourselves. As anyone more than 50 or 60 years old can well remember, electricity is a relatively new-fangled commodity, as is the gasoline engine.

For the future, however, there is hope. Because fossil fuels are growing daily more costly, so-called alternate energy sources are getting new attention. The sun can heat enough hot water to supply the average family's needs most of the time. The sun can also provide a goodly portion of the heat required to keep a well-insulated house at a comfortable temperature, even when it's cold outside. Wind and water mills can generate enough electricity for household needs, and have, at times, some left over to supplement industrial demand.

Converting to alternate energy use isn't inexpensive; neither, we are fast discovering, is present-day electric power. Instead of screams of outrage and dire threats, householders should exert their combined efforts, their considerable influence, on our government to bend its energies toward the development of alternate energy and stop fiddling around with token appropriations to that end.

We do face an energy crisis. There are viable answers to the problem. No new inventions are needed before the technology can be implemented. The solutions are at hand, lying within the reach of all of us, collectively. Our complaints to the utilities, if we have any, should be directed at their foot-dragging attitudes. Power companies recognize they will lose a huge portion of their market if individual households become energy-independent. They are a powerful lobby.

The people of these United States hold in their hands the power to out-lobby the utilities. We have the vote!