

Fighting High Energy Costs as the Temperature Heads Upward

Most energy experts agree that the days of under-\$2-a-gallon gasoline and heating bills that don't require oxygen before opening are far, far away.

The way you deal with higher costs for transportation and utilities shouldn't be an afterthought. The current energy environment is an opportunity for permanent changes in the way you manage energy spending throughout your life. Some ideas:

Start thinking about alternative energy vehicles. There's a healthy debate about whether hybrid vehicles and the coming generations of flex-fuel vehicles (those capable of running on gasoline and ethanol blends) are good investments. The answer comes down to the individual vehicle and your driving habits. Some argue that you're better off going with sub-compact traditional fuel vehicles than a hybrid on a pure price basis, but this year, the federal government has offered some help in the form of income tax credits for hybrids placed in service in or after 2006. Some state and local governments are doing so as well. Go to www.irs.gov for more information on the federal tax credits (they vary by vehicle model) and check your state or city revenue department website for any local information. Beyond that, assess an alternative energy vehicle on the same points you would any other car you've purchased. Consult various consumer resources on service records and maintenance costs, and check to see how much the vehicle will cost to insure in your area.

Drive smart. Even in the winter, you don't need to leave a car running for more than a minute to get it ready to drive, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. To be safe, check your owner's manual. Experts advise you to drive slower, use air conditioning only when necessary, and consider public transit or carpooling. Other ideas: Clean out the trunk (extra weight cuts gas mileage) and make sure your tire pressure is correct.

Consider a gasoline budget: Is every car trip necessary? If you typically spend \$120 a month on gasoline, set a budget of \$100 and see what you can cut to make it. Consider car-pooling, public transportation, walking, or even the family bicycle if you get close to the budget amount.

Consider a budget plan for your utilities: Most utilities feature some sort of budget plan to help homeowners even out their monthly electric and fuel heating bills through the year. Know that the utility company is in the driver's seat—it will estimate your usage for the next 12 months and assign you a monthly payment. Talk with a local utilities watchdog group about potential problems with that plan. Other tactics: try and shift your dishwasher and laundry usage to the off-peak hours in the evening and wait to use them until you have a full load. Also, if you really think bills are going sky-high in the winter but you don't want to do the budget plan, overpay your cooling bill during the summer months.

Turn down the wattage. If you replace four 75-watt or 100-watt standard light bulbs in your home with 23-watt compact fluorescent bulbs, the Energy Department says you'll get as much light as the higher-wattage bulbs but save 69 percent in electricity costs. Assuming the lights burn more than four hours a day, the saving can add up to roughly \$200 a year.

Rethink the whole driving vacation thing. If you still believe that driving to a destination is the cheapest way to run a family vacation, you might want to consider air travel. Don't forget to consider the cost of renting a car at your destination.

Get a programmable thermostat. If you're not able to discipline yourself to keep your thermostat low in the winter and high in the summer, you might want to consider a programmable thermostat that automatically adjusts your home temperature based on time of day. It'll cost you roughly \$50 if you install it yourself.

Get friendly with your water heater. Some water heaters are preset by manufacturers to about 140 degrees Fahrenheit and very few consumers ever touch that setting. However, the Energy Department considers 120 degrees enough for safe dishwashing and comfortable showers.