

# Off-grid living: Is creating electricity at home worth the startup cost?

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SPRINGFIELD — As power bills rose across the state this year, southern Illinois solar-panel technician Aur Beck fielded more calls than usual from people wanting to generate their own electricity at home.

"They want to eliminate their electric bill," he says.

But despite the uptick in interest, Beck hasn't pulled in much more business for his Pomona-based Advanced Energy Solutions.

That's at least partly because while a set of solar panels, a small windmill or even more insulation might save a homeowner power costs in the long-term, many people having trouble paying their power bills can't afford the technology's up-front cost, he said. Some think that may be changing, though.

State Sen. Bill Brady, a Bloomington Republican who also co-owns a home building company there, says he regularly hears from prospective buyers wanting energy-efficient houses that will save them money.

"Most of the decisions we make on energy are based on the payback," he said.

While hundreds of dollars spent buying fluorescent light bulbs could pay themselves off in a year or so, it can sometimes take a decade to recoup the costs of more expensive home renovations.

But as electricity becomes costlier for home and business owners, higher-priced efficiency items might begin to make more sense.

"Obviously, with the rate increases, the payback period may be a little quicker," Brady says. "And as utility rates end up being whatever they are, they'll make some forms of technology more available."

How high Ameren and ComEd power bills will be in the next year is yet to be seen as lawmakers in Springfield continue their battle with the utilities over rate hikes that began this year. Even if those increases are scaled back some, inflation and other market factors suggest they'll go back up eventually.

Not that Beck will mind.

He's lived "off the grid" in Southern Illinois generating all his power at home for 16 years — but not without sacrifices.

Solar power runs his whole house, but what he runs has to be limited. All his appliances have to be energy efficient. Beck recently bought a large high-definition television because despite its size and crisp picture, it uses less power.

He owns the solar panels that power his house. But some suggest the expense of solar panels or windmills could be averted if homeowners don't actually own them.

Bob Vogl, president of the Illinois Renewable Energy Association, says the next business model for home power may be for an outside company to own the solar panels, even if they're attached to a homeowner's roof. The company would install the system, then just sell the power to the homeowner, eliminating the up-front cost.

Vogl says the set rates of a long-term contract could attract homeowners to the concept.

"It's already in the American psyche to buy that way," he said.

Vogl and his wife, both retired Northern Illinois University professors, help run a yearly summer summit on energy in Oregon, Ill. It's set for Aug. 11-12 this year.

But while interest in energy efficiency may have swelled further after Illinois electric rates rose, Robert Corlett of Viola is glad he built his house before the hikes hit.

He built a four bedroom house on an 80-acre farm more than two years ago that uses top-notch insulation methods, as well as systems that heat and cool his home with geothermal energy.

Corlett is retired and had the money to invest in energy efficiencies up front so he wouldn't have high monthly energy costs while living on a fixed income.

While his power bill has been higher than ever in the past several months because of the rate increases, Corlett says he's glad he built an efficient house before the hikes.

"It could have been a lot worse than it is," he said.

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