Spend a little, save a lot on utility bills

September 27 2010, By John Ewoldt

Being an early adopter isn't cheap. If you have to have the latest gadget to save money on utilities, you've already spent thousands on a solar water heater or a geothermal heat pump.

For the rest of us wanting to save on a gas, electric or water bill, it has to be affordable, said Jim Barnes, manager of Home Depot in Brooklyn Park, Minn.

Here are six moderate options costing $19 to $50 that are recommended by Barnes, Mike Frattalone of Frattalone's Ace Hardware, Tina North of Moss Envy in Minneapolis, and Consumer Reports. All have the potential to save much more on your utility bill than the product's original investment.

MOTION-ACTIVATED LIGHT SOCKETS AND WALL SWITCHES

Cost: $20 to $30 at Ace Hardware and other hardware stores.

No more rhetorical questions from the scold in the house asking, "Who's paying the light bill around here?" when lights are left on and no one's around. The sensor detects movement to turn lights on and shuts them off automatically within four minutes after you leave. Menards sells two models, one from First Alert (PIR720RN, $25) that senses movement in a 360-degree radius, and one from Westek (MLC2BC, $20) that detects movement in a 120-degree radius. Screw the sensor into an existing light socket and screw a lightbulb into the base of the new sensor. The WattStopper ($30 at Ace) replaces the wall switch. Turn on the light at

the wall switch and the WattStopper turns off the light automatically within a few minutes if no motion is detected.

Low-tech savings: Last one to leave turns out the light.

SMART STRIP SURGE PROTECTOR

Cost: $29 to $40 for various models at stores including The Home Depot, Walmart and Amazon.com.

Reduce electricity usage from electronic devices such as TVs and computers that continue to draw power when off or in standby mode. Smart Strip surge protectors cut down on such "phantom" power usage when a device is not in use. Save an estimated $39 per year, according to the manufacturer.

Low-tech savings: Unplug the offending appliance when not in use or use a standard surge protector and shut off its power switch.

REFRIGERATOR KIT

Cost: $20 at Target or Target.com.

This device can save you money by showing the temperature inside your fridge. Ideally, it should be between 34 and 37 degrees. Use the temperature gauge to find out if you can turn the thermostat dial to a 4 instead of a 5. The monitor also has an alarm that goes off if the door is left open for 45 seconds or more.

Low-tech savings: Dial down your fridge's thermostat a notch or two.

DUAL-FLUSH TOILET CONVERTER

Cost: $19 to $25 at most hardware stores.

Save up to $105 a year (up to 15,000 gallons) by flushing less water down the toilet. Rather than having to buy a new dual flush toilet for about $350, just replace the flapper and handle on a standard toilet to accomplish the same thing. A "quick flush" gets rid of liquid and paper. A "full flush" gets rid of solids. The package says it installs without tools in 10 minutes. The cheapest one I found was at Costco for $19 (stores only, not online, while supplies last).

Low-tech savings: Dare to implement the old saying, "If it's yellow, let it mellow."

LED LIGHTBULBS

Cost: $20 and up, available at hardware and lighting stores and some online discounters.

It's the next generation of lighting expected to surpass the much-maligned compact fluorescent. LEDs use less energy than CFLs, are usually dimmable, and have no mercury, but they're not ready for prime time yet. They're also expensive -- as much as $100 per bulb and no one is sure how long they'll last. Less expensive models are sold at hardware stores and even Sam's Club, but they're mostly flood lights or track lights. Since the light is directional and usually less than a 60-watt equivalent, LED can make a great task light, but don't expect to start replacing your standard incandescents yet.

As many consumers learned with CFLs, keep the packaging and the receipt in case you need to return it. The cheapest ones I found were at Sam's Club ($18.72 for two track lights, or $19.86 for a Par 38 flood light). Look for the EcoSmart LED lights to be in Home Depot stores soon or now at homedepot.com.

Low-tech savings: Consumer Reports rated CFLs in its October issue and generally found Home Depot's EcoSmart brand to be a good choice.

WATER-SAVING SHOWER HEAD

Cost: Available widely at a range of prices.

Of all the money-saving products, a water-saving shower head is the most disappointing. I'll save water with a dual-flush toilet and take a five-minute shower, but if the water pressure feels wimpy, I'll return to the water-wasting "firehose" model instead. Consumer Reports likes the American Standard FloWise Water Saving Showerhead 1660.717 ($43 at tinyurl.com/332nuls). Maybe you can return it if you hate it, but who wants to go to the hassle of removing and replacing the old and new models and looking for yet a third option?

Low-tech savings: Take shorter showers.

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