Line Items
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TWO HOUSES. SAME THERMOSTAT SETTING. VERY DIFFERENT ELECTRIC BILLS.

Why the temperature on the wall tells only part of the story

Imagine two houses next door to each other. Both are about 1,500 square feet. Both have electric heat pumps. On a chilly November evening, both thermostats are set to 70 degrees.

Yet one household uses considerably more electricity than the other.

How can that happen? They're heating the same amount of space to the same temperature.

The answer is that a thermostat setting is a goal. How much electricity it takes to reach—and maintain—that goal depends on what's happening throughout the house.

One house holds its heat better

In the first home, insulation and sealed gaps help keep warm air inside. In the second, heat escapes more readily through the attic, and cold air enters around doors and other openings.

Both homes can feel comfortable at 70 degrees. But the second home's heating system must run longer to keep it that way.

Think of two coolers holding ice. Both can keep drinks cold, but the cooler with poor insulation needs more ice to do the same job. A house works on a similar principle.

Some of the heat never reaches the room

Now look at the ductwork.

In our example, the first home has well-sealed, insulated ducts. The second has a loose connection allowing heated air to escape into an unconditioned attic.

The heating system is still doing its job—but some of its work is warming space the family doesn't live in.

That is why a home can have a relatively new heating system and still use more electricity than expected. The equipment and the air-delivery system have to work together.

The thermostat can't explain the showers

Even if both homes used exactly the same amount of electricity for heating, their total usage could still differ.

One household takes two short showers each morning. The other takes four longer showers, runs more laundry and has an extra refrigerator.

If the homes have electric water heaters, those different hot-water habits matter. The thermostat has no control over any of that.

Square footage measures the house. It doesn't measure everything happening inside it.

The same temperature may involve different equipment

Both thermostats may say 70, but the systems behind them can operate differently. Equipment efficiency, maintenance and the use of electric auxiliary heat all affect consumption.

A thermostat displays the temperature in the room. It doesn't show how hard the equipment is working to maintain it.

Compare your home with itself

A neighbor's bill can be interesting, but your own usage history is usually a more useful starting point.

Compare daily kilowatt-hour use during similar weather. Consider changes in household routines, hot-water use or equipment. If consumption rises unexpectedly, those clues can help narrow the search.

Two houses can look alike from the road and feel alike from the couch. Their electric use can tell very different stories.

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Joseph Jones
Editor

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Between the Lines

by Greg Proctor
President/CEO

The Cheapest Electricity Is Only Part of the Equation

When you buy gasoline, you can compare prices on the signs, choose a station and fill your tank. If you don't need the fuel right away, it can stay in the tank until you do.

Electricity presents a different challenge. We need it delivered at the moment we use it, whether that is a mild afternoon in November or a freezing morning in January.

That makes supplying electricity more complicated than simply finding the lowest price.

Two concepts help explain why: **energy** and **capacity**. Energy is the electricity consumed over time—the kilowatt-hours recorded by your meter. Capacity is the ability to supply power when it is needed. Both matter when planning for dependable electric service.

Think of a restaurant. The number of meals served throughout the day is similar to energy. The kitchen's ability to prepare meals for a full dining room at the lunch rush is similar to capacity.

A kitchen might comfortably prepare 500 meals spread across an entire day. Preparing those same 500 meals within one hour would require more equipment, more staff and a different level of preparation.

The electric system faces a similar challenge.

On a mild day, heating and cooling systems may barely run. On a bitterly cold morning, thousands of households may need heat at the same time. Add water heaters, appliances and businesses beginning their workday, and demand can climb quickly.

Those busiest hours help determine how much dependable power supply must be available. Planning also has to account for equipment being unavailable because of maintenance or an unexpected problem.

This is where price alone can give an incomplete picture. An inexpensive source of electricity has value, but planners must also consider how much power it can provide during the hours when demand is greatest. Different resources have different operating characteristics, fuel needs and limitations.

Storage can help move electricity from one time of day to another, but it also has limits on how much power it can deliver and for how long. Every resource must be evaluated as part of the larger system.

Keeping enough supply available carries a cost, even when all of that capability is not needed on an ordinary day. Much like the restaurant preparing for its lunch rush, the electric system must be ready before the busiest period arrives.

For members, this explains why the cost of electric service involves more than the number of kilowatt-hours used during a month. It also reflects the resources and infrastructure needed to meet demand when many people need electricity together.

The goal is to balance those needs responsibly: securing reasonably priced energy while maintaining enough dependable capacity.

The lowest price is an important consideration. So is having electricity available on the morning everyone reaches for the thermostat.

Thinking About Plug-In Solar?



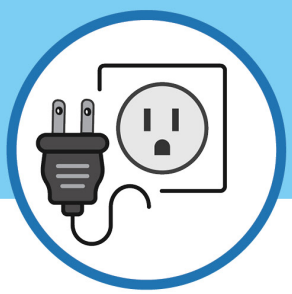
Looks Simple

Plug-in solar systems are marketed as DIY products that plug into a standard wall outlet to help reduce your electric bill.

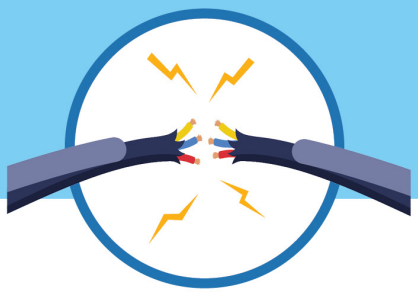
What You Should Know

Plug-in solar systems may look simple, but they come with important safety and financial considerations.

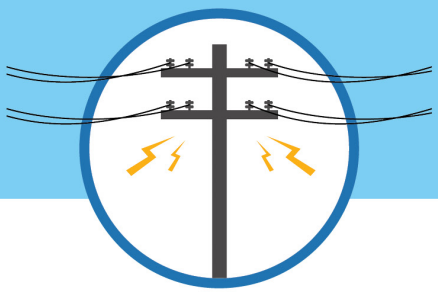
Important Considerations Before You Buy:



1. Your home's electrical wiring may not be suitable for plug-in solar. Systems must be connected to a GFCI outlet on a dedicated circuit.



2. Improper installation or use may overheat wiring causing shock or fire hazards.



3. Electricity can flow back onto power lines if the panels aren't properly managed, creating dangerous shock hazards for lineworkers.



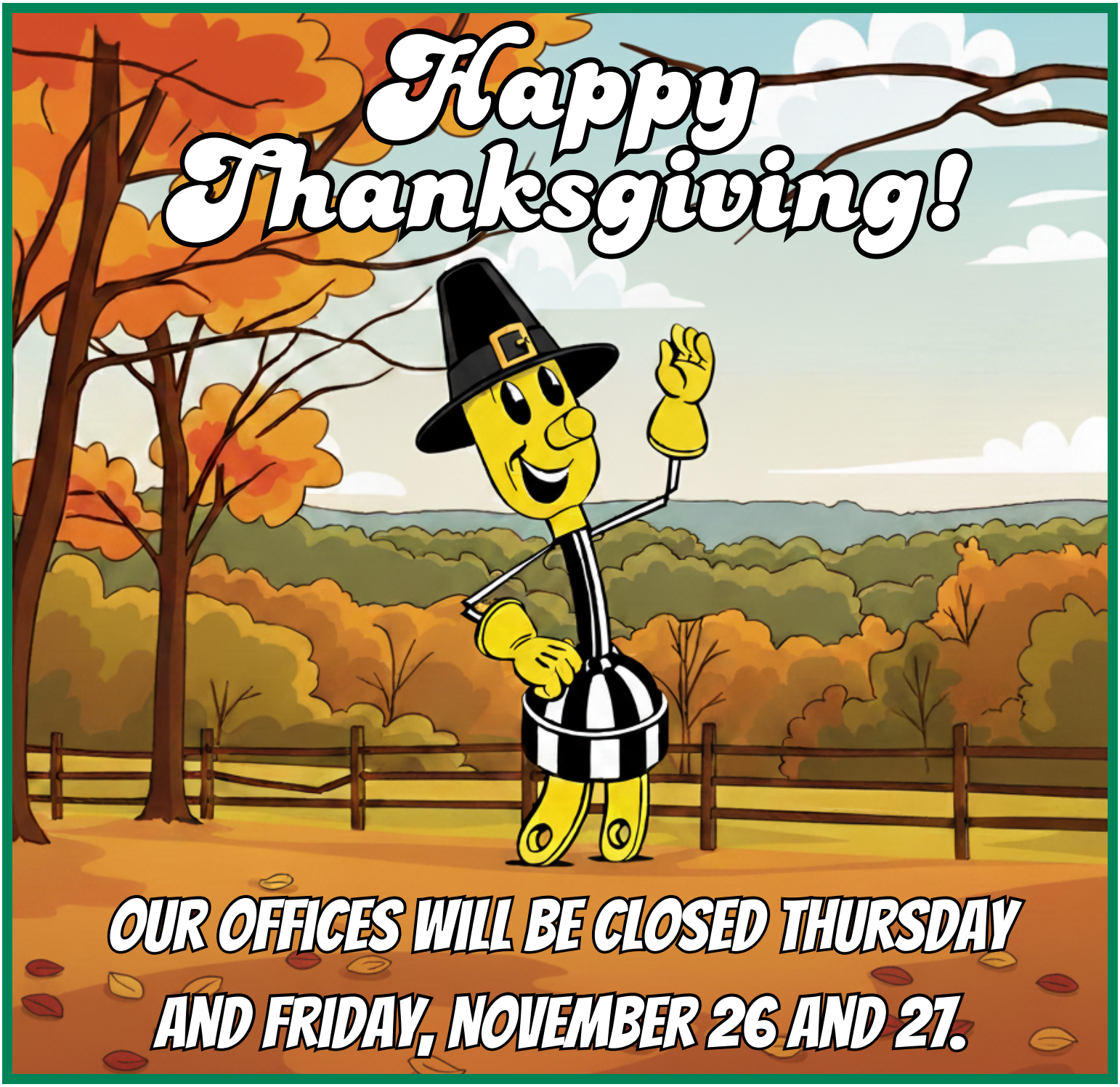
4. Solar panels continue producing electricity in sunlight. An unplugged system could still be energized.



5. Plug-in solar systems do not require professional installation, making it important to keep safety in mind.



6. Plug-in solar systems can cost $500-$1,000+ but may only save 40-80 cents per day, depending on conditions.



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