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Energy efficiency through NC SAVE\$

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Energy efficiency is not sexy; it's not gleaming solar panels or alabaster wind turbines spinning in the breeze. It's hard to get excited about weatherstripping.

But exciting or not, energy efficiency is the best and cheapest way to make the most of our power supply.

There are huge gains to be made. Consider incandescent light bulbs waste 95 percent of electricity used by them as heat – only 5 percent goes to produce light. Or that 25 to 40 percent of the energy going to our heating and cooling units is wasted through leaky ductwork. Replace those light bulbs and seal the ductwork and voila – more energy. For those of you who hear energy efficiency and think of Jimmy Carter shivering in a cardigan, don't. This is about smart use, not suffering.

In July, I wrote about Duke Energy's ill conceived Save-a-Watt proposal. Touted as a new paradigm for energy efficiency programs, it was really a profit-generating device for Duke. The good news is that Save-a-Watt is crumbling under the weight of public scrutiny and protest. The better news is that now North Carolina has a real alternative – a new, independently administered program called NC SAVE\$.

An efficient alternative

In a number of states, energy efficiency programs have been taken out of the provenance of the utilities and turned over to independent administrators. Typically, these administrators are created by utilities commissions or legislation and governed by a board of efficiency experts. They come under yearly review to make sure they are doing their job – providing cost-effective energy savings.

Unlike the utilities, they are not working at cross purposes. Saving energy is their primary goal. Contrast that with Duke Energy's conundrum, as stated by Keith Trent, their chief strategy, policy and regulatory officer: "Right now we are incented to sell electricity. It actually hurts us to sell energy efficiency." Or as NC PIRG's Shana Becker puts it, "Duke Energy lost any credibility as an energy efficiency steward when it proposed Save-a-Watt, not to mention when it simultaneously proposed building a new power plant. It's time to kick the fox out of the henhouse."

Other states have had great success with these programs. Burlington, Vermont, saw a 17.7 percent energy savings. The top 20 programs average energy savings of 11.9 percent and their costs range from \$16 million in Maine to \$175 million in New York (for comprehensive information on these programs, see www.cwfnc.org). When you consider the measly 0.23 percent projected energy savings for the first years of Duke's program, new coal plants costing \$2.5 billion each and nuclear reactors upwards of \$10 billion, the numbers for an independent energy efficiency administration look very good.

Best for consumers

What exactly does NC SAVE\$ propose? Maximizing energy efficiency at the best cost to consumers. A report commissioned by the Utilities Commission says at least 14 percent energy savings can be gained by cost-effective energy efficiency.

NC SAVE\$ will meet its goal of reducing the amount of energy used in four ways. First, it would target improving energy efficiency for working families and North Carolinians on a fixed income. This group struggles most to pay rising electric bills and often is least able to afford efficiency measures. Secondly, it would increase energy efficient residential appliances. As National Geographic's Green Guide noted in its Fall 2008 issue, efficiency of major household appliances has dramatically improved in the past 10 years. Refrigerators use 14 percent of a household's total electricity. Upgrading those older energy guzzlers to Energy Star models makes for quick gains. Thirdly, NC SAVE\$ would help schools, churches, commercial buildings and government buildings maximize energy efficiency. Lastly, NC SAVE\$ would create "green" jobs – jobs for people conducting energy audits, sealing ductwork, and adding insulation. These are jobs that stay in North Carolina and can't be outsourced.

NC SAVE\$ is supported by cities and communities, and by 14 organizations including environmental and faith groups. An independently administered program that produces significant energy savings benefits all. Less power use means less air and water pollution. Fewer rate hikes due to new power plant construction means lower bills for all North Carolinians. Sexy? No. Practical? Absolutely.

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