

Lubbock utility bills doubling, maybe tripling in this heat

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Rates haven't increased in recent months, but the cost to cool homes has.

The average Lubbock household sees its electric usage go up two to three times in the summer months, largely attributable to running the air conditioner at a much higher rate. With temperatures topping over 100 degrees through the end of last week and this weekend, those air conditioners are likely to be persistently working. It'll be reflected in the next billing cycle, as it already has.

Temperatures were high before this most recent heatwave — LP&L says the average temperature in June was five degrees hotter than normal, and in May it was eight degrees hotter than the average.

At a meeting last week, LP&L officials said in May the municipal-owned electric company anticipated about 220 million megawatts of electricity to be used, but because of heat, Lubbock customers used about 255 million.

In June, LP&L said there were days the city came close to the peak demand, which usually occurs a few months later in the summer.

“It’s shaping up to be a warm summer, we’ve started to get some bill complaints, and we’re going to see some more of those as we progress through the heat of the summer,” David McCalla, director of electric utilities, told the Electric Utility Board at the meeting last week. “We’re doing what we can to try to help people manage their uses, but the temperatures require the air conditioners to run more often than they would otherwise.”

Unlike prior summers, electric rates did not increase this summer — LP&L got rid of the season rate adjustments this year in preference of a year-long rate. LP&L a few months ago slightly lowered its pass-through rate, so rates are less now than in prior winter months. The increase in LP&L bills month-to-month is the result of usage.

“Every single year, utilities in Texas see their customers’ electric usage double, and even in some cases triple, as you move into the Texas summer,” said Matt Rose, spokesman for LP&L. “It’s because your air-conditioning unit is the highest consumer of electricity in your home. In Texas, we typically transition from days where we average about 75 degrees to days like now where we’re averaging anywhere from 95 to 100 degrees.”

Rates, however, have been increasing year-over-year. Fiscal year 2017-18 was the fourth and final year LP&L implemented an increase of about 5 percent to the base rate for capital projects. In June, a resident in Lubbock using 1,000 kwh paid \$116.66, which is about \$2 higher than the average rates in cities LP&L compares itself to.

Average customers in Lubbock in June paid about \$12 more a month than nearby SPEC customers, and \$10 more than electric users in Amarillo.

Monthly utility bills also include water, wastewater and stormwater charges, and those have increased over the years. According to A-J archives, the Lubbock City Council this fiscal year increased the water base rate by \$2 a month and reorganized the rate structure so that the larger users pay more per volume than the lower users.

LP&L’s website offers energy-saving tips to try to curve electric bills. Some long-term measures to ensure cold air is trapped inside and the warm air stays outside include making sure a house is well insulated and windows are well sealed and that there are no cracks below doors. Having vegetation, like large trees to offer shade , is also helpful.

One day-to-day tip is to keep window shades closed during the daytime. If you want to have the window blinds cracked a little, it’s recommended angle them to where the light goes up instead of down into the carpet where it will heat up the floor.

Rose also strongly urges users to not turn off the air conditioning during the day when nobody is home. Rather, he suggests increasing the temperature eight to 10 degrees and then slowly adjusting it down during the evening when it’s cooler outside.

It's recommended to change out your air filters once every quarter year so the air conditioner isn't working extra to push air through the debris buildup, and Rose said it's also beneficial to keep ceiling fans going to keep the air well circulated.

Also, wait to turn on household items that could heat up the house, such as the clothes dryer, oven or dishwasher, until after the peak heat of the day.