

# A utility especially to conserve energy can pay off in several ways

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The Legislature is trying to plug into electric energy capacity in all kinds of directions. While three competing bids for natural gas, wind and coal-fired generation stations are being evaluated pending a May 8 deadline, there's now another "green" conservation option in sketchy draft form.



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The idea for a non-profit "sustainable energy utility" comes from successful models in New England, New York and California. Since last year, state Sen. Harris McDowell has led a research task force on how to start one here. Its mission would be to improve residential and commercial energy efficiency and renewable power installations -- and ideally lower prices and pollution too.

The group's plan, released this week, notes that other Northeast states use less electricity per capita, and thus spend less on it. So the theoretical Delaware goal is to get a third of the residences and businesses here to reduce this excess by 30 percent as of 2015.

It would run on voluntary participation to install new efficient appliances, weatherization and solar equipment. The incentive to join would be rebates to cover the cost differential of such purchases, and creation of a market to buy back any unneeded solar power.

And this new market would result from requiring that existing electric utilities ultimately provide 20 percent of their power from renewable sources.

Management of all this would be handled by staff of the sustainable energy utility, underwritten by special bonds of up to \$30 million. A surcharge on utility bills for conservation projects would also go up to about 18 cents a month.

The track records of similar sustainable utilities in other states over the past decade are persuasive. However, the Delaware predictions of sweeping savings seem speculative based on public volunteerism. Property owners need the discretionary

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income upfront to invest in upgrades.

Still, organizing ways to make energy conservation pay off for Delawareans fits the economic and environmental trends.