

Plugged in to Altamaha EMC

VOLUME 15

NO. 11

JUNE 2015

LYONS, GA

The Official Newsletter of Altamaha Electric Membership Corporation

Serving: Toombs, Montgomery, Emanuel, Treutlen, Laurens, Johnson and Tattnall

Look before leaping on solar offerings

By Stan Wise,
Georgia Public Service Commissioner

The ink isn't dry yet on legislation making it easier to finance solar power systems for Georgia consumers, and already unscrupulous marketers are misleading consumers with offers to go solar and "eliminate" the electric bill. If Georgia's experience is anything like California, Arizona or even Louisiana, the Governor's Office of Consumer Affairs will soon be busy with complaints of deceptive marketing. Rest assured, solar consumers will still get an electric bill. And when you consider all capital and finance costs, solar isn't cheaper than residential and small commercial electric rates offered by Georgia utilities. Even after applying rebates and tax credits, it would take close to 14 years to break even on a \$16,800 7-kw rooftop system.

Study the offers. Beware of sales gimmicks that predict electric rates will rise 4 to 6 percent annually. Over the last 25 years, the average annual increase has been less than 2 percent for the state's investor-owned electric utility. Ask for a good faith estimate of the kilowatt-hours to be delivered by the system over time. Request plain language explanations of pricing terms over the life of the contract, warranties, and operation and maintenance costs and responsibilities. The lowest cost option for solar arrays may not even be a lease, but paying cash or using a home equity loan and taking the 30 percent federal tax credit oneself.

Think twice about solar backup systems. Before investing in a solar battery backup system at \$5,000 to \$10,000 every 10 years or so, be sure to weigh that cost against more practical investments in nonperishable foods and other goods necessary to ride out those rare power outages. If backup power is necessary, a natural gas standby generator is likely more cost-effective.

Talk to real estate appraisers. Even if cost calculations suggest you will break even in 15 to 20 years, it may not be a good idea to install solar if you may move before then. A solar array may be a selling point in some parts of California, but here in Georgia it can be a liability that harms resale value. Only a few buyers are willing to have arrays on their houses, much less willing



to assume leases of older, less efficient equipment.

Be aware of restrictions. Some developments may require that solar arrays not be visible from the road. Considering the arrays perform best when facing south, this may limit your options. If you have trees that shade your home, your house may stay cooler with the shade and save you more money than if you cut the trees down for solar.

Rate structures may change. Solar customers must be connected to the grid for backup power and to sell excess power back to the system, which means they still need power plants and all the network infrastructure necessary to serve the home 24 hours a day. However, residential solar customers do not pay all these fixed costs. Efforts are under way in some states, such as Wisconsin and Arizona, to roll back the cost shifts that result. In California, a 2013 study estimated that rooftop solar has caused a \$1.2 billion cost shift onto non-solar customers because solar customers pay about 19 percent less than what it costs the utility to serve them. For these reasons, Georgia should consider restructuring the fixed infrastructure costs into a demand component on residential customer bills so that everyone who uses the grid pays his fair share of the costs of keeping it operational.

Before investing a large amount of money in a home solar system in hopes of saving a few dollars a month, have an energy audit performed on your home to see if you can save energy costs every month. As consumer protections develop, technology improves and prices decline, solar energy shows great promise under the right application.

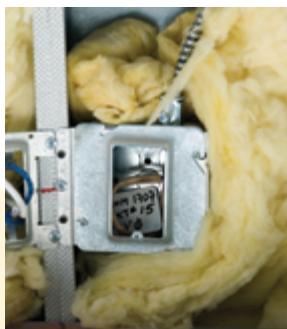
Energy Efficiency For Your Home

Before you decide if installing renewable energy-generating sources in your home is right for you, do some homework. Make sure your home is energy-efficient. Why is an energy-efficient home a prerequisite to adding residential renewable energy? Solar energy is free, but the equipment you'll need to harness and use that energy is expensive. Be smart about making that investment by reducing your home's energy requirements.

Start small. Make simple changes, such as unplugging appliances, turning off lights and adjusting your thermostat by just a few degrees. Once you've checked some simple tasks off your list, the next step is tightening up your home's envelope by addressing issues such as:

- **Air sealing**—Reducing air leaks by sealing holes and gaps in your home provides a big return. Your co-op may be able to help by conducting a blower-door test to pinpoint air leaks.

- **Leaky ducts**—Most heating and air-conditioning ducts are not airtight, causing homes to lose 15 percent to 25 percent of the air that should be flowing through them. These leaks make your air conditioner work harder and create air quality issues.



- **Insulation**—Are your floors and attic properly insulated?

Other elements in your home also have a major impact on its energy use:

- **Heating, ventilating and air-conditioning (HVAC) system**—Have a NATE (North American Technician Excellence)-certified HVAC contractor inspect and tune up your system.

- **ENERGY STAR appliances**—If you are planning to replace any major appliances, choose ENERGY STAR appliances. Today's ENERGY STAR refrigerators use half as much energy as models from the 1990s. However, even the most energy-efficient appliances can cost a lot to operate

when they're left on all the time. Read the instructions on the energy-saving features, and turn off the appliances when they're not needed.

- **Water heating uses a lot of energy.** To save energy, reduce your water heater's temperature; install low-flow fixtures, showerheads and aerators; and use cold water for washing clothes.

- **Lighting your home with LEDs** (light-emitting diodes) uses less energy, saves money and lasts longer.

By taking these steps, you'll save energy and money and have a more efficient, comfortable home. Home energy-efficiency improvements are the least expensive way to decrease your costs and help our environment. These improvements can also help reduce the size and cost of renewable-energy sources that you may consider in the future.



Altamaha EMC has a staff of energy experts ready and willing to assist you in making your home more energy-efficient and readying it to take advantage of renewable energy.



Stay safe exploring the great outdoors this summer

Summer is in full swing, and that means it is time for fun in the sun! As you find yourself spending more time outdoors, Altamaha EMC reminds you to stay safe.

Planning a home improvement project? When working outdoors, you may be using tools, such as ladders, power tools, shovels – or even paintbrushes with extendable arms. These items help you get the job done but have the potential to be dangerous if used improperly.

Pay attention to where you place metal ladders or dig for fence posts. Before you start any project, always look up and avoid overhead power lines. Keep a minimum of 10 feet between you and overhead lines.

If you are planning a project that requires digging, remember to dial “811” first to find out if the area you will be working in is clear of underground power lines. Power tools should be kept away from wet surfaces, and outlets should not be overloaded.

Exploring the great outdoors is a great way to spend time with the family, but keep these safety tips in mind.

Children should never climb trees near power lines. Always assume a wire is live. Fly kites and remote-controlled airplanes in large open areas like a park or a field, safely away from trees and overhead power lines.



Planning to take a dip in the pool? Electrical devices, such as stereos, should be kept at least 10 feet away from water sources, and outdoor electrical outlets should always be covered. If you hear a rumble of thunder, exit the pool right away.

Speaking of thunder, summer storms can be dangerous if you're caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. If you find yourself outdoors during a storm, move toward suitable shelter with covered sides, and stick to low-lying ground if possible.

These are just a few tips to remember when you are spending time outdoors this summer with your family. Have some fun out there, and always keep safety in mind!



HOLIDAY NOTICE



Altamaha EMC's offices will be closed Friday, July 3rd in observance of Independence Day. In the event of a power outage or related problems, standby personnel will be on duty. You can report power outages by calling us at (912) 526-8181.



Keeping you safe during and after summer storms

No one knows electrical safety better than the experts who practice it every single day. Altamaha EMC encourages you to practice safety with these reminders – for during and after a summer storm:

Avoid wires and water — When lightning strikes a home during a storm, the electrical charge can surge through pipes and utility wires. That means you can get zapped if you're touching water or any device that's plugged in, whether it's a landline phone or toaster.

Skip the makeshift shelter — During a storm, it's tempting to take cover under a picnic gazebo or golf cart, but in open-sided structures with no conductors to channel strikes, a bolt's path of least resistance to the ground could be you. On top of that, these structures raise your risk of a lightning strike because of their height. Keep moving toward suitable shelter.

Portable generators — Take special care with portable generators, which can provide a good source of power, but if improperly installed or operated, can become deadly. Do not connect generators directly to household wiring. Power from generators can back-feed along power lines and electrocute anyone coming in contact with them, including co-op line workers making repairs. It's best to hire a qualified, licensed electrician to install your generator and ensure that it meets local electrical codes.

Flooded areas — Stay away from downed power lines and avoid walking through flooded areas. Power lines could be submerged and still live with electricity. Report any downed lines you see to Altamaha EMC by calling 912-526-8181 immediately.

Electrical equipment — Never use electrical equipment that is wet – especially outdoor electrical equipment, which could be a potential danger after a summer storm. Water can damage electrical equipment and parts, posing a shock or fire hazard.

Altamaha EMC has served our local community since 1936 and safety for our members is our number one concern. To learn about our safety programs and tips, visit www.altamahaemc.com.

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Member RECIPES



South Georgia Cracker Salad

Ingredients

1 can (14.5 oz.) whole tomatoes
1 sleeve saltine crackers, crushed
(leave a bit chunky)
4 tablespoons mayonnaise
6 large eggs, hard-boiled and chopped
1 medium onion, chopped
1 medium bell pepper, chopped (optional)
Salt and pepper

Directions:

Pour tomatoes, including juice, into a large bowl. Squeeze each tomato through your fingers until they are crushed but still chunky. Add remaining ingredients and mix well. If it appears dry, add a little more mayonnaise. Add salt and pepper to taste. You can eat immediately or refrigerate overnight. Can be served as is, on celery sticks, stuffed inside cherry or grape tomatoes or even on more crackers.

– *From the kitchen of Amanda Lawler*

Each month, our newsletter features recipes submitted by our members. If you have a favorite recipe and would like to share it with other readers in the Altamaha EMC service area, send a copy, complete with name, address and daytime phone number to: Tammye Vaughn, Altamaha EMC, P.O. Box 346, Lyons, GA 30436. Each month, a recipe will be selected for publication. The member who submitted the featured recipe will be given a \$10 credit on their next Altamaha EMC bill. Due to limited space, not all recipes received will be featured. Recipes printed in *Plugged In* are not independently tested; therefore, we must depend on the accuracy of those members who send recipes to us.