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NEBRASKA

October 2025

Magazine

A Safe Harvest

Protecting Lives
During the Busy
Season

**Public Power
in Nebraska**

**Essential Space Heater
Safety Tips**

**Best Bets For
Efficiency Projects**



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In the early 1900s, Decatur, Nebraska, a town with no streetcar, used a postcard featuring one as a marketing trick. Freelance writer Tim Trudell explains how, a century later, as part of a public art project, the town acquired a real streetcar to display in a park, bringing the myth to life and creating a community gathering space.



14 Public Power in Nebraska

Join us in celebrating Public Power Month in October. Public power means electricity is provided by not-for-profit, publicly owned utilities, rather than private, for-profit companies. These utilities are governed by locally elected or appointed boards and operate solely to serve the interests of customers.

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ON THE COVER

Harvest season's intense pace increases the risk of accidents from fatigue and electrical hazards. Prioritizing worker safety, including adequate rest and electrical awareness, is crucial to a successful harvest. See the related article on Page 10. Photograph by Wayne Price

Editor's Page



Wayne Price

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Eight Decades of Service and Leadership

The story of the Nebraska Rural Electric Association (NREA) is one of vision, cooperation, and persistence. It began on October 26, 1935, when a group of leaders gathered in Lincoln to address the challenges facing newly formed rural electric systems. Called together by attorney C.A. Sorensen, the meeting brought representatives from 10 existing systems who shared a common goal: to extend the benefits of electricity to rural Nebraska.

At that first meeting, participants discussed pressing issues such as standardizing line construction, connecting to wholesale power from hydroelectric districts, and finding temporary service solutions while major projects were still under development. By the end of the day, they had created what was then called the Nebraska Association of Rural Public Power Districts and Electric Associations. Nearly two decades later, in 1953, the organization adopted the name it still carries today: the Nebraska Rural Electric Association.

The articles of incorporation established the group as a nonprofit dedicated to cooperation and progress. Sorensen was elected the first chairman, while Paul D. Marvin was named secretary. Marvin went on to become the Association's first employee, serving as secretary and later as secretary-editor. In 1947, he launched the statewide magazine, originally titled *The Electric Farmer*, which became a key tool for communication with rural families.

In its early years, the Association's work touched nearly every home connected to rural power. Services included wiring inspections, encouraging electricity use, helping with power supply issues, and advocating for fair legislation in Lincoln and Washington, D.C. Training and safety education soon became priorities as well. In 1951, John Clema was hired as the first general manager, while Marvin continued as editor of the magazine.

Over the decades, NREA adapted to the changing needs of its members. Technical support, legislative advocacy, and education remained at the heart of its mission. The magazine and representation in government gave rural Nebraskans both a voice and a trusted source of information.

Today, NREA serves 35 member-systems. Each system has a representative on the board of directors, which meets quarterly. Its services are wide-ranging: training for line personnel, education for directors and employees, legal guidance, research, and compliance support. The Association also partners with agricultural and industry groups and provides cost-saving cooperative services. Just as important, it represents rural electric systems before state agencies, the Unicameral Legislature, and Congress.

From its beginnings in 1935 to its work today, NREA has remained true to its purpose: helping rural systems provide reliable, affordable electricity for Nebraska families.



Alyssa Clemens
Roberts

Alyssa Clemens
Roberts is the
General Manager of
Dawson Public
Power District
headquartered in
Lexington, Neb.

A Culture of Connection and Service

In March, I packed my bags and made the journey from New Hampshire to Nebraska to serve as the General Manager for Dawson Public Power District. I traded the granite of New England for the rolling plains of the Platte River Valley, and I've been struck by the incredible sense of community and purpose that defines this state. The slogan, "The Good Life," isn't just a marketing phrase, it's a genuine reflection of the people and the culture.

What I've found here is a deep-rooted connection among people, many of whom have been Nebraskans for generations. There's a shared history and an innate understanding that we are all in this together. It's a connection you see in the small, charming gestures, like the classic "one-finger wave" that drivers offer as they pass on a gravel road. It's a simple, yet profound, acknowledgment that we see one another and we belong to the same community.

This sense of community is at the very heart of public power. Nebraska is the only state in the nation where all electricity is provided by customer-owned, not-for-profit utilities. As a public power district, we are not driven by shareholder profits but by a commitment to our customers. Every decision we make is guided by the core mission to provide safe, reliable, and affordable electric service.

In New Hampshire, I had the privilege of serving an electric cooperative, which shares many of these values. However, the statewide public power model in Nebraska takes that commitment a step further. It creates a unified culture of service and collaboration. Whether it's a line crew responding to an outage in the middle of the night or a customer service representative helping a family with their bill, the focus is always on putting the customer first.

I've seen firsthand how this commitment to service translates into a good life for Nebraskans. It's the peace of mind that comes from knowing that you can rely on your lights to come on, the economic stability of affordable rates, and the security of a utility that is directly accountable to you. It's an honor to be a part of this tradition and to work alongside a team so dedicated to the well-being of the communities we serve.

How a Nebraska Town Turned a Century-Old Hoax Into History

At the turn of the 20th century, Decatur was a bustling town. With a population north of 1,300, it was more a city by Nebraska standards. So it made sense that a streetcar ran along tracks from the Missouri River through downtown.

Only the streetcar didn't actually exist. It was a genius marketing scheme. Why not create postcards featuring a Decatur streetcar? Few people outside of Decatur, and maybe Burt County in northeast Nebraska, would know the difference.

As years passed, some people swore the community did have a streetcar, but, in reality, the postcard featuring the trolley was nothing more than early Photoshop.

"They wanted a railroad for years, and the whole town was built on the assumption that they would have a railroad," said Jane Judt, president of the Decatur Museum board. "But it never came to be. So, I suppose, you know, this was a way of attracting customers to their businesses."

While two postcards featured a streetcar, one recommended passersby visit Byram's Drugstore, Judt said. HC Byram was also a banker, she said.

The story of the Decatur streetcar was included as part of the Byway of the Arts, a 2015 project highlighting three Burt County communities - Decatur, Lyons and Oakland. The Center For Rural Affairs' project featured projects identifying a piece of each town's history.

The Rural Affairs center sought to create projects that would blend a community's culture with tourism opportunities. Lyons chose to develop a storefront theater used for public viewing of parades and community movie nights, while Oakland built a mobile stage reflective of the town's Swedish heritage.

As Decatur residents discussed ideas for their art project, some wanted to recognize the history of the Missouri River toll bridge, which opened in 1956 and operated under local control until it was transferred to the Nebraska Department of Transportation in 2013.

But, the condition of the toll house prevented its relocation, Judt said.

"The project then came to be by someone mentioning



the postcard, and they just followed up on myths and legends of it," she said.

Once locals agreed to create a park using a streetcar as the anchor attraction, the Decatur committee organized to handle the project needed to find it, Judt said.

With the Decatur project led by conceptual artist Matthew Mazzotta, he learned that an older streetcar, out of commission for several years, was sitting in storage in New York City. Using a \$10,000 grant for the Byway of Art project, Decatur officials approved purchasing it for \$5,000 on e-Bay.

"Apparently that was a mistake, but the person selling it sold it to him anyway, because it was going to a community for an art project," Judt said. "It kind of came together."



Above: A postcard from the early 1900s depicts a streetcar in Decatur. It was a smooth marketing scheme as the northeast Nebraska community never had one. Photograph provided by Decatur Historical Museum

Decatur's streetcar park includes a bench celebrating rural legends. Photograph by Tim Trudell

small gatherings.

The first event, in November 2015, focused on spooky stories, with Halloween having just passed, Judt said.

"We told ghost stories of the community that were passed down," she said. "I mean, they weren't just made up. We had heard them from several generations, and so it was interesting way to start out."

Since then, the streetcar park has been the scene for tales of rural legends, author talks and band performances, Judt said. There have also been community movies hosted there, she said.

Carolers have performed at the park during the holidays, Judt said.

While the streetcar came to symbolize Decatur's place on the Byway of Art, the village actually has a unique history.

Decatur's history among Euro-Americans traces back to the 1804 Lewis and Clark expedition, when their Corps of Discovery team camped along the river bank.

In 1854, Peter A. Sarpy and Clement Lambert of

With the streetcar - it was actually a trolley - purchased, officials had to figure out how to get it to Decatur.

"Matthew had to drive it four days to get it here," Judt said. "And, then, they had several trips through town letting people ride."

In the end, Decatur residents did get to hop aboard their version of a streetcar for a jaunt through town, bringing truth to the myth of Decatur having a streetcar. It was just a century after the postcard first appeared.

With the streetcar parked at Trolley Park, about a block south of 7th Street on Broadway, the vehicle's engine was removed, leaving it stationary.

A small gazebo, bench and a few historical note placards and flower beds add color to the park.

With a table and benches inside, the streetcar is used for

Continued on Page 8



From Page 7

Bellevue, along with Henry Fontenelle, built log houses near Wood Creek and operated a trading business with the Omaha tribal nation on behalf of the American Fur Company.

Then, in 1856, Decatur became the second town incorporated in Nebraska, behind Bellevue. It was named after Stephen A. Decatur, who arrived in the area in 1841 and lived with the Omaha Nation. He later worked at the trading post.

Situated along the Missouri River, it seemed ripe for development and growth. But, as towns competed to be located along the railroad in the early 1860s, Decatur was ignored. Since rail transportation was faster and more reliable than ferries and barges on the then-untamed Missouri River, communities along the railroad enjoyed more growth than others.

Decatur saw its population dwindle to 800 early in the 1900s. It's now about 400 people, Judt said. In 1984,

Decatur Public School merged with the Lyons district.

"That's kind of prevented growth of Decatur," she said. "But it seems to be a pretty popular place for recreation on the river."

As Decatur settled on its version of historical art to be shared on the Byway of Art, it took dozens of volunteers to make it happen, Judt said. From people hauling gravel to the site to others laying the railroad tracks used for the streetcar display, Judt said the project wouldn't have been successful without volunteers.

But, in the end, Mazzotta created an art piece, she said.

"We're the ones who came up with the idea, but then he kind of pulled it all together," Judt said.

Above: A look inside the Decatur streetcar, which can be used for meetings and events. Photograph by Tim Trudell

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A SAFE HARVEST

Protecting Lives During the Busy Season

Harvest season is the reward for months of hard work and long hours. It brings both excitement and pressure as farmers race to bring in the crop before the weather turns. But the rush to finish can also bring serious risks. Each year, farm workers across the country are injured or killed in accidents involving power lines and electrical equipment. Many of these tragedies are preventable with careful attention and planning.

One of the most overlooked hazards on the farm is also one of the most familiar: power lines. Because they are always there, it is easy for workers to stop noticing them. During harvest, when large equipment is constantly on the move, that oversight can turn deadly.

Before the season gets into full swing, take time to review safety procedures with every worker. Walk through the farmyard and fields, pointing out areas where equipment comes close to overhead lines. Measure equipment heights and make sure there is at least ten feet of clearance in every direction—above, below, and to the side.

If Equipment Touches a Power Line

Accidents can happen even when precautions are taken. If a vehicle or piece of machinery contacts a power line, the operator should stay inside and warn others to keep back. Call 911 immediately. Do not attempt to exit until the utility crew confirms it is safe.

If fire makes it necessary to leave, jump clear of the equipment without touching the ground and the vehicle at the same time. Land with your feet together, then hop away until you are a safe distance from the site. Never attempt to climb back on equipment once you are off—it could still be energized.



Safety Starts with Training

The best way to prevent tragedies is through awareness. Make sure all workers, including seasonal help, are trained to recognize electrical hazards and know the correct steps to stay safe. Harvest is a time to celebrate the rewards of farming. By putting safety first, Nebraska farmers can ensure that the season ends in success, not tragedy.

Prioritizing Safety Through Rest

For farmers, the fall harvest is a race against time, with long hours stretching from dawn until late into the night. This intense period of work, driven by deadlines and the need to maximize yield, creates a perfect storm for injuries. The majority of on-farm injuries occur during the busy planting and harvesting seasons, when stress and exhaustion are at their peak.

This isn't just about physical strain; it's about the mental toll as well. A lack of sleep, often a sacrifice made for more hours in the field, is a major contributor to this risk. Sleep deprivation is linked to slower reaction times, reduced concentration, and impaired judgment, all of which can lead to costly mistakes, whether operating heavy machinery or driving on the road.



ESSENTIAL HARVEST SAFETY PRACTICES

- ALWAYS LOWER GRAIN AUGERS BEFORE MOVING THEM, EVEN SHORT DISTANCES. SHIFTING GROUND, WIND, OR UNEVEN WEIGHT CAN CAUSE UNEXPECTED ACCIDENTS.
- USE A SPOTTER WHEN OPERATING LARGE MACHINERY NEAR POWER LINES. SPOTTERS SHOULD NEVER TOUCH THE EQUIPMENT WHILE IT IS IN MOTION.
- KEEP LADDERS, POLES, AND OTHER EQUIPMENT AWAY FROM OVERHEAD LINES. EVEN NON-METALLIC MATERIALS SUCH AS WOOD OR ROPE CAN CONDUCT ELECTRICITY IF DAMP OR DIRTY.
- NEVER TRY TO RAISE OR MOVE A POWER LINE TO MAKE ROOM FOR MACHINERY. ONLY TRAINED UTILITY CREWS SHOULD HANDLE ELECTRICAL LINES.
- DO NOT USE METAL POLES TO BREAK UP BRIDGED GRAIN INSIDE BINS. MAKE SURE ALL WORKERS KNOW WHERE AND HOW TO SHUT OFF POWER IN AN EMERGENCY.
- HIRE QUALIFIED ELECTRICIANS FOR REPAIRS AND INSTALLATION OF DRYING EQUIPMENT OR OTHER FARM ELECTRICAL SYSTEMS.

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Egbers Flighting

Public power districts and electric cooperatives across the country are urging members to stay alert as utility-related scams continue to evolve. Fraudsters are becoming more aggressive and more convincing—using impersonation, false urgency and digital deception to extract payments or personal information from unsuspecting individuals.

Reports of scam calls, fake energy rebate offers and phony disconnection threats have increased in recent months. These schemes often begin with a phone call, text or visit from someone claiming to represent the local electric provider. The tactics vary, but the goal is always the same: to pressure the member into acting quickly before they have time to verify the request.

Some scammers demand immediate payment, threatening that your service will be shut off within minutes. Others offer too-good-to-be-true incentives like rebates, energy audits or free equipment installations—if the member provides banking information or pays an upfront fee. In many cases, scammers can even

manipulate caller ID to appear as though the call is coming from a trusted utility number.

Nebraska's public power districts and electric cooperatives want members to know they will never call and demand immediate payment. They will never ask for banking or account information over the phone, nor will they pressure a member to act without the opportunity to verify the situation. If someone claiming to be from your local electric utility insists on urgency or payment through nontraditional means, that's a red flag.

These scams can arrive in the form of emails, text messages or QR codes designed to look like real payment portals. Typically, the links redirect to fraudulent websites that steal sensitive

data. The scammers may also encourage members to pay through untraceable methods like prepaid debit cards, mobile apps, or cryptocurrency—methods legitimate utilities never use.

One concerning trend involves scammers visiting homes unannounced, posing as utility workers conducting inspections or installations. Without proper identification or appointment confirmation, these visits should always be treated with caution.

Education and awareness remain two of the most powerful tools in this fight. Members are encouraged to talk with family, friends, and neighbors about the warning signs of scams. Sharing information helps others stay safe and contributes to a stronger, more connected community.

If something doesn't feel right, don't hesitate to hang up, close the message or refuse entry. Call your local electric utility directly using the number listed on your monthly bill or on the official website. Member service professionals are available to assist.

Public power districts and electric cooperatives were built on trust, service and community. By working together and looking out for one another, we can help expose fraud for what it is—and ensure that scammers are left in the dark.



If you suspect you've been targeted by a scammer, do not hesitate to hang up. Call your local electric utility directly using the number listed on your monthly bill or on the official website. Photograph by Center for Ageing Better, Unsplash

Is a Battery System Right for Your Home?

Across the country, homeowners are turning to battery storage systems to take greater control of their energy use. What was once a niche technology is now becoming mainstream, offering savings, reliability, and support for renewable energy.

The cost of battery systems has dropped in recent years, while efficiency has improved. This shift is making batteries more affordable and practical for everyday households. By charging a battery during off-peak hours, when energy is cheaper, families can lower their monthly bills. At the same time, these systems help rural electric utilities balance demand during the busiest hours of the day.

Beyond savings, battery storage brings peace of mind. When storms or unexpected outages strike, a battery system can keep essentials like the refrigerator, lights, or even the whole house running. Unlike gas generators, batteries are quiet, clean, and don't require constant refueling.


Batteries also play a key role in expanding the reach of renewable energy. They can store solar power collected during the day for use at night, or capture wind power generated overnight for daytime use. This ability to smooth out the ups and downs of renewable generation makes the grid stronger and more sustainable.

For homeowners considering a

system, cost is still a factor. Prices generally range from \$3,000 to \$10,000, depending on size and features. Popular options include the Tesla Powerwall, Enphase IQ Battery, and Sonnen's sonnenBatterie. When researching, it's important to look at capacity, lifespan, and efficiency to find the best fit.

Before making a purchase, check with your local electric utility. Many are developing storage programs or community battery projects that allow members to share in the benefits without the high upfront expense. These partnerships are helping to make energy storage more accessible, while paving the way for a cleaner, more reliable energy future.

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Public Power IN Nebraska

Public power means electricity is provided by not-for-profit, publicly owned utilities, rather than private, for-profit companies. These utilities are governed by locally elected or appointed boards and operate solely to serve the interests of customers. Public power utilities generally prioritize local needs and lower, stable rates over profits for shareholders.

Decisions are made locally, and revenue is reinvested in the system and the community. Public power utilities have a strong focus on affordable rates, reliability and customer service.

Is Nebraska really the only all-public power state?

Yes. Nebraska is the only U.S. state where every electric utility is publicly owned — either by municipalities, public power districts, or rural electric cooperatives. There are no investor-owned utilities in the state.

How is public power governed in Nebraska?

Public power utilities are governed by locally elected boards or city councils. These officials are accountable to the public and must operate in compliance with open meetings and public records laws.



Why does public power matter?

Public power keeps decision-making local, rates competitive, and revenues reinvested in Nebraska communities. It ensures accountability to customers, not shareholders, and focuses on reliability, transparency, and long-term planning.

Are electric rates in Nebraska competitive?

Yes. Nebraska consistently ranks among the top 15 states for lowest average retail electric rates. Public power keeps rates stable by eliminating the profit motive and emphasizing long-term, cost-effective planning.



How reliable is the electric service in Nebraska?

Nebraska public power utilities maintain high reliability and fast restoration during outages through a mutual aid program. Local ownership allows for quicker decision-making and tailored solutions for Nebraska's communities.



How are electricity rates determined in public power?

Rates in public power are set to cover the cost of providing reliable electricity, including operations, maintenance, and infrastructure improvements. Since there are no shareholders seeking profit, rates are generally cost-based. Public hearings are often held to discuss rate adjustments, ensuring transparency and public input.

Where does Nebraska's electricity come from?

Nebraska's power supply is diverse, including wind, coal, nuclear, hydroelectric, and natural gas. The state has seen significant growth in renewable energy, particularly wind, with over 30% of electricity now from renewable sources. Nebraska's public power entities are increasingly incorporating renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, and biogas into their energy portfolios. They are committed to providing reliable and sustainable

energy to their customers. For example, many districts have invested in wind and solar farms across the state.



Do public power utilities invest in clean energy?

Yes. Nebraska's public power utilities are committed to sustainable energy development. They're actively expanding renewable energy generation, improving energy efficiency programs, and reducing environmental impact.

Can customers get involved in public power decisions?

Absolutely. Because utilities are public entities, customers are encouraged to attend board meetings, provide input, and vote in local elections for utility board members. You can stay informed about the utility's activities through newsletters and websites. You can usually find information about your local utility's governance and public engagement on their website.

Nebraska Rural Electric Association
402/ 475-4988 www.nrea.org

**YOUR VOICE
MATTERS**

If you can't remember when you purchased your space heater, it might be time to replace it. Just like the flip phones of yesteryear have progressed into today's modern cell phone, portable space heaters have come a long way too. Most of today's models have built-in safety features, such as non-exposed coils and sensors that detect overheating or touch, as well as an automatic shut-off feature in case it gets tipped over.

Regardless of whether your space heater is fresh out of the box or several years old, it should be used safely. Along with using a unit that is in good working order, be sure to keep clothing, papers, rugs and other flammable items at least 3 feet away from a space heater. More than half of the heating-related home fires start when items are too close to the heat source, according to the NFPA, including upholstered furniture, clothing, a mattress or bedding.

Follow these additional space heater safety tips:

- Read all instructions and only use as recommended.
- Do not leave a space heater unattended.
- Keep children and pets away from space heaters.

Keep space heaters at least three feet away from flammable items.

• Plug it directly into an outlet; most power strips and extension cords are not equipped to handle the energy spikes caused by a space heater cycling on and off.

- Unplug any other item from the outlet you are



using; also try to use a dedicated circuit to avoid overload.

- Turn them off before you leave the room or go to sleep.

• Do not use a heater in disrepair or with a frayed cord or damaged plug.

• Place them on flat, level surfaces and never place on furniture, counters or carpet, which can overheat.

Use a space heater with care. For additional safety tips, visit safeelectricity.org.

Murphy



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is credit."*

- J.P. Morgan

For many people, their home is the biggest investment and the largest purchase they make in their lives. We want to make sure that we make good decisions to protect and maximize the benefits of the investment in our homes. Energy efficiency upgrades are potential investments that can save money by reducing the energy used in your home and pay for themselves over time. Rooftop solar is another energy investment that can reduce your electric bill by generating your own energy at home.

Using return on investment is a common method to determine the benefit of an upgrade. It measures the gain or loss of an investment relative to the cost. ROI is calculated by dividing the net profit—the total cost of the investment subtracted from total revenue generated—by the cost of the investment and multiplying by 100 to find the ROI percentage. The higher the percentage, the better the investment.

If you take out a loan, home equity line of credit or use a credit card, add the borrowed money and interest rate into the investment cost.

Let's put the calculation to work on a few home project examples. Keep in mind, the numbers used below are hypothetical. Prices will vary based on the scale of your project and the cost of labor and materials in your area.

Adding insulation and air sealing your home are some of the most cost-effective home improvement projects and can save money year-round by reducing the energy needed from your heating and cooling systems. The United States Environmental Protection Agency estimates that air sealing and insulation can save an average of 15% on heating and cooling costs or an average of 11% on total energy costs, with higher savings in the north and south because of more extreme temperature swings. Attics, walls, rim joists or floors over crawlspaces should be insulated. The ROI will vary based on your location, existing

insulation levels and project cost.

Let's say you spend \$3,000 to insulate your home, saving \$330 per year for the next 20 years. Your net profit is \$3,600. Then, divide the net profit by the total cost of the investment, \$3,000, and multiply it by 100. That's a ROI of 120%.



If you're looking for the most bang for your buck, consider adding insulation and air sealing your home. Photograph by Mark Gilliland, Pioneer Utility Resources

The energy efficiency impact of new windows in your home depends on the difference in efficiency of the new windows and the existing windows. You will see the most improvement when you go from the least efficient—single pane with no storm windows—to the most efficient new windows. The exact ROI for your home will also depend on your location, energy costs and the efficiency of your heating and cooling systems.

The EPA estimates upgrading single-pane windows to Energy Star®-rated windows can save about 12% of your annual energy use. Let's say you replace your existing windows for \$5,000, saving \$360 per year for the next 20 years. The ROI is 44%.

Windows and insulation upgrades have the added benefit of making your home quieter and more comfortable. They can also add value if you sell your home.

Rooftop solar is another investment that some people consider. Let's say a solar system costs \$20,000 and is projected to save \$30,000 over 25 years. With a net profit of \$10,000, the ROI is 50%. Solar system costs and savings vary depending on where you live, how you pay for the system and your cost for electricity.

It also has the potential of adding value to your home if you decide to sell. Yet, if you have a solar system loan and lease, it can add complexity to a potential sale.

You might be eligible for tax credits or incentives through your public power district or electric cooperative or state programs to reduce the upfront costs for energy efficiency or renewable energy projects.

6

Smart Ways to Cut Heating Costs This Winter

by **Cory Fuehrer, NPPD Energy
Efficiency Program Manager**



From October through March, the average Nebraska home consumes more than one-third of its annual energy requirements to keep warm and cozy. It is no wonder heating is the largest energy expenditure most people have. Here are a few ways to keep a few more energy dollars in your pocket this year:

1. Evaluate your insulation. Since it is seldom seen, most people do not consider whether their home is adequately insulated. Inside exterior walls and above ceilings, insulation is critical to maintaining a comfortable indoor temperature and lowering energy usage. Throughout Nebraska, attics should be insulated to a minimum R-49. Exterior walls providing an R-value less than 13 definitely have need for additional cavity or exterior sheath insulation.

2. Seal air leaks. While old windows are often characterized as energy losers, it is usually the air leaks around and through them that causes the greatest energy losses. Worn out frames and cracked seals can allow warm air to escape during the winter. Cracked caulking and improper sealing during installation are additional reasons to investigate.

3. Tune-up your heating system. Have a certified HVAC specialist perform a tune up to ensure all of the heating system's parts are in good working order. This includes inspecting your heating system, cleaning and adjusting each component as necessary, replacing the filter, and testing its overall efficiency. Regular maintenance for your HVAC system will prevent

breakdowns, increase efficiency, extend the system's lifespan.

4. Use space heaters wisely. Space heaters can consume a lot of energy, especially if used continuously. Be mindful of when and where you use them. They can be more effective at reducing heating costs if they are used in one specific room or area instead of the entire house. However, if that room or area is not well insulated and has air leaks, the space heater will run nonstop, resulting in higher energy costs.

5. Manage the fireplace. If a fire isn't burning in the fireplace, keep the fireplace damper closed. When the damper is open and there isn't a fire burning, warm air can escape through the chimney. Purchasing energy-efficient fireplace grates is also a good investment. These grates will help circulate cool air into the fireplace while pushing warm air back into the room.

6. Install a smart thermostat. Set it up to adjust temperatures to 70°F or lower when you're home and to automatically lower the set point to 65°F or lower during bedtime hours or while no one is home.

Your public power district or electric cooperative wants to help you efficiently keep your home warm this winter. They may also provide incentives for reducing the cost of some efficiency-improvement projects. For more ideas on how you can make your home or business EnergyWise, contact them, or visit www.energywisenebraska.com for more information.

FAIRFIELD OPERA HOUSE FAIRFIELD, NEB.

The Fairfield Opera House may not host operas anymore, but it is still the center of good times in this small Nebraska town. Built in 1893, the location has worn many hats over the years. Its upstairs once buzzed with dances, receptions, and community events well into the 1980s and 1990s. Downstairs, the building has housed everything from restaurants to a John Deere dealership.

Today, it thrives as a bar and grill owned by Scot Pell, who bought the business two years ago. “I just bought it on a whim,” he said with a laugh. But Pell already knew the place well. He had worked there under former owner Lynn Nejezchleb, who gave the building a major facelift in 2006. Nejezchleb carefully remodeled the space, preserving the character while making it functional for a new era. Pell credits that vision with keeping customers interested.

“I think the history draws people,” he said. “But hopefully it’s also the food and service that bring them back.”

Pell runs the kitchen himself with help from two full-time and 11 part-time employees. During the week, the menu has a small-town, comfort-food vibe—pizza and wings on Tuesdays, chicken fried steak on Thursdays. Saturdays bring hungry guests for a prime rib dinner that has become a hit with regulars from Hastings, Grand Island, and beyond.

While Pell does not operate a brewery, he makes good use of the adjacent space once used for that purpose, hosting events and receptions. Guests will also find local flavor on tap, with craft beers from nearby Hastings and Ohioa.

The Opera House walls tell their own story. Murals capture Fairfield’s history, offering a visual reminder that this is more than just a place to eat—it is a gathering spot tied to the town’s roots.



Pell himself is a transplant, originally from North Platte. He moved to Fairfield in 2010 after meeting his wife, Lisa, a local nurse. Lisa’s family has long been connected to the community, and her aunt helped Scot land his first job at the Opera House.

Electricity for the Opera House, like the rest of Fairfield, comes from South Central PPD, but the real energy inside comes from neighbors, friends, and travelers who stop in to share a meal, a drink, and a slice of small-town history.



Potato Pizza Puffs

- 1 medium (5.3 ounces)
Wisconsin russet potato
- 2 cups cold water
- 3 whole garlic cloves, crushed
(optional)
- 1 sheet frozen puff pastry
dough
- nonstick cooking spray
- 1/2 cup Parmesan cheese, grated
- 1 1/2 cups mozzarella cheese
- 1/2 cup pepperoni
- 1 tablespoon Italian seasoning
- 1 cup marinara sauce

Wash and scrub potato thoroughly. Pat dry and thinly slice into 1/8-inch rounds.

Place sliced potatoes in saucepan and cover with cold water. Add crushed garlic cloves to the water, if desired.

Parboil potatoes 5 minutes until slightly tender.

Thaw puff pastry and roll out slightly with rolling pin. Cut into 12 equal strips.

On foil-lined tray generously sprayed with nonstick cooking spray, sprinkle with Parmesan and Italian seasoning then shingle 3-4 par-cooked potato slices with 3-4 pepperoni slices. Top slices with mozzarella followed by puff pastry strip. Push edges of pastry down onto foil to slightly "seal" puffs, keeping contents within pastry.

In air fryer set at 400 F, bake 7-8 minutes.

Wait for cheese to cool before removing puffs from tray. Gently peel potato pizza puffs off foil. Serve with marinara sauce.

Reader Submitted Recipes

Shrimp and Corn Chowder

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1/2 pkg. mushrooms, chopped | 1 can cream of potato soup |
| 1/2 onion, chopped | 1 can cream of shrimp soup |
| 2 tablespoons butter | 6 ounces cream cheese |
| 1 small garlic, minced | 1 cup frozen or canned corn |
| 2 cups frozen shrimp | Milk as needed |

Sauté mushroom, onions and garlic in one tablespoon of butter until onions are tender. Remove from pan. Add another tablespoon of butter and sauté two cups frozen shrimp until tender. Blend cream of potato soup, cream of shrimp soup and cream cheese together then add corn and bring to a boil. Reduce heat, add shrimp, onion and mushrooms. Cover and simmer for 10 minutes or until done. Add milk to desired consistency. All ingredients can also be put in the crockpot on low for 4-5 hours, stirring occasionally.

Leanne Atwood, Albion, Nebraska

Energy Balls

- 1 cup oatmeal
- 1/2 cup peanut butter
- 1/3 cup honey
- 1/2 cup ground flax seed
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1/4 cup mini chocolate chips

Combine all ingredients in a bowl. Form into balls using your hands. Place on a baking sheet and put in refrigerator until set up, then store in an airtight container in the refrigerator.

Jace Benda, Norfolk, Nebraska

Fresh Apple Fritters

- 1/2 cup milk
- 1 egg, beaten
- 2 tablespoons butter, melted
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 2 apples, finely chopped
- 1 1/2 cups flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- Oil for frying

In a mixing bowl combine milk, egg and melted butter. Add chopped apples (skins can be left on) and vanilla. Sift together flour, salt and baking powder. Stir into milk mixture with a spoon until blended. Do not over mix. Heat oil to 350 degrees. Fry 2 to 3 minutes per side, turning them to brown evenly. Drain excess oil on a paper towel. Sift powdered sugar over them and serve.

Barbie Christensen, St. Libory, Nebraska

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