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Cut demand, save grid, money

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The heat wave is over, but the memory of two power outages, one Monday night and one during the day Tuesday, will remain for the couple of thousand Schenectady residents affected. While the hardship was nothing compared to Baghdad or Beirut, it was certainly something to be avoided if possible. Getting more participation in electric demand control programs like Operation Save New York could help do that.

New York's grid can easily handle normal demand. But it also has to be able to handle peak demand, usually limited to a few days a year. Monday was one of those days, when, driven by temperatures of around 100 degrees in New York City, average hourly demand set a record.

Like National Grid in Schenectady, Consolidated Edison and the Long Island Power Authority had some equipment failures due to the high demand. But it could have been much worse if not for Operation Save New York, which is administered by a company called Energy Curtailment Specialists under contract with the New York State Independent System Operator, manager of the state's grid.

Participants in the program, which include manufacturers, hospitals, hotels and schools, are paid an annual fee for committing to reduce their demand if asked to do so during emergencies, and then also paid per kilowatt actually saved (just as if they sold those kilowatts to their utility). The company, which has had the contract for five years, has signed up enough participants downstate and in big manufacturing areas upstate, such as Massena and Niagara Falls, to save 400 megawatts (enough to supply 400,000 homes). Other companies with similar programs have commitments to reduce demand another 300 megawatts.

Cutting peak demand not only can save the grid from a major blackout, it can save big money. Electricity is priced based on marginal costs, and that next kilowatt, especially when supplies are tight, is very expensive. Large users of electricity in the Capital Region can help themselves, and the rest of us, by participating in one of these programs.

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