

Energy Efficiency Makes Massachusetts Man a Suspect

By MICHAEL DEEHAN

An aggressive dedication to energy conservation can sometimes lead to the wrong impression, as Ray Janke found out in September 2002. Janke, a 45-year-old science teacher at Chicopee High School in Chicopee, Mass., uses energy so efficiently in his Belchertown, Mass. home that his power company suspected him of illicit behavior, resulting from his 236.5-kilowatt-hours-per-month energy usage.

“My power use is so low they suspected I had tampered with the meter,” said Janke.

Janke found out about Mass Electric’s suspicions when his wife, Cindy, an electrical engineer at Northeast Utilities, noticed that their home’s electrical meter had been replaced. Knowing that something was irregular, Cindy called Mass. Electric (now part of National Grid) and was told that the new meter was installed so that the old one could be tested for any unauthorized modifications.

Janke described his efficiency techniques to the power company and their suspicions were dispelled.

“I’ve done about as much as I can to make my house efficient,” he said. Compact fluorescent light bulbs in all fixtures, surge protectors, and the use of Energy Star® certified appliances all help Janke keep his electric bill as low as possible.

“The biggest thing was putting everything on a switch,” Janke said. Devices that are turned off can sometimes still drain electricity, resulting in phantom loads. Keeping devices plugged into a power strip or switch that you can turn off after use helps prevent idle appliances from using electricity.



Ray and Cindy Janke Photo by Clay Turnbull

Janke also uses extensive insulation in his 2,800-square-foot home that drastically cuts his oil use to just 700 gallons annually. Janke said that he couldn’t put anything more in the walls, so his next task is to see how well he can insulate his roof. His energy-saving success is accomplished without the benefit of a PV system other than his solar-powered battery charger. Janke said that PV wouldn’t be cost effective for him at this point, but he is looking into a solar hot water system for the future.

Janke teaches physics, physical science, technology science, and earth science at Chicopee High School. He includes some lessons on smart energy usage by teaching his students about efficiency and conservation. One lesson has students performing a cost analysis of conventional versus rechargeable batteries.

Janke insists that his lifestyle is not affected by his conservation and that he and his wife are “normal people.”

“We’re not hermits,” he added, and said that they use the same kinds of electrical devices as most normal couples.

He hopes more people will follow his example and reduce their own energy consumption. One hopes that the reaction of his power company won’t scare anyone from following his lead.

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