Rising energy prices have given a free marketing boost to any product or service that cuts usage of watts and therms.

Solar panels, fans, even cold-water detergents now have added cachet when the gas bill arrives. Governments are weighing in as well, both with the carrot of tax credits and the stick of tighter regulation.

Product developers are watching too, with local research looking to translate laboratory research into energy-saving products that people will buy and use.

Whatever the motivation, people are asking about ways to cut down on power consumption.

"I would say in the last couple of years we have seen maybe 20 percent more people call me," said Rob Coons, owner of Capitol Valley Electric. On the residential side, whole-house fans are probably his most popular item, though he also gets inquiries about ceiling fans, energy-efficient appliances and lighting controls.

On the commercial side, light-emitting diodes are big. Power-sipping LED units are popular for exit lighting, floor lighting and decorative lighting, and Coons says he's starting to see adoption for under-counter illumination. A big stumbling block at the moment is that LED lights don't count under the California Energy Commission's new Title 24 rules, which say 50 percent of the lighting load must be fluorescent, but the industry is working to make the rules more inclusive. (See box, Page 18.)

"We are certainly seeing more interest in our energy-saving features," said John Ralston, vice president of Premier Homes Properties Inc. The developer's Premier Gardens subdivision in Sacramento and Premier Oaks in Roseville offer "zero-energy homes" that combine energy-efficient appliances with systems such as on-demand water heating and solar power.

"The way we are doing it now is selling solar as an option. Historically that has been very difficult to do. But we have had multiple sales of people paying an additional $18,000 to buy the solar and additional features," Ralston said. "It's still a little bit challenging. The cost of solar is still pretty high, unfortunately."

People pick the solar option only about 10 percent of the time, but more people say they are checking out the homes specifically because of the energy-saving features, he said.
The first homes have been up long enough to produce some hard numbers. "In Roseville the average home is 3,200 square feet, and the average (monthly) electric bill is $32 over a long period of time" in the solar homes, Ralston said.

For both new construction and older homes, efficient furnaces are in demand.

"On the furnace side, the heating side, we have seen a dramatic shift in our high-efficiency business," said Jeff Small, general manager of U.S. Air Conditioning Distributors Inc., a wholesaler in San Leandro.

**Strong start**

California in general and Sacramento County in particular are in a good starting position when it comes to keeping down energy costs.

A December 2005 report by the Energy Commission says that California buildings tend to be more energy-efficient than those in other states. The commission noted that per-capita use of electricity has plateaued at less than 8,000 kilowatt-hours in California for the past 30 years. Nationwide the figure has been on an upward climb that already has passed 12,000 kWh.

The report estimates that the state's electricity use in 2003 was about 15 percent less than it would have been without the cumulative effect of efficiency programs and standards adopted since the commission was created in 1974.

Cost helps encourage that energy frugality.

Power prices went up during the energy crisis of 2001, and fuel costs have risen since. Locally, the Sacramento Municipal Utility District says it nailed down natural-gas contracts a couple of years ago and wasn’t hit by any price spike after Hurricane Katrina. Customers who get natural gas from Pacific Gas & Electric Co., however, already have seen bills jump.

For all the progress made in energy efficiency so far, the commission says there is still plenty of room for improvement.

Half of the floor area in California's commercial buildings was built prior to 1982, the first year California set energy performance standards on new construction. Likewise, more than 8 million of the state's homes and apartment units were built before 1982.

Building standards have been upgraded several times since then, and another round is in progress for 2008.
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