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DEBBIE ARRINGTON FOR [THE SACRAMENTO BEE](#) 1 MONTH AGO

## Seeds: Sacramento rolls out new conservation program

Drip, drip, drip. Wasted water really adds up.

So does wasted electricity and natural gas. All that excess adds up to dollars down the drain, too.

With the arrival of residential water meters, Sacramentans are feeling extra pressure to conserve. The shock of seeing how much water they really use, and its price tag, is enough to prompt rapid action.

But upgrading to "green" technology can be expensive. That's where PACE could make a difference.

Property Assessed Clean Energy is a federal program that allows homeowners to pay for conservation upgrades via installments added to their property tax payments.

This month, Sacramento became the nation's first city to take the next step with PACE. As part of Clean Energy Sacramento, local officials rolled out a program offering 100 percent financing for those upgrades with no upfront costs and with payments stretched over 20 years.

"It's tied to the property, not your own credit," Sacramento Councilman Kevin McCarty said about the innovative loan program. "That way, the loan stays with the house."

If the home is sold, the buyer takes over responsibility for the low-interest conservation loan as part of property tax payments.

"You're also able to take advantage of rebate programs and tax credits immediately," McCarty said. "And you start saving on your utilities (as soon as work is completed). It's a win-win-win for everybody."

Water conservation remains a local priority. Sacramento is in the midst of installing 75,000 water meters on homes built before such devices were required. Meter installation is expected to reduce water use by more than 10 percent.

Meanwhile, Sacramento teamed with Niagara Green City to create this pioneering conservation program. It's open to Sacramento city residents who have at least 15 percent equity in their home, are current on mortgage and property tax payments and have not declared bankruptcy in the past three years. That covers more than half of Sacramento's homeowners, say city officials.

It starts with a house call. A green technology expert surveys the entire house with the home owner, then comes up with a plan for water and energy savings. Niagara provides labor and materials for improvements.

Conservation packages start with retrofits of shower heads, faucets and toilets and adjust to the individual home's needs. For example, a solar water heating system can reduce water heating bills up to 80 percent. Recirculation

pumps can cut down wasted water at the sink. Outdoor irrigation can be revamped with rain sensors, smarter sprinklers and rainwater harvesting systems.

With an eye toward future savings, Kevin and Alexandra Goldwaithe got an early Niagara Green City house call. Built in 1925, their east Sacramento home proved a perfect candidate for retrofits.

"We're always looking to save money on our utilities," Kevin said. "We have a water heater that's older than I can imagine."

Certified "green plumber" Todd Fulton of Syntrol went room by room, looking for ways to save water and energy.

"The first thing I look for is leaks," he said. "Leaks account for 18 percent of average household water use. One leaky toilet can account for 200 gallons a month. Stop the leaks, stop the waste."

Then he moved on to the fixtures.

"The toilet is the biggest household water user," said Fulton in the front bathroom. "All those flushes add up. Switching out the toilet to a more efficient model is potentially your biggest water saver."

Low-flow toilets keep getting better, he added. Niagara's Stealth toilet model, for example, uses only .65 gallons per flush, compared with 3.5 gallons for toilets installed before 1992.

"Smart" shower heads also rapidly save water; typically, they use a gallon or more per minute less than standard heads.

Installed at the kitchen sink, a recirculation pump keeps hot (or cold) water at the ready instead of running many gallons waiting for the temperature to change.

For this particular home, Fulton suggested a solar water heating system. The ancient water heater needed replacing and its attic location made it ideal for a solar retrofit. Such a solar system for a 1,700-square-foot house would cost about \$7,000 installed.

"But you can also get up to \$1,800 in rebates, and there's a 30 percent (federal) tax credit available, too," he said.

Outdoors, big savings can be found in landscaping, which accounts for about 75 percent of home water use in Sacramento. Replacing the home's antiquated sprinkler system with a water-smart drip system and weather sensors could add up to thousands of saved gallons during warmer months.

"The cumulative effect is a lot of small things added together," said Greg Wisner of Niagara Conservation.

"The house call is free. Because the payments are tied to your property taxes, the first payment won't be until next year."

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