

# The TimesUnion

Albany, New York

Wednesday, October 19, 2005

## A season's cold reality

Forecast of increased heating fuel costs has many people watching thermostat, budget

By DANIELLE T. FURFARO, Staff writer

COLONIE -- Rosemary Hand lives alone in what she calls a "Florida trailer." There is plenty of room but not much insulation.

"I've got the house on 66 now, but it gets cold in here before it comes on again," Hand, 84, said Tuesday on a mid-October afternoon when the temperature outside was in the 60s.

Like many elderly and low-income people living north of the Sun Belt, Hand has a big dilemma on her hands this winter. Heating costs are heading toward record levels and she doesn't know how she'll pay to stay warm at home.

The grim outlook comes on top of already staggering prices at the pump, with the price of a gallon of gasoline temporarily surging above \$3 following Hurricane Katrina.

"While we can't predict the weather, we can predict record high heating prices," said Teresa A. Santiago, chairwoman and executive director of the New York State Consumer Protection Board.

In New York state, the cost of heating oil is expected to increase by 40 percent, propane by 20 percent and natural gas by 35 percent, she said.

An average home uses about 800 gallons of home heating oil in a winter. At last year's rates, that would total about \$1,472. One-third of the state's households heat with oil. With the increases, the cost will jump to an estimated \$2,176, according to the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority. For the 52 percent of households that heat with natural gas, the U.S. Department of Energy projects that costs will rise from \$1,029 last winter to \$1,353 this winter -- and up to \$1,518 in a very cold winter.

Hand, along with hundreds of thousands of other New Yorkers, is eligible for a grant under the federal Home Energy Assistance Program. Last year, she got \$300. That was just a fraction of her heating bill. The HEAP yearly maximum per household is \$400, except in emergencies. Last year, 800,000 New Yorkers received HEAP assistance.

"I'm on Social Security," said Hand. "I don't know what else to do."

Meanwhile, the state is encouraging homeowners and apartment dwellers to take advantage of weatherization programs, for which other grants are available.

Consumers can apply to the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority for help in covering the costs of weatherization. Every dollar spent on such measures can save homeowners \$1.83 in heating costs over the course of a year, according to the federal Department of Energy.

Gov. George Pataki is also proposing an energy plan with tax credits for the elderly as well as additional federal funding for HEAP programs, small businesses and farmers.

Across the Capital Region, people are brainstorming on ways to cut their heating bills. Bill Moody of Albany plans to buy a digital thermostat that will automatically lower the temperature at night and when he is normally at work.

"That way I don't have to touch it," said Moody, 31. "I can't afford to forget."

Ken Dean of Oak Hill, Greene County, has purchased four solar space heaters, which he has placed throughout his house. "It takes the chill off, that's for sure," he said.

National Grid, formerly known as Niagara Mohawk, gives customers the option to spread winter heating costs over 12 months. At the moment, about 200,000 out of the utility's 1.7 million customers use the payment plan.

"It's likely there will be new enrollments," said spokesman Alberto Bianchetti. "It's too early to tell yet how many we'll get, since October is the month when people really start to think about home heating issues."