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### Smart power meters? Well, sure. Someday.

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Can I take back the column I wrote last summer about smart electricity meters?

The one that said smart meters could deliver "amazing efficiencies" through "modest" investment? The one that insulted existing meters by saying they're 1920s Model T's and dumber than toasters and coffee makers?

That's all still true. But as the Public Service Commission nears a decision on smart-meter proposals by Baltimore Gas and Electric and Pepco, the people cautioning Maryland about jumping into smart meters are starting to sound sensible.

Someday your meter will talk to your refrigerator and the Internet, and it'll really be cool. But because the hardware and software are unproved, maybe Maryland should wait a couple years before sending its meters to college.

Let California and other places suffer the grief and waste that often come with new technology. When BGE and Pepco get around to equipping every house with a smart meter in 2013 or so, they'll have learned from others' mistakes.

"Bottom line: My ratepayers once again are being asked to put out a whole lot of money to pay for something that presents a lot of uncertain risk and cost impacts," says People's Counsel Paula Carmody, who represents household electricity users. "We've, at a minimum, asked the commission to delay authorizing this."

Yeah, a delay would probably forfeit the \$200 million Washington pledged to help pay for BGE's meters. But technology gets cheaper over time. Waiting might give Maryland an affordable, better system even without the federal subsidy.

Meanwhile there are easier, cheaper ways to reduce kilowatts burned, which is the main purpose of smart meters.

"There are a lot of simple things you can do, and most of them don't require the installation of a handy-dandy meter," says Robert McCullough, a respected energy consultant and gadget geek. He bought and installed a smart meter on his Portland, Ore., office, but for most people, he thinks smart meters are of questionable value.

Instead, buy ultra-efficient LED or CFL lightbulbs. Take advantage of substantial tax credits to buy a



high-efficiency furnace or refrigerator, or to install extra insulation.

Sign up for BGE's Peak Rewards program, which pays bonuses to customers who allow their air conditioners to be briefly turned off on hot summer days.

Peak Rewards has already chopped electricity demand in Maryland by half of what a new decent-size nuclear reactor would pump out - at far less cost than for smart meters, according to Mark Case, BGE's senior vice president of strategy and regulation

The program saves me \$50 a year, and I notice no change in the air conditioning.

Technology fiends drool when they think about being able to set their thermostats on the Internet, watch their oven's minute-by-minute kilowatt use or program their fridge to shut off when hourly electricity prices spike. If you have an iPhone, you probably want a smart meter.

But no regulator is ordering people to buy iPhones. Your heat and health won't be jeopardized if your iPhone breaks or if you can't figure out how to use it.

BGE wants every household to have a smart meter and pay for it over 15 years in small, monthly installments. Are families already wrestling with the complexity of credit cards, cell-phone bills and adjustable mortgages ready to become test pilots for unproved technology?

California, where millions of smart meters have been installed, is in "open revolt," The New York Times reported in December.

Customers suspect they're being overbilled, and the state utilities commission summoned auditors to test the devices. Last week, a San Francisco TV station had a story on a guy who locked up his old meter so Pacific Gas & Electric couldn't take it.

Texas electricity customers also have complained about bills skyrocketing after smart meters go in, according to the Dallas Morning News.

The complaints might be overblown, as are worries about privacy and cyber-security. But it's a fact that early technology adopters often face bugs, crashes and great expense. Ask any company that installed online banking services or SAP enterprise management software in their early stages, paying handsomely and reaping little reward.

BGE ran a textbook pilot program, getting a cross section of 3,000 metro-Baltimore households, not just geeks, to try smart meters. The program produced big energy and dollar savings and high satisfaction even for seniors and low-income households, Case said.

Still, I wonder how well the results forecast the smart-meter experience for all 1.1 million BGE households, especially since the BGE plan includes sharply raising prices at times of peak use. (Off-peak prices would fall to compensate.)

Nobody knows how millions of households respond to smart meters over time. There tends to be a "novelty effect" in which people reduce consumption temporarily and then go back to immolating kilowatts as usual, McCullough said.

And for all smart meters' potential, exactly which features will prove most valuable remains to be seen.

BGE ought to expand its pilot program and ask for volunteers.

But for most of its customers, sticking with dumb meters for a few years might be smart.

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