

We're springing ahead three weeks earlier, but is it really better?

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Published February 22, 2007 in "Chicago Tribune", page 1.

It might well seem as if spring has sprung early.

Daylight-saving time arrives three weeks earlier this year--debuting for the first time in March, instead of April--promising an extra hour of sunlight at the end of each day.

It could be just the lift Chicagoans need after weeks of bitter cold and snow.

Commuters won't have to drive home in the dark. Parks open until dusk will stay open later. Some may be inspired to fit in a game of golf or a trip to the zoo.

The nationwide shift on March 11 magically pushes Chicago's sunset from 5:51 p.m. to 6:52 p.m. Thanks to a 2005 bill, the start of daylight-saving time is changing from the first weekend of April to the second Sunday of March in an attempt, legislators say, to conserve energy by reducing nighttime electricity use.

The law also adds an extra week of extended daylight in the fall, carrying daylight-saving time past Halloween.

All this comes with a cost, of course: It may mean darker mornings.

Because of this, some experts question whether there will be any energy savings, arguing that it means people will use more electricity in the morning.

There are also fears the change will cause headaches for unaware computer clocks that were programmed to automatically adjust for daylight-saving time, but on a calendar different from that in the 2005 law.

However, many Chicagoans already are planning their March evenings, which will now be brighter.

Softball captain Jennifer Good will use the extra hour of daylight to practice fly balls and line drives at a field without lights.

"When it's dark outside when you leave work, it's really depressing," she said. "Even if it is still chilly in March, at least it will be light out."

The frigid temperatures have scared visitors away from the hiking trails and acres of woodlands at the Morton Arboretum.

The arboretum--along with the city's golf courses and the Chicago Botanic Garden--stays open until sunset, so the time change will keep the park open an hour later.

"I think a lot of people have cabin fever right now," said Rick Hootman, director of visitor programs. "Daylight will get people out and encourage them to come out after work and after school, which they haven't been able to do."

The time change comes as the sun is getting higher in the sky, its rays more intense.

Sun rays in March are more than twice as strong as they are in December, said WGN meteorologist Tom Skilling.

"There is a boost to having more sunlight," Skilling said. "Sun has a way of doing that to folks."

The other side of the coin is that the sun will rise at 7:10 a.m. instead of 6:11 a.m., Skilling said.

In Chicago, children walking to school should not be affected because most of the city's elementary schools do not start until around 9 a.m., said Mike Vaughn, Chicago Public Schools spokesman. Even the earliest bus routes leave by about 7 a.m., he said.

Nevertheless, early riser Greg Ramirez isn't too excited about leaving for work in the dark.

The security guard leaves his home in the Bridgeport neighborhood around 6 a.m. each day and treasures his quiet time at sunrise.

"It's always nice to go to work when the sun is shining--that is my favorite of time of the day," said Ramirez, 57. "It's refreshing. It gives me a good attitude for the day."

Ramirez said he plans to cope with the dark mornings by drinking an extra cup of coffee.

But for those suffering from the winter blues, shifting the daylight to evenings could be a good thing.

Darkness in winter months can contribute to depression, said Dr. Jim King, president-elect of the American Academy of Family Physicians. The cold weather, along with less social contact and exercise, can cause seasonal affective disorder, a less severe form of depression that occurs in the winter, he said.

"There is an association between depression and sunlight," he said. "The ability to spend more time in the sun would be beneficial. It extends the amount of time available to do things."

The shift comes from an amendment of the Energy Policy Act of 2005, a law that also included tax breaks for energy producers in exchange for complying with mandates, such as requiring oil refiners to increase the percentage of ethanol in gasoline.

The law also adds a week to the tail end of daylight-saving time, extending it until the first Sunday of

November. States can opt out, but Arizona and Hawaii are the only two to have done so.

The amendment's author, Rep. Fred Upton (R-Mich.), said the time change would save energy, in addition to reducing car accidents at dusk. It could even cut crime by reducing the hours of darkness before bedtime, he said.

Legislators relied on a U.S. Department of Transportation study from the 1970s that found each day of daylight-saving time saved the equivalent of 100,000 barrels of oil, or 1 percent of the nation's energy consumption at that time, Upton said.

The time change saves "a small, but significant amount of energy," said Dr. David Prerau, who worked on the study and has since written a book about the history of daylight-saving time.

The latest development is a part of a trend to extend daylight-saving time. The month of April was added in 1986 under President Ronald Reagan. Previously, Congress established daylight-saving time year-round to conserve energy after the 1973 Arab oil embargo. It lasted for 10 months in 1974 and eight months the next year, before returning to the previous six-month period, which lasted from May to October.

A study released in January at the University of California Energy Institute cast doubt as to whether the time shift really saves energy. The study, which examined changes to daylight-saving time in Australia in 2000, found that the net amount of energy people used stayed the same.

"People used less energy in the evening, but more when waking up in the darkness," said Ryan Kellogg, one of the doctoral students who authored the study. "Those two effects more or less washed each other out."

Legislators and researchers seem to agree on one thing though--people seem to appreciate the extra hour of daylight in the evenings.

For the baseball team at Hubbard High School on the Southwest Side, it means enough after-school daylight for a full practice game, said varsity coach Charlie Vazquez. The games typically start around 4p.m. at the school's field, which doesn't have lights.

"The games were called because of darkness out of safety for the kids," Vazquez said. "We would spend money on a school bus and umpires--all that money on four lousy innings."

Vazquez heard about the time change from other coaches at a clinic and excitedly told his players that March practices could last longer.

"I ran it by the kids," he said. "They were all for it."

Melvin Dillard, who directs athletics at Simeon Career Academy on the South Side, agrees that the early arrival of daylight-saving time will give the track and baseball teams more time to practice outdoors

before the sun goes down. In the past, he was worried when players from the women's softball team rode public transportation home in the dark.

"It will allow our students to leave to go home while it's still light out," Dillard said and then paused. "Now, if only we can keep it from snowing."

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IN THE WEB EDITION: Read how to squash the daylight-saving bug in your computer caused by the earlier time change at chicagotribune.com/daylight