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Eye on the Environment

## Stimulus Dollars at Work in our Community

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When I was 8 years old, our country was in the midst of an energy crisis. The year was 1973 and I remember sitting in long lines at the gas pump in our Buick station wagon with my mother lamenting the steep price of fuel at the pump.

A few years later, I vividly remember President Carter calling on all Americans to conserve energy. My whole adult life I've always heard his words in my head to consider turning down the thermostat and putting on a sweater.

For me, these early experiences inform my own interest in energy conservation. Last year, in the midst of the recession, those of us involved with the Swan Valley Elementary School got word that some of the federal stimulus dollars had been given to the Montana Department of Commerce for energy efficiency improvement projects in public buildings.

For a project to be selected you had to show a great need, a marked improvement in energy use as a result of the project, and the ability to create or sustain jobs. As much as any other conservation work I've been involved in, this

project excited me, and a crew of us began to work away on our application.

The Swan Valley Elementary School facility is actually three buildings cobbled together. Surprisingly, given our regular dips down to 30 below zero in the winter, the main school building was constructed with long reaches of single paned windows and lacks insulation in the walls.

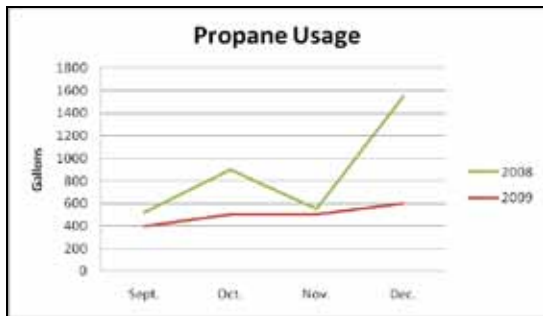
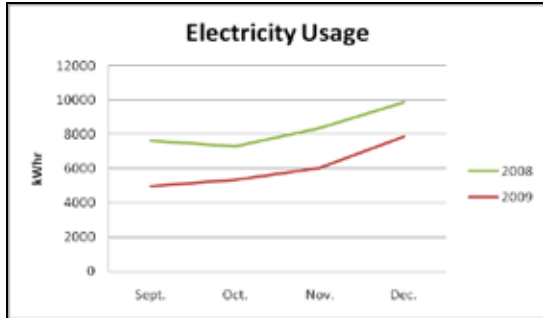
The first requirement from Department of Commerce was to have an energy audit. What the auditors turned up last June was two more major energy problems at the school. The lights throughout the building were very poor quality and they were very wasteful of electricity. The second issue was that there were no good control valves on the boiler system to tailor the heating system to the times of the day when staff and students were actually in need of heat.

In the end, the state only funded about half of what every applicant asked for, so our school did not get the opportunity to insulate the walls. But we did put together enough funding to replace all the windows, many of the lights, and add heat control valves. And the work was done by contractors and businesses in Seeley Lake, Missoula and Big Fork.

Dar Kearney, the facilities manager down at the school, then discovered that we could apply for a rebate check from Missoula Electric Coop for our improvements. She did that and we received additional funds to help pay for the lighting upgrades.

Preliminary results from this past fall indicate that our school now uses about 31% less energy. The results shown in the graphs below cover four months during the fall before and after our upgrades. The results are even more

compelling when you consider that the fall of 2009 was extremely cold at times, whereas the previous fall was actually quite mild.



Our school has many challenges ahead, including general fund shortages that are resulting from lower state revenues and declining enrollment, but these federal stimulus dollars did help us to cut our costs freeing up some of our dollars to pay for student programs rather than propane and electricity.

And this project is really the smaller of the local projects that I know about that have been helped with American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds. I know that the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and the Swan Ecosystem Center are putting \$400,000 into local fuels reduction projects with stimulus funding.

And I hear that the Forest Service will be improving main system roads in the Swan Valley this summer and contracting with trail crews to improve several trails in the Mission Mountains as part of an overall investment of \$2M across the Flathead National Forest.

But it is our little school project has really re-ignited my childhood passion for energy efficiency. And it is nice to see incentives for energy savings on the rise. I encourage everyone to check out rebates and tax credits currently available through Missoula Electric Cooperative, the state of Montana, and the federal government. Such incentives are currently in place for homeowners and businesses wishing to improve their wood heat systems, upgrade their lighting, increase their insulation and otherwise reduce their consumption of gas and electricity. It is very gratifying to be able to make a small investment that saves you dollars every year, puts local businesses to work, and provides a higher quality indoor environment.