

Tips from big energy users Pennies can be pinched via supplies, gadgets.

JOSEPH DITS
Tribune Staff Writer

Here are some creative lessons in saving energy from big agencies that need the heat.

Other suppliers

The YMCA of Michiana is saving money on its natural gas bill by choosing an alternative supplier.

It appears to be making a difference for the hungry consumer. The YMCA eats up gas to heat water in its pool and showers and the air in its spacious gym, exercise areas and racquetball courts.

Director Kirby Falkenberg says it saved the Y about \$10,000 in 2004; the nonprofit agency normally spends roughly \$50,000 a year on gas. He admits he was lucky about saving that much. He signed up right at the time when gas prices dropped. He'll feel good about saving just 5 percent this year.

The YMCA is actually tapping into NIPSCO's Choice Program, which allows customers to choose from a list of alternative suppliers. NIPSCO spokesman Tom Cuddy said the company requires the suppliers to buy at least 20 percent of the year's gas during the warm months – when it's usually cheaper – and store it with NIPSCO. (NIPSCO buys some of its gas in the off season, too.)

Anyone, even homeowners, can use Choice. They still pay NIPSCO for delivery.

But the YMCA chose to scrutinize and pick its supplier with the help of a broker. It's worth paying the broker's fee, Falkenberg said, because unlike him, the broker has the expertise to study the market and the terms of each supplier and to negotiate with them. The YMCA's broker is California-based Kathie Bozzone, who says her Midwestern employer, C2 International, helps homeowners and businesses to find cheaper options in various utilities.

At first, Falkenberg was leery of the risks, knowing that every once in a while the prices can be higher. Now, he says, "I'm pretty sold on it."

Based on that success, the Girl Scouts of the Singing Sands Council is in its first year of buying gas with a broker's help to heat its 11,360-square-foot building in South Bend. It bought almost 60 percent of the year's supply during the warm months, said finance manager Jeff Faulkner. He said it will save money but isn't sure how much.

For more information on Choice, call (800) 4-NIPSCO or go to www.nipSCO.com and click on "Products & Services."

The Web site www.cheapgasheat.com also provides information on the Choice Program. The site was created by the Center Township Trustee's office in LaPorte. NIPSCO advises customers to cross-reference that Web site's information with NIPSCO's **Tricks of an energy miser**

Imagine trying to conserve energy in 122 buildings that you oversee in northern Indiana, the largest of which has about 250,000 square feet and serves as a workplace for 1,500 people.

That was Tom Vanderford's job until he retired in July after 27 years with "the phone company." (Its name is now Verizon.)

He used every little trick to save dollars. And he figures on using some of them as buildings manager for the Family & Children's Center and its four affiliates. He began the job one month ago.

"This is a piece of cake," he says, referring to 14 buildings in all, including four group homes and the Boys and Girls Club of St. Joseph County. A few of his tricks:

Motion sensors turned on lights in some rooms and hallways only if someone was there. No forgetting to turn the lights off.

A timer switch kept water heaters from heating water unnecessarily at all hours.

Solar film on the windows kept buildings cool in the summer.

Flushing valves on the toilets limited the use of water. The thermostat in bigger buildings was wired into a computer that he could control. And thermostats at other sites were locked up so employees couldn't fiddle with them.

The right amount of lighting was used, and energy efficient bulbs were everywhere. Some workplaces make the mistake of using too much light, he says.

Staff writer Joseph Dits:
jdits@sbtinfo.com
(574) 225-6450