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Fuel, natural gas costs pinch VASD

Seth Jovaag
 Group reporter

High fuel costs really add up when you're driving 335,000 miles a year.

That's how much distance Verona school buses covered during the 2007-08 school year while hauling kids on 28 routes to and from school and to extracurricular events.

Verona's fleet of buses average about eight miles per gallon, said Dave Rasmussen, contract manager for First Student Inc., the district's busing contractor. That means school buses used nearly 42,000 gallons of diesel last year.

Multiply those gallons against diesel fuel prices from June 2007 (\$2.97 per gallon) vs. June 2008 (\$4.75) and you'll find about a \$74,000 difference. That gives a rough idea of how much more VASD might have to spend in 2008-09 for bus fuel alone.

Natural gas prices are another concern.

Earlier this month, the district locked down prices for 50 percent of its natural gas needs for the upcoming school year. The rate - roughly \$13.20 per decatherm - is nearly 42 percent higher than what the district paid on average last year, said Chris Murphy, business manager.

The other 50 percent of the district's natural gas costs will fluctuate with the market, explained superintendent Dean Gorrell.

If natural gas costs for 2008-09 end up around the \$13.20 mark, and if the district uses roughly the same amount of natural gas it did during 2007-08, VASD could end up paying nearly \$120,000 more next year.

Add that to potential diesel fuel hikes, and the district is facing a potential \$200,000 increase in fuel costs.

"It's not good," Gorrell said. "But it's not that unlike anybody in their home... Costs are up."

Things could change, of course. As crude oil prices dropped this week, so did natural gas futures. But a bad hurricane season - as some are predicting - could send natural gas prices skyrocketing, as happened in 2005-06 after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita battered the Gulf Coast.

That uncertainty is largely why VASD is making a habit of locking in at least part of its natural gas pricing each year, a practice that's growing throughout Wisconsin, said Steve Grams, an account executive with CenterPoint Energy who works with about 30 school districts in the state.

"Nobody knows with any level of certainty what the market is going to do," Grams said. "It gets back to, 'Do you want to play the game (of hoping for lower prices in the future) or do you want to manage your risk?'"

One alternative to higher heating costs - turning down the thermostat - isn't an option for Verona schools. They tend to keep buildings around 68 degrees in the winter, the minimum per state statutes, Gorrell said.

Likewise, Rasmussen said bus drivers have mostly tapped out common-sense ways to save fuel, such as keeping tires inflated and limiting idling.

"We're doing the best we can to get the best mileage," Rasmussen said.

Earlier this spring, Murphy said the district projected a roughly 10 percent increase in natural gas costs next year in its budget.

That likely won't be enough now, however, so the district is setting aside an expected surplus in fund balance from 2007-08 that Murphy expects to be between \$100,000 and \$150,000.

Geothermal savings

The geothermal system at Glacier Edge Elementary School saved more energy last year than expected.



Community Calendar

<	July	>				
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
	1	2	3	4	5	
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

Reader Poll

Should Verona be the next city in Dane County to propose a smoking ban?
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No way! Let businesses and customers work it out.

No, wait for a statewide ban instead.

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Yes! Smoking should be banned everywhere.

We have to, since we don't want all the displaced smokers coming here.

When the school was built in 2006, officials expected the system to lower heating and cooling costs by about 15 percent. Last year, savings were closer to 29 percent.

The system saved VASD about \$24,000 on heating bills. If natural gas prices stay higher, savings will increase, too.

In that case, the district could recoup its roughly \$250,000 investment in the system more quickly than anticipated.

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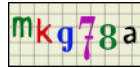
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