

Article published February 25, 2005

Habit of energy conservation saves cash for Monroe nuns



Sister Julie Vieira of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, puts papers into a barrel for recycling.

(THE BLADE/DON SIMMONS)

By [GARY T. PAKULSKI](#)
BLADE BUSINESS WRITER

MONROE - Two years after adopting major energy-conservation measures at their motherhouse in this Michigan community, the Blue Nuns are in the green.

The religious order, officially known as the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, say they've cut utility bills by \$187,000 a year through a one-half reduction in their use of water and of natural gas for heating.

"We're very pleased," said Martha Weise, campus administrator for the order that goes by the initials IHM. "Any kind of savings in gas consumption is wonderful. But we're most pleased with the way the systems are working. The comfort levels of the buildings are good. And repairs haven't been needed.

The lesson, say the nuns: "Sustainability pays. And not just earthly dividends." Gas usage is down by 54 percent; water usage by 50 percent.

Claiming that conservation of the Earth's nonrenewable resources is a "spiritual and moral mandate," the nuns nearly four years ago brainstormed on how to make their 280-acre campus more environmentally friendly as part of a \$56 million renovation program.

The planning resulted in numerous innovations at the 73-year-old motherhouse and elsewhere at the campus, including:

- A geothermal heating and cooling system that takes advantage of the Earth's constant 55-degree temperature through a 47-mile network of pipes deep underground that circulates water through the motherhouse.
- A man-made "wetlands" fed by so-called gray water from sinks, showers, and tubs. The water is recycled to flush toilets.

- Use of water and electricity-saving devices.

The renovation used energy efficient glass, added windows to increase natural light, and low-flow toilets.

While the measures are cutting utility bills, they haven't yet paid for themselves. The campus administrator isn't sure when that will happen. Conservation measures boosted construction costs by 25 percent, the nuns estimated.

But the savings go beyond reduced utility bills.

The nuns have netted \$2,000 by using recycled paper and other recycled office supplies; \$2,200 by selling empty inkjet cartridges to a recycler; \$65 by recycling cell phones; and \$4,100 by cutting the number of Dumpsters used and increasing paper and household recycling.

The activity is overseen by a "greening committee," which has initiated other measures, such as fueling vehicles after 6 p.m. As part of a fund-raiser to buy a can-crusher for the motherhouse, home to 235, the committee is selling T-shirts made with recycled materials. Another 250 people work at the convent.

Contact Gary Pakulski at:
gpakulski@theblade.com
or 419-724-6082.