

Illuminating the way to a greener Town Hall

Audit shows town wasting energy, money

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Williston could save thousands of dollars a year by converting historic Town Hall from an energy-wasting structure to a building that efficiently uses heat and electricity, a new report concludes.

A Williston-based company, Building Energy, recently completed an energy audit of the building. The audit studied and suggested improvements to Town Hall's heating and cooling systems as well as lighting and insulation.

Just replacing insulation could cut the building's annual natural gas bill by 20 percent, the report concludes. Upgrading light fixtures and replacing the air conditioning system could save even more, reducing electricity costs by up to 50 percent.

It makes sense to spend money for energy upgrades because it not only helps preserve the environment but saves money for taxpayers, said Dennis Bates, who worked on a grassroots group in Williston that has been looking at ways to increase energy efficiency in public buildings.

"We're trying to make an example of Town Hall, which used \$6,000 in natural gas in 2007," said Bates, who is also the president of Vermont Sun Structures in Williston. "These are tax dollars the town can squeeze out in a tight budget year. You have to spend money to make money, though."

The audit recommends improvements that combined would cost roughly \$65,000. That estimate includes upgrading insulation for \$14,000, changing lights and controls for \$10,000, replacing the boiler and hot water heater for \$21,000 and installing a new air conditioning system for \$20,000. Solar panels could cost an additional \$80,000.

But those investments would pay for themselves over time by reducing gas and electric bills, said Scott Gardner, president of Building Energy. Costs for some changes would be recouped within a few years; others would take as long as 20 years.

The energy audit grew out of efforts by Williston officials and residents to preserve the environment and conserve energy, said Jessica Andreoletti, a town planner whose work focuses on the environment. The idea for the energy audit came from a conference she attended at Vermont Technical College.

Gardner, who owns property in Williston, volunteered to do the work for free. He said the audit, which included inspecting Town Hall and taking infrared photographs to find heat leaks, would have cost about \$1,500.

The audit could help the town win a \$12,000 grant that could fund energy efficiency projects, Andreoletti said. The grant would require the town to make a matching contribution of at least \$2,000.

The upgrades at Town Hall "would save serious cash because it is leaking like a sieve," she said.

Williston Town Hall is a two-story brick structure that was built in 1860 and renovated in 1988. But the energy audit found that the renovation left gaps in the attic insulation. The town's heating and air conditioning systems are also outdated or poorly configured.

The 2009-10 municipal budget includes \$15,000 to install new insulation at Town Hall. That funding is subject to the Selectboard's final approval of the proposed budget.

"Some of the things (recommended by the audit) are very low cost and we can accomplish them through our operating budget," Town Manager Rick McGuire wrote in an e-mail.

More expensive items would likely have to be funded in future budgets.

Caring for the environment by reducing use of fossil fuels is a worthy goal, Gardner said, but a cold-eyed focus on the bottom line is more important when it comes to gaining public support for energy efficiency projects.

"If it makes sense economically and it's going to save the town money, let's do it," he said. "If it reduces the carbon footprint, great, but you can't take that to town meeting."

