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Fuel prices slash profit margins

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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Chuck Shea, of Shea Tree Service Inc. in Southamptton, has had a picture of an International bucket truck on his wall for five years. He recently bought the used truck, which uses diesel fuel and has an elevator lift that enables him to clear tree branches at a range of heights, to keep up with competition.

"It was a business plan, so we finally got to the point where we could afford it," said Shea, whose business has been in operation for 25 years. "These new companies are popping up left and right, and I don't know where they're getting new equipment. It took me 15, 20 years. I don't know who's bankrolling all these young kids, but you got to keep up with them."

Before the purchase, Shea said his company was subcontracting with other companies if he needed a bucket truck. The bucket truck, which Shea said gets about 5 miles per gallon, joins four other company vehicles - including a wood chipper, dump grinder and loader - totalling \$500 to \$1,000 a week in fuel expenses.

"We're putting fuel in all the trucks and a lot of this equipment is diesel," Shea said. "I think (the cost) is ridiculous."

Since acquiring the bucket truck, Shea has expanded his working area in Hampshire and Hampden counties. The cost of business, for Shea, is in part costing his customers.

"We've had to up the price for the hourly rates," Shea said.

Travel limits

Meanwhile, other contractors, including carpenter John Burnett of Pioneer Valley Housing Solutions, are travelling less to save on fuel expenses.

"Gas becomes a factor in how far away you'll accept a job," Burnett said. "If it isn't a reasonably good profit margin, you have to turn the job down."

A carpenter for five years, this year is the first that fuel costs put limitations on where Burnett takes jobs. In years past, distance was only a limitation if it took more time out of the work day than it was worth.

"Fuel never would have been a factor," Burnett said, as he was filling up his 2003 Mazda Dual Sport pickup truck at the Pride gas station on Union Street in Easthampton. "Nowadays, it's entirely on how much fuel you're going to burn."

Burnett, of Easthampton, said he needs a pickup truck to transport his tools and equipment. His pickup truck gets about 19 mpg around town and 24 mpg on the highway. "I could have a larger one with diesel mileage, but it's not economical to do so," Burnett said.

On the other side of the pump, James Batchelder, of Chesterfield, filled up his Dodge Ram 2500 with diesel fuel. Batchelder, who is self-employed and builds houses, bought the truck because of its gas mileage at 22 mpg. The truck, which tows snowmobiles, trailers and equipment for building houses, is used when he's on and off the clock. "It's got more power, more life and a little better mileage," Batchelder said comparing his new truck to the older model he previously drove.



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Meanwhile, as Burnett finished filling up, he noted that fuel prices are higher overseas. Burnett took a trip to Haiti in July 2007, when gasoline costs were \$10 a gallon there.

"As high as fuel is here, we certainly don't have it as bad as some other places," Burnett said.

He continued to count his blessings, saying that prior to his job as carpenter, he was a FedEx delivery driver.

"I pity those guys," Burnett said.

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