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Judi Kehoe of Sharon fills up yesterday at the Irving station in West Lebanon, where gasoline prices were about \$2.98 a gallon. Even though gas prices have gone down, Kehoe said, "I'll still be careful with how I drive. We still have to pay for our heating oil, so we have to be careful with our expenses."  
 (Valley News — Jeffrey Porter)

## Price Drop Has Drivers Pumped

By Mark Davis

Valley News Staff Writer

**Enfield** -- When the price of gasoline spiked above \$4 a gallon this summer, drivers across the country pledged to car-pool, trade in their SUVs, and make other lifestyle changes to cut their consumption.

But gasoline is now selling below \$3 a gallon -- and it's poised to drop further. That's fine, many Upper Valley motorists said yesterday. They're happy to save a few bucks at the pump. But they remain wary of price spikes, plan to keep their driving to a minimum and said they'll keep the cost-cutting habits they began this summer.

"Even if it was \$2 a gallon, we'd be the same way," said Enfield resident Chris Hanly as he filled up his Harley-Davidson at the Cumberland Farms in Windsor, "because we figure it will jump up again and we need to save a few bucks for a rainy day."

Hanly said he and his wife plan to continue to think hard about every trip they make. "Nobody trusts any of the oil companies," he said.

While filling up at Petro Mart in Enfield, Linda Paulsen of Canaan said her family is trying to do a little more walking and a little less driving.

When prices shot up this summer, she said, her family decided to walk to stores in downtown Canaan for as many errands as possible, instead of driving into West Lebanon.

"We decided we'd use closer services and we'd walk," Paulsen said. "We walk to pick up a pizza or go to the hardware store. It's amazing the number of times we'd jump in the car to go get a pizza."

Even though gas prices are falling, Paulsen said, they plan to leave the car in the driveway. They enjoy the walk, and they like keeping their money in town, she said.

Similarly, Canaan resident Carla Hall works two days a week in Randolph, but stays overnight in part to avoid an extra 90-mile roundtrip. She also makes sure she does her shopping on her way home from work, to avoid using more gas than necessary. Hall said she does not plan to change the routine.

The decline in gas prices has been sharp and sudden. Crude oil has dropped below \$72 a barrel, down from a July peak of \$147, and some experts say the drop will continue.

Goldman Sachs, a global banking and investment management firm, made waves over the summer when it predicted crude oil could climb to \$200 a barrel. But last week, the same firm predicted that, due in part to the global financial crisis, the cost of a barrel of crude could soon drop as low as \$50.

The Vermont Fuel Dealers Association has long argued that financial speculators in the oil market were artificially driving up the price of crude oil, and association Director Matt Cota said yesterday that the recent collapse of prices, coming on the heels of the financial crisis, is vindication of that stance.

"It's astounding to have that type of collapse in three months," Cota said. "It's going to be headed below \$3 a gallon pretty soon. If (crude) prices are coming down, everything is coming down with it. Where is the bottom? That's a great question, and we just don't know. We know that we are getting back to normal."

The gas station is not the only place where consumers will notice a price drop.

In Vermont, heating oil was selling for less than \$4 a gallon last week -- down from \$5 a gallon in July -- and could soon drop below \$3 a gallon, Cota said.

Numbers from New Hampshire were not immediately available.

Some people interviewed yesterday said the drop in gas prices had already allowed them to make changes.

Enfield resident Judy Shattuck said cheaper gasoline has freed her to make more visits to her daughter in Claremont and leave the house for errands without feeling guilty.

“I can do a little more running around,” Shattuck said. “It didn't stop me too much, but now I feel a little more free to go out, instead of staying in.”

But Windsor resident Cortland Hammond said the drop wasn't enough. Hammond had to cancel an annual trip to the Northeast Kingdom this summer, and won't be able to hunt deer and moose in Maine in the coming weeks. Hammond's wife is pregnant, and the frequent 25-mile trips to Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center are eating away what little extra money he has.

“I can't afford the gas to get to these places,” said Hammond, a machinist for Precision Cutter Grinding in Hartland. “I have to work as much overtime as possible just to get done what I need done. It affects everything.”

Others said that savings from the drop in gas prices isn't enough to compensate for the higher cost of groceries, stagnating wages and, in a few weeks, heating oil bills.

“It's the combination of everything,” Canaan resident Chris Burdiski said. “Groceries are a lot more expensive. It seems you spend an extra \$40 in the grocery store for the same items.”

Windsor resident Dana Monteith said he tends to ignore gas price changes, reasoning that he and his wife drive only when necessary and have no control over the situation.

“I don't pay a lot of attention,” Monteith said. “It fluctuates so much, it doesn't influence us that much.”

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