WATER SCROOGE

by Karen Mitchell

Karen's water conservation efforts are having a big impact on her 232 neighbors.

I live in a condo which means 233 homeowners share landscaping and maintenance expenses. I am also on the homeowners board of directors, a volunteer position that is paid in much grief and many complaints. When I see our landscaping water go into storm drains, I see my homeowner fees going down the drain.

Our community is blessed with 60 percent green space. Yes, it looks nice but Water Scrooge sees water meters running - increasing expenses. We used over 17.5 MILLION gallons of water in 2009. I decided this would be an easy target in my goal to reduce landscape expenses. We have a poorly designed and inadequate irrigation system. Once a cycle started, it had to complete itself even if we had a two-hour drenching rain.

I attended a seminar on water usage in the North Dallas area last summer and was introduced to smart controllers. They have computers that use evapotranspiration (ET) to determine when water is needed. ET is the amount of water lost from the soil through evaporation plus the plant's water loss (known as transpiration). These are affected by weather conditions. The ET manager receives updates hourly on weather conditions wirelessly from real-time weather satellites. It uses solar radiation, temperature, wind and humidity to determine the optimum time to water. ET managers are reasonably priced and can be added to most systems.

Now that I was an amateur expert, I approached our landscape company and asked them to investigate these controllers. They did not share my enthusiasm and did not feel we needed new ones. I had other reasons to be unhappy about our landscape company and it was bid time so the board of directors decided to switch landscape companies. We interviewed several in our price range and one stood out when they suggested new smart controllers and updated rain sensors to us. They came up with a plan to audit our system zone by zone fixing leaks, heads and general maintenance. They spent two months fixing our irrigation equipment. They installed our smart controllers in March. In the first four months of 2010 we used 920,350 gallons. In 2009 during the same time frame we used 4,292,210 gallons.

Even if you attribute some of our success to weather differences, this is a significant savings. Projecting our savings for 2010, we will have paid for the new controllers and the repairs by the end of 2010. I wish my 401K would see even half of that return on investment.

Bottom line – spending money up front has paid off in big savings. Every home with an automatic sprinkler system can see the same type of savings by auditing their systems at least once a year. Adding a smart controller will increase those savings by eliminating unnecessary watering. Texas lawns survive nicely on one inch of water every week! Most of us use that amount two to three times a week. I would like to see Plano encourage smart controllers and rain sensors for every business and for every new

home irrigation system installed in the future. Our water needs are not going to decrease, the price is not going to decrease but more effective watering can be increased one irrigation system at a time.

The Water Scrooge is happy for this season. I am working on 2011 ideas.