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Economy vs. environment? No need to choose

By Tom Watson
Special to The Seattle Times

If "Monsters vs. Aliens" isn't scary enough, how about Economy vs. Environment?

When those two duke it out, you might expect the economy to win hands down. After all, with so many families, businesses and governments in dire financial distress these days, it seems obvious the economy should take priority.

Fortunately, we don't have to choose one over the other. A healthy economy and healthy environment can grow and thrive together. But it won't be easy. Today we'll look at the complicated relationship between money and the environment, from the global economy to your own household.

Q: A strong economy is all about people buying lots of stuff, which is bad for the environment, right?

A: That's only partly true. When a nation's economy is built largely upon the consumption of unnecessary, disposable or toxic products, it certainly takes an environmental toll. But a prosperous economy does not necessarily have to rely on the purchase of those types of products.

Q: What's the alternative?

A: Think "sustainable." Here's one succinct definition of sustainability: "Meeting present needs without jeopardizing future resources." Though not very specific, this definition at least makes us think about what we really need, and the costs to future generations.

In a sustainable economic system, local businesses produce or sell durable, reusable and healthy products.

This new economic model has already begun to flourish here. Dozens of companies in the Seattle area now make products from reused, recycled or less-toxic materials, and legions of small farmers sell their crops at the 90 neighborhood farmers markets (www.pugetsoundfresh.org) in the Puget Sound region.

A truly sustainable economy also emphasizes energy conservation. Making our homes and buildings more energy-efficient reduces global warming, pollution and a reliance on oil.

Energy conservation and renewable energy projects also can create plenty of the new "green jobs" promoted by the federal government as a solution to our economic woes.

Q: Won't some jobs be lost by going green?

A: Reducing the consumption of wasteful and unneeded products would likely result in job losses in certain sectors here and around the world. The hope is that those workers could shift to equal or better green jobs, and that new employment opportunities would arise locally. From recycling processing plants to university science labs, jobs should grow organically out of the new green economy.

Q: On the individual level, can green living really help me and my family financially?

A: Absolutely. In fact, one reason the green movement has continued going strong in this lousy economy is that the public and media have made the connection between a sustainable lifestyle and saving money. All those green savings there at our fingertips for years, from shopping at thrift stores to buying energy-efficient appliances, have suddenly become much more relevant.

Q: What will save the most money?

A: Your home and car both have heavy environmental footprints and cost a lot to maintain, so start with those. If your boss agrees to let you work a four-day flex schedule or telecommute one day a week, for example, you could save \$400 or more a year by driving less. Insulating and sealing your home may reduce energy costs by 30 percent.

Buying used products also gives you a huge green bang for your buck. Options have multiplied immensely on the Internet and in stores for buying used furniture, clothes, electronics, books, music and more. Don't forget eco-discount programs such as King County's Northwest Natural Yard Days (www.yarddays.com), offering savings of up to 25 percent on green gardening products through May 15.

This week, we celebrated the 39th annual Earth Day. When we don't need Earth Day anymore because we live it every single day, we'll know we finally have a vibrant green economy.

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