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Commercial building benchmarking in cities across the nation

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The Building Energy Benchmarking and Reporting Program is currently underway in select cities across the country including Seattle, New York City, Washington DC, Los Angeles, Austin and San Francisco. This program requires commercial and multifamily building owners to disclose how much energy they use to help reduce their costs by benchmarking energy use to better understand how much they use or waste.

Because buildings consume a huge amount of energy, 40% of the total amount of energy used, and more than 75% of cities' carbon emissions come from buildings, there is ample opportunity to improve efficiency. Measuring and rating a building's performance increases control and improves energy efficiency initiatives. The program's goals are to reduce fossil fuels and reduce the risk of overtaxing aged energy and electricity grids. Savings are expected to occur due to the adoption of energy saving programs in addition to the availability of rebates along with financial incentives. Substantial fees will be applied to buildings who do not comply to the newly instated requirements by the April deadline.

Offices, schools, retail outlets and restaurants are some of the commercial buildings that are being targeted. Government regulators collect data on the activities of buildings and the EPA offers a free software, portfolio manager, to help building owners make better sense of this data. This tool is frequently used in professional energy audits and is a prerequisite for USGBC's LEED certification program for existing buildings. After entering data about fuel, heat and electric use, the tool allows you to view your building's energy usage and compare it to other buildings. The transparency of the program and where this information is displayed varies by state. For instance, in New York a building's data is entered into a public database where as in Seattle building owners are required to share their energy performance information with any current or potential tenant, buyer or lender but the information is not available to the public. Seattle's government has become an educational resource for building owners by offering hands-on training workshops, webinars and a "how-to" guide on benchmarking.

Each city that participates in the program has its own unique set of guidelines for the initiative. Seattle recently sent letters out to over 8,000 of its building owners to inform them that they must begin keeping track of and reporting their building's energy use by April 2012. The current phase requires benchmarking for nonresidential buildings exceeding 50,000 s/f (specifications vary by city) while the next phase will require nonresidential buildings over 10,000 s/f and multifamily buildings with five or more units to benchmark and report their energy performance.

Numerous beneficial outcomes are expected as a result of this program. These include reducing energy waste in the participating cities along with decreasing energy costs for building owners, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, improving building management and design practices and tracking overall progress in building energy efficiency. An added bonus of this initiative is that it will

create a market composed of informed and knowledgeable people who have a new-found understanding of how to operate a building at its highest efficiency.

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