

A Look at Energy Cost Savings Strategies

Keeping an Eye on your Bottom Line

By Keith Loria

By now, we've all heard about rising oil prices—and are seeing their impact on our energy bills. Co-op and condo owners in New York have seen their energy bills climb to record highs and there's no relief in sight, so buildings and their owners are looking for ways to lower their energy bills.

“Obviously anyone who gets a direct electric bill has seen the impact that oil prices have had and how much electricity costs have gone up,” says Lewis Kwit, owner of Manhattan-based Energy Investment Systems. “We expect electricity rates to go up between 18 and 40 percent [within] the next three years based on the price of fuel. Con Ed has said 18 percent, but I have heard more—and it will happen sooner rather than later.”



Mike Tanoory

Getting Started

Building managers and administrators don't have to take this news lying down, however. While some solutions are physical—like making structural or systemic improvements to a building with the aim of reducing energy waste and making what is used go as far as possible—others are more behavioral and count on the building's staff and occupants to help keep costs down. The latter approach could include anything from encouraging residents to turn off lights in unused rooms to taking shorter showers to conserve water.

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According to the professionals, one of the problems in multifamily buildings is that people don't see a direct connection between their “good behavior” and their utility bill. They tend to think no one else in the building is being conscientious, so why should they? It may help if a conscientious board can show residents that if everyone did do their part, they would see a measurable difference.

“The real issue here is that most everyone knows what is wasting energy in their own apartment, especially if they are paying for it directly,” says Warren Zaretsky, vice president of marketing for U.S. Energy Group in Flushing. “On the other hand, we seem much more cavalier about wasting the landlord’s electricity and all the other energy and resources paid for by the landlord—or by the common expenses of a co-op or condo.” There are plenty of things for a building to do to save on energy costs, but it’s important that managers and boards first talk with a professional about what can be done.

“I think the state has it right,” says Kwit. “Buildings should have a comprehensive review of how they are using energy and how much it is costing them. It’s very important to take a global view, as if you were from a satellite looking at the building. When you’re living in a building and you are on a co-op board or condo board, you may be too close to the issue. You need to address your priorities, but you and your consultant need to take some steps back and look at the data and really see how your building is using energy.”

The Building’s Role

According to most energy experts, even making a minor change—such as swapping the standard lightbulb in the building’s common areas for the new compact fluorescent bulbs can really cut down on waste and give a quick return on the investment.

Compact fluorescent lamps or light bulbs (CFLs) can be purchased and installed very easily by individuals and board members. A 15-watt CFL can last up to 10 times longer than a standard 60-watt incandescent bulb, and will save up to 75 percent of the wattage consumed.

Kwit says that buildings can make use of CFLs in hallways, near elevators, in common rooms and anywhere where an older light bulb now sits. “They are easy to install and the supers can do it themselves rather cheaply,” he says. “There’s no reason not to have these now, and it’s a quick way to decrease your energy costs.”

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The second quickest return on investment—and the biggest in terms of both energy and dollar savings—is installing an Energy Management System (EMS) to control the heating system and reduce oil and/or gas consumption. “The EMS controls the building’s heating system and reduces fuel consumption,” Zaretsky says. “It’s perhaps the single most cost-effective upgrade for steam and hot water systems, and it’s proven to reduce consumption by more than 15 percent with an ROI of less than two years. Not having an EMS in a building today is the equivalent of driving a Hummer in Manhattan traffic.”

Zaretsky goes on to say that most New York co-ops or condos use a single outside sensor (generally referred to as a heat timer) to control cycling of the boiler. This method is highly inaccurate and often results in over-heating the building (it’s why you’ll see windows open during the dead of winter, throwing your heat, fuel and money to the wind).

Alternately, an EMS adds a number of temperature sensors strategically placed in apartments—usually those furthest from the boiler, and the last to get the heat. “The EMS computer then reads the outside temperature together with the indoor temperatures and controls the boiler, with adjustable set-points, to operate only as long as it takes to deliver the right amount of heat,” Zaretsky says. “The exact right amount to keep residents comfortable without wasting fuel. The boiler runs far less and therefore uses less fuel and requires fewer repairs.”

Larry Zucker is president of Compusave Fuel Systems Inc. in Flushing, which installs computer systems that attach to the thermostats of a building. By placing the thermostats on the top floors and monitoring the temperature throughout the day, the system can cut up to 20 percent off the annual fuel bill.

“A lot of co-op and condos are using the system now because oil is a killer with the prices,” Zucker says. “By doing this you can save tremendous amounts of money because so much less oil is being used.”

Beyond these, there are numerous other energy saving options, both at the higher and lower end of the budget spectrum. On the low end, buildings can employ more and better quality insulation, use motion sensors or timers in common areas that aren’t used frequently, and change their air filters regularly. On the higher end, boiler replacement, zoning the heating system, replacing old windows, electric submetering and roof gardens can all help reduce those bills.

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“If the building is only using oil, you should look to see if you can implement a natural gas system as well,” Kwit says. “Advantages to using natural gas is it’s cheaper, it’s a cleaner burner so you don’t have to clean the boiler all the time, and it’s domestic so you don’t have to import it.”

Individuals Take Action

We all know the things our mothers taught us about turning off the lights, closing the windows, not lingering in front of an open refrigerator door, and taking shorter showers. But, there are plenty of other things that individual unit owners can do to help save energy in their buildings.

“You should take a look and replace all of your light bulbs with CFLs,” Kwit says. “Just because you bought this type before and you had trouble with them, take another look. Now they’re making softer light and they are better.” CFLs can be screwed into room lamps and anywhere a regular light bulb already exists.

Owners looking to replace their appliances will find that next-generation washers, dryers, and other major appliances have come a long way since the last time they purchased such an item.

Consider an Energy Star dishwasher. The price of water has gone up 14.5 percent in the past few years and it may go up again. “Energy conserving dishwashers use a lot less water,” Kwit says. “Buildings should try to establish some incentive programs and guidelines for buying these.”

According to Frank Maris of UtiliSave in New Rochelle, using dimmer switches is a great way to save energy as well. “People will find that they don’t need the amount of light that they think they do,” he says. “So dimmers are a really good thing and you should put them in as many rooms as you can.”

He also recommends putting in ceiling fans, because they keep rooms cooler and thus reduce the need for air conditioners to run full-tilt constantly. He also recommends the use of window and door caulking and weather-stripping to keep heat in during the colder months, and out during the summer.

A building can also become more energy efficient by reducing its water consumption. Reducing the water temperature to the minimum required to meet the load is also an excellent method to reduce energy use. Hot water systems lose energy to their surroundings, so turning off recirculation pumps when they are not needed is one easy way to curb wasted energy. In some instances, replacing a central hot water system with point-of-use heaters is not difficult, and can provide a significant payback. Installing low-flow showerheads and low-flow aerators can also make a big difference in water usage.

Help is Out There

For boards and managers that want to learn more about energy solutions, there are a myriad of websites that can help.

“NYSERDA is an excellent source, and any of the green websites on the Internet have worthwhile ideas,” Maris says. “There’s also Keyspan (National Grid) and other energy companies. They’ve all got good ideas and recommendations, though it’s important to always pay attention to the return on your investment for each.”

There’s plenty that buildings and owners can do if they work together and invest the time and care into their energy solutions. “The most important and cheapest strategy is to educate residents,” Zaretsky says. “In short, we all need to be more aware, more socially-conscious and more cooperative in saving the planet.”

Keith Loria is a freelance writer and a frequent contributor to The Cooperator.

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