

Energy savings a budget bonanza

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With the economy still tight, towns and school districts are struggling to manage slim budgets while preserving jobs and programs. But in addition to belt tightening, they can use another strategy to realize significant savings while holding the line on taxes: energy savings.

Too many cities, towns, counties and schools are watching money go right out the window, through costly, wasted energy and old infrastructure. It doesn't have to continue.

A statewide energy efficiency program subsidizes 100 percent of the audit costs to identify savings up to an annual \$100,000 incentive cap. The savings identified through the audit can pay for the expense of implementing the efficiency recommendations. Usually the savings pay for the improvements within one to seven years — not a bad investment.

As school and local government budgets are finalized, it is a program every local official should investigate for every building.

According to statewide school budget information, New Jersey's schools spend about \$2 billion to operate and maintain school buildings, which includes the costs to heat and cool the buildings. Other costs include cleaning and regular ground and building maintenance.

Public information on schools does not break out energy costs. But they are significant, especially for older schools or districts that have been forced to cut back on maintenance.

National estimates say between 15 percent and 30 percent of every heating and cooling bill pays for wasted energy. That is money leaking through windows, doors, cracks and other spaces, inefficient lighting, leaking water, as well as older heating and cooling systems.

Schools could save millions just by upgrading their buildings. These are savings that could keep teachers in the classroom, pay for textbooks and equipment, or be used to hold down property taxes.

Our engineering company has performed more than 400 energy audits in New Jersey's municipal buildings, schools, county facilities, colleges and other publicly funded buildings over the last 20 years. We know these savings are real and attainable.

It starts with a free energy audit under a program created by the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities, the Local Government Energy Audit Program. As the audit is performed, it establishes a baseline of where and how energy is consumed in a building, and identifies opportunities to lower energy consumption and costs. Engineers examine energy usage patterns and inspect all systems inside and outside of the facility.

When it is complete, the audit provides a plan with energy conservation measures to maximize energy savings. Solutions are specific to the building. So, in one building the solution could mean moving to a geothermal heating system or solar panels to save on electricity. In a different building, the solution could be as simple as using more efficient lights and conserving water. Every audit of every building finds unique ways to maximize savings.

Paying for the capital improvements is easy. The terms of the state-sponsored Energy Savings Implementation Plan allows government agencies to pay for the work through the energy savings over a 15-year period. There is no need to increase debt or tap cash reserves.

This is a program that all municipalities and schools should use for every building, but so far many haven't. Every budget cycle that goes by without an energy audit to create more efficient government buildings is taxpayer money wasted. It all begins with a free energy audit.

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