



What are these benches and why are we marking them?

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The last few years have seen a sudden boom in legislation requiring buildings to benchmark their energy usage. Building owners faced with this new task ask: What does that mean? Why does it matter? But perhaps we should all be asking, Why haven't we been doing this all along? If a company did not know how much money they spent over the last year, you would think them careless or negligent. Yet ask a building owner how many kilowatt hours of electricity they used last year and the common refrain is "I have no idea, I just pay whatever bills come in."

Benchmarking a building is the act of recording how much energy a building uses in a year - then comparing that usage to similar buildings to see if there is potential for improvement. This essentially reveals whether a building owner is "spending" - in energy and dollars - more than they should. Owners of large buildings who "just pay the bills" contest they don't have time to benchmark, yet some spend millions of dollars a year on energy with little insight into whether they are overspending. Progressive companies have been tracking this information for years with a view to cutting a deal with utility providers or third party suppliers, but they are the exception and not the rule. Environmental benefits of lower emissions aside, it is economic suicide to ignore the vast sums of money spent on wasted energy, particularly in the current economic climate.

Energy benchmarking legislation aims to make it a standard practice to measure and manage energy spending. New laws in New York City, Austin, Washington DC, Seattle and California, to name a few, require large building owners (think apartment buildings with 50 apartments and similarly-sized commercial buildings) to file their annual energy use yearly, just as they file their taxes. The hope is that, by simply showing owners and managers how much they use each year and how that compares to their peers, they can see how much money they are wasting. In that sense, it is almost the opposite of taxes: taxes require you to pay money, benchmarking shows how you can save money, be more profitable and contribute to America's energy independence.

In this time of economic uncertainty, there is no more powerful driving force than helping businesses improve their bottom line. If the side effects are reduced carbon emissions, less smog and more comfortable living environments, then all the better. Becoming an "energy conservative" might in fact be the only thing the Tea Party, Occupy Wall St. and everyone in between can agree on.

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