



Cutting a building's heating costs: A step by step process that you can tackle with confidence

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Restructuring a multifamily building's heating system, to most owners will appear a daunting task. However, with the following easy step by step process an owner can tackle it with confidence.

Study Your Building's History

Before commencing any plan, track your historical energy usage at the building. To arrive at the benchmark your designers have to beat, obtain a summary of the fuel units consumed per month for the last one to four years.

Educate Your Team

Obtain the HPD code requirements regarding hot water and heat during the heating season. Educate your manager and building staff about the law. (There are inexpensive courses offered at various institutions around New York City, including NYU, that provide excellent training for these kinds of issues.)

Investigate and

Log Your Findings

Purchase an electronic thermometer that can take the temperature of a room with the press of a button. To learn how the current heating pipes distribute heat, log the temperature in different parts of the building at different hours through the day and even on weekends, until you are able to determine which are the coldest and hottest areas of the building. You'll soon notice that different sections of the building have widely ranging temperatures.

Apply Today's Technology

To tell you the temperature in various apartments, and direct your boiler to provide heat when the temperature goes below a certain threshold that you set, research and purchase a heat computer that fits your building's size and budget. You will be able to control this remotely from your office, even many miles away. Older systems provided heat purely based on the outside temperature. Thus an apartment can be at 85 degrees and still have the boiler on merely because of the brisk external temperatures. A heat computer's sensors allow you to cash in the savings that come from other heating sources in the apartments such as cooking, body heat, and electronic devices.

Correct Your Heating Traps

With setting your temperature threshold at a reasonable amount higher than the minimum legal apartment temperature requirements, you will see that your coldest areas of the building may be significantly below the code requirements, while most of your building may be at targeted temperatures. This means that you have one or more heating traps. With the information that your investigation and heat computer provide, diagnose the areas of your building where there may be too much or too little heat traveling. Having a master plumber inspect and adjust your heating traps, will enable you to provide heat on an as-needed, rather than an as-poorly-engineered basis.

Consider Alternative Fuel Options

In New York City, we generally have the option of using either gas or oil to operate our heating plants. Gas is currently trading at a historically low price and, inside the building, is a much cleaner product than oil. In situations where a utility has already piped a street with gas, capitalize on this, and transfer your building to gas. Call your utility representative and find out if you have an adequate supply on your street. If you do or can get it done at a reasonable price, converting your building to gas can realize substantial savings.

Engage Your Tenants

It is common for tenants to complain when their apartment temperatures drop, even though the heating is still being higher than the city mandated temperature minimums. Many managers simply raise the temperature back up to avoid such complaints. However, such actions cost a building thousands of dollars per year. In middle to lower class tenanted buildings, when such complaints are received, the building staff should immediately inspect and take an apartment temperature reading. Your staff should show the reading to the tenant and educate the tenant about the law. This is key, as you are now engaging your building community in your goal of creating an efficient building. However, if you are running and marketing your building as a luxury accommodation, engineer your heating system accordingly.

Create a System

Create a system to monitor these changes. Your management team now must regularly review complaints, and adjust apartment temperatures until you have a margin of safety keeping you within the legal requirements. This is critical as the fines associated with violating these requirements can cripple your finances. While you are creating your system, compare your fuel consumption with your historical records. This should show substantial savings.

Final Thoughts

When you have taken all the above steps and integrated all of them, you have now transformed your relationship with your fuel cost from a position of weakness and fear to an opportunity of transformation and confidence. This financial statement expense item may now become an opportunity to beat all previous years' numbers, regardless of all the obstacles we have in the industry.

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