Using Energy More Efficiently In NYC

by Laura Forlano
Thursday, December 16, 2004 12:00 AM -

This is a good time for City Hall, and the city as a whole, to focus on using energy more efficiently.

There are many reasons to do so. For one, energy costs have been skyrocketing, and promise to rise even more steeply. The price of oil is already way up, and Con Edison is trying to get a rate increase of 6.7 percent.

Pollution also looms as a large threat. This summer, New York City joined eight states in announcing a lawsuit against five major polluters, whom they charge with contributing to global warming. These companies alone -- American Electric Power Company; the Southern Company; Tennessee Valley Authority; Xcel Energy Inc.; and Cinergy Corporation -- are responsible for ten percent of the nation's total carbon dioxide emissions.

"There is no dispute that global warming is upon us and that these defendants' carbon dioxide pollution is a major contributor," says Attorney General Eliot Spitzer.

At the same time, the demand for energy is increasing. In recent years, the number of electrical appliances in homes and offices (especially computers) has increased significantly. In August 2003, the high demand for energy led to a major blackout. While New York's energy systems are some of the most modern, the state's reserve of energy is 40 percent lower than regulators say it should be. That is one reason why power companies are proposing the construction of up to 15 more power plants in New York City.

Thus, reducing energy use would save money, prevent blackouts, reduce the need to build new power plants, and could also improve local air quality.

And one way to reduce energy use is to increase energy efficiency. There are some computers â€“ and air conditioners and lights and household appliances and industrial motors â€“ that run more efficiently than others. Most newer computers have software that can automatically save power when the computer has not been used for a certain amount of time. Experts also advocate for greater use of such cleaner and more efficient energy sources as solar power and wind power, as well as fuel cells. Frank Morris of the Sierra Club believes that better management of the demand for energy could reduce the city's energy use by 35 percent.

Currently, there is a bill pending in the New York City Council that would create a new energy policy office. The law would require the city to develop a comprehensive energy policy, assess the efficiency of energy use in city facilities, set goals for the reduction of energy use, encourage energy conservation and the use of fossil fuel alternatives by both the public and private sector, and promote public awareness of the efficient use of energy.

One could reasonably question how effective this office would be, however, in light of the difficulties over another bill being considered by the City Council, which encourages City Hall to get its own house in order.

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The bill focuses specifically on the use of city-owned computers . The city owns some 100,000 personal computers and office equipment, which could be made more efficient â€“ and save some $1.4 million on energy costs â€“ through the use of power-saving software.

But the city agency in charge of the computers, the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT), opposes the legislation.

Why?

The city's vast information technology infrastructure "makes the implementation of the proposed initiative difficult to deploy and enforce," testified Ron Bergmann, a deputy commissioner at DoITT. "Agencies largely administer their own computer operations and have a diverse array of equipment, operating systems and applications."

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