

As DC retreats, NY goes all-in on energy efficiency

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A worker installs a unit that provides air conditioning and heat.

With billions of dollars in metro-area economic potential, energy efficiency is an increasingly lucrative field with real long-term benefits to public health and the environment. In the absence of national leadership on building the efficiency industry and reducing carbon emissions, recent moves by New York leaders look not only prescient but also bullish on businesses working to save energy.

New York City's rules on energy efficiency have caused some confusion and consternation, yet they represent a major business opportunity. On the state level, Gov. Andrew Cuomo in January committed to "a comprehensive and far-reaching energy-efficiency initiative" to take effect on Earth Day, April 22.

The new policies will spark action, innovation, entrepreneurship and lower utility costs. We know this from past experience, as entities such as the New York State Research and Development Authority have documented their positive regional impact. Federal efficiency programs, now on the chopping block, have done more public good than even predicted. Fuel-efficiency standards for cars create jobs, as do renewable-energy initiatives. And there are more to come.

In New York it is time to reconceive energy-system upgrades for buildings. A City Council bill signed into law by Mayor Bill de Blasio in January makes the city's energy codes among the nation's most aggressive, matching today's so-called stretch codes. A call for more efficient buildings, it will coax owners to upgrade HVAC systems, windows, roofs and building envelopes.

The city's leading building owners are already spending to improve efficiency as well as indoor air quality, acoustics and other quality-of-life and wellness measures. For property owners behind the curve, deferred maintenance is draining dollars by making operations inefficient.

At the same time, the city's Local Laws 31 and 32 bolster efficiency and sustainability rules with measures that will make our public-sector buildings among the nation's most efficient. Municipal properties will use half as much energy as a typical code-compliant building does today. It's a valuable start.

On top of that, heavily insulated, tightly sealed buildings with heat-exchanged, filtered, ventilated air are not only more efficient, but they also have proved better for occupants' health. So-called passive-house construction, which is a global energy leadership standard, is becoming more prevalent in residential buildings and being examined more closely by governmental agencies and commercial developers.

Some rules have raised eyebrows, including a requirement—modeled on restaurant scores—that building owners post efficiency grades from A to F. But those objections often miss the big picture.

The mayor's underlying mission is to cut 80% of carbon emissions by 2050. It's a laudable aim that firms like mine support through industry initiatives, such as the AIA 2030 Commitment, and through projects including geothermal wells at St. Patrick's Cathedral and our latest project, a retrofit of a Harlem townhouse to meet passive-house standards.

We're hardly alone. Thousands of New York business leaders, institutions and universities are already joining the push to save energy, improve building operations and lead on environmental issues. Many initiatives offer proof of concept for new city and state rules.

These converging forces have dramatically raised businesses' interest in proven approaches for complying with stringent energy-conservation rules, including updating our codes and meeting standards such as LEED and passive house.

It makes one wonder: Why are the nation's leaders moving in precisely the opposite direction?

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