

# NJ CLEAN ENERGY'S REQUIRED BENCHMARKING:

## Easier & More Beneficial than Expected

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**T**he global focus on sustainable energy solutions has gained significant momentum. Recognizing the urgent need to reduce carbon emissions, the Garden State enacted the New Jersey Clean Energy Act, which aims for the state to reach 100% clean energy by 2050. It established a mandatory benchmarking program to measure large buildings energy and water performance. This is yet another obligation certain condominium associations over 25,000 SF must check off.

Benchmarking measures, reports, and compares a building's energy consumption to similar buildings or historical consumption. By collecting and analyzing energy and water data, benchmarking identifies consumption patterns, potential inefficiencies, and areas where retrofits can be implemented to optimize operations. Retrofits may include

improving insulation, upgrading HVAC systems, installing energy-efficient lighting, or adopting renewable energy technologies such as solar panels. The goal is for owners and managers to use their benchmarking information to set performance goals, foster a culture of sustainability, and make informed decisions about taking advantage of financial incentives for energy efficiency improvements through State and utility programs.

Many know the Energy Star logo on appliances, electronics, and other consumer products. Products is one of five critical areas of the Energy Star US EPA program. New homes, existing homes, industrial buildings, and commercial buildings are the others. The focus on commercial buildings is important because commercial and industrial occupancies use accounts for more than half of all US ener-

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gy consumption, and it is estimated that up to 30% of it is wasted through inefficiencies. The EPA developed the Portfolio Manager tool to help owners measure and track energy use. A successful industry, standard it has benchmarked nearly 30 billion square feet of commercial space. Fifteen of the country's largest 20 school districts and 8 of the 10 largest healthcare organizations save money every day by using the tool.

The first round of mandated annual benchmarking submissions was due

*"The first round of mandated annual benchmarking submissions was due October 2023."*

October 2023. Commercial buildings over 25,000 SF were to submit their energy and water usage to the US Environmental Protection Agency's ENERGY STAR® Portfolio Manager tool. The NJ Board of Public Utilities defines "commercial" by the building's property tax assessment business class – Class 4A Commercial and Class 4C Apartments, which includes many condominium buildings.

Each year, the property owner or manager can enter the required data themselves or work with either a NJ Certified Benchmarking or Licensed Professional Engineer. Someone must input the building's characteristics and monthly electricity, natural gas, fuel oil, propane, water, and sewer con-

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sumption. Then, the EPA's Portfolio Manager tool analyzes the consumption by calendar year, compares its type, size, geographical location, and age against buildings with similar characteristics, and provides an energy performance rating for the building on a scale of 1 to 100. One (1) is the lowest performing and one hundred (100) is the highest performing.

Julie McCutcheon, PCAM, CPM, the General Manager of Mediterranean Towers West in Fort Lee, NJ, worked with a NJ Certified Benchmarker to complete the community's required submission.

"It was so easy," she said. "We discussed what was needed, signed the paperwork, gathered all the information they needed, and it was done just like that. The whole thing lasted two weeks from the first conversation to the final submission. It couldn't have been easier. With a laundry list of other things to take care of, I'm grateful that it was painless, and I feel better knowing it was done right."

Community associations should consider partnering with an engineering firm to submit the required benchmarking reports and make the most of the process. Professional consulting engineers are not bound to any manufacturer or contractor. They will consider the community's initial installation costs, ongoing energy bills, sustainability, and applicable financial incentives when preparing mechanical, electrical, or plumbing plans. With the association's long-term best interest in mind, professional engineers can

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explain the pros and cons of various energy efficiency upgrade options for the board to consider.

"Having an engineer prepare design plans and specifications will help com-

munities gather apples-to-apples bids for competitive pricing and receive quality materials, equipment, and workmanship," said CoolSys Energy Design's manager Ben Rosenzweig, PE. "Plus, many Federal, state, and local utility rebate programs require energy modeling, pre, and post cap-

ital improvement, to maximize the award amount, so it is important to bring in an expert early in the process."

Julie McCutcheon, PCAM, CPM, mentioned that she recently worked to upgrade the 50-year-old building's boiler and chiller system. The new mechanical equipment is substantially more efficient than the old system so she is looking forward to receiving her benchmarking results.

"Mediterranean Towers West is happy to be in this program. Of course, we always want to be compliant and make our operations as efficient as

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possible, but it will also be rewarding to see that these large capital improvement projects are showing results."

Sharing the green sentiment of the NJ Clean Energy Benchmarking regulations, Julie said, "Making our building better while being environmentally conscious is the goal of every decision we make."

Overall, the NJ Clean Energy Act requires that commercial buildings over 25,000 SF submit their energy and water usage to the US Environmental Protection Agency's ENERGY STAR® Portfolio Manager tool annually. Although it is mandated by law, the benchmarking process is simple, quick, and beneficial. By turning the information on a building's utility bill into knowledge the owner/property manager can act on, benchmarking is the first step to reducing the building's energy consumption and costs – in addition to reducing its carbon footprint. ■

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