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Mayor and Alders Introduce Program to Save Energy and Cut Carbon Pollution in Commercial Buildings

Last week, Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway and Alders Tag Evers, Regina Vidaver, and Grant Foster introduced legislation to advance the Building Energy Savings Program (BESP). The program aims to help commercial building owners increase the energy efficiency of their buildings, save money, and reduce their carbon footprint. Cutting carbon emissions from buildings is a critical step in achieving the City of Madison's goal of reaching 100% renewable energy and net-zero carbon emissions community-wide by 2050.

Experts say the world must cut carbon pollution in half by 2030 to avoid the most catastrophic impacts of climate change. Action is required at every level to meet this imperative. "We have reached an 'all hands on deck' moment for climate action," said Madison Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway, "and the building sector is a key part of the solution. Luckily, there are proven, cost-saving strategies like those in the Building Energy Savings program that can reduce carbon pollution, save business owners money on energy bills, and build a well-paid, green workforce all at once."

In Madison, commercial buildings are responsible for 30% of carbon emissions, and large commercial buildings account for a substantial portion of that total due to their size and complexity. The new, proposed Building Energy Savings code introduced at the January 3 meeting of the Common Council aims to improve energy efficiency in these large commercial buildings through energy benchmarking and tune-ups.

Under the new code, commercial buildings 25,000 square feet and larger would be required to benchmark energy use annually using ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager – a free, online tool developed by the U.S. EPA. Benchmarking provides information to building owners and managers about how their building's energy use compares to other similar buildings, how it changes over time, and ways to save energy. Buildings that benchmark typically reduce their energy use by 8 to 10% over time.

Commercial buildings 50,000 square feet and larger would also be required to complete a building tune-up once every four years. To tune-up a building, a qualified professional assesses a building's

existing energy systems, controls, and maintenance practices and performs no- to low- cost operational adjustments, maintenance, or minor repairs that improve system performance and save energy. On average, tune-ups reduce energy use by 12% and pay back in 2-3 years. Tune-ups aim to make sure a building is running at its best without wasting energy. They often uncover hidden issues and correct them. These could be as simple as adjusting the schedule for heating and cooling, making sure lighting sensors are working properly, or finding an unknown maintenance issue. The program also includes a number of alternative compliance pathways, where building owners can demonstrate they have a highly efficient building or have recently taken actions that substantially improved their building's efficiency.

“This program puts better information in the hands of building owners and operators and helps identify and fix issues that waste energy,” said District 13 Alder Tag Evers. “Benchmarking and tune-ups put our building sector on a path toward efficiency and move Madison closer to reaching our climate and energy goals.” Indeed, reducing annual energy use in buildings covered by this program by 10 to 15% would cut carbon emissions by an estimated 91,257 to 136,886 tons per year. That's the equivalent of taking 17,838 to 26,757 cars off the road.

The Building Energy Savings Program is more than just the new code. The program will provide the training, support, and information that building owners need to benchmark and tune up as well as take the next steps to turn building efficiency knowledge into action. The BESP program is informed by two years of local outreach and research on best practices. “While the BESP program may be new to Madison, similar programs are operating in more than 40 cities across the nation,” said District 15 Alder Grant Foster. “We are learning from other programs nationally and from the Madison community about what will work best here.”

In all, BESP creates numerous benefits for the Madison community. “Reducing energy waste improves air quality and climate resilience, lowers energy bills for building owners and tenants in the business community, and helps to grow the green workforce in Madison,” District 5 Alder Regina Vidaver said about BESP. “It is also giving building owners and managers valuable information about additional energy-saving actions they can take just as the Inflation Reduction Act provides tax incentives and other resources for energy efficiency. The timing couldn't be better.”

The BESP proposal will be reviewed by the City's Economic Development Committee and Sustainable Madison Committee before returning to the Common Council for a decision, which is anticipated on February 7th.

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