



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Understanding the Energy Use of Your Business and Industry

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Energy and sustainability programs can be important economic development initiatives for governments. Governments interested in initiating energy efficiency and renewable energy programs for their business and industry should first learn about how those businesses and industry sites use energy.

Two of the largest public data sets available from the federal government can help—the US Census and the US Energy Information Administration.

Any energy program can be beneficial for the community. But governments interested in starting these types of programs often have limited resources, and a little research can help steer those dollars into the most effective program designs.

The first step in the process is to identify the types of business and industry that exist within the government's jurisdiction. This information may be available from economic development staff or through permits and licenses. In addition, governments may wish to explore the parcel tax data available through the county tax assessor's office. While these data vary from county to county, governments can often find out what types of businesses operate within their jurisdictions as well as important building characteristics such as age, heating/cooling systems and fuel type, and square footage.

The US Census also maintains records of the types of businesses open annually at the county level through its Economic Census. Governments can access these records through the American Fact Finder website by choosing information about businesses and industry and then searching for the tables of establishments and firms.

Each of these establishments has a North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) code which should be noted. These codes standardize the labeling of business and industry sites across the country.

Once governments have this information about the types of business and industry in their area, there are additional data that can help them understand how these commercial entities use energy. If the government operates its own electric utility, obtaining this information will be as simple as conducting a search of billing records.

But for the vast majority of communities that do not operate their own electric utility, the EIA provides valuable insight through its Commercial Buildings Energy Consumption Survey (CBECS), a national sample survey that collects information on the stock of U.S. commercial buildings, their energy-related building characteristics, and their energy consumption and expenditures. Governments can take this information to make a strong educated guess as to the potential for energy savings at various types of commercial entities.

The Environmental Finance Center has conducted several of these assessments of the potential for energy programs for several state and local governments across the country. In Alabama, for example, the EFC's analysis showed that, while pulp and paper mills were the most intensive energy users, the more prevalent iron and steel mills presented a bigger cost-saving opportunity. In addition, smaller facilities found in great numbers statewide such as shopping malls and scientific laboratories also had a large potential for savings. The study also found that the majority of potential sites for energy improvements were located in just three counties, which could help narrow the geographic focus of an energy program.

With a small amount of research, governments can make more informed decisions when planning energy programs.

