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Philadelphia-area buildings ripe for energy updates, study finds

November 06, 2011 | By Andrew Maykuth, Inquirer Staff Writer

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Owners of Philadelphia-area commercial property spend 29 percent more on energy than the national average, making the region's aging buildings good candidates for retrofits.

According to a study of the region's 9,058 middle to larger commercial and industrial buildings, about 77 percent were built before 1990 and would benefit from energy-efficiency improvements.

The report was compiled by Econsult Corp. for the Greater Philadelphia Innovation Cluster for Energy-Efficient Buildings (GPIC), the year-old federally funded organization in the Navy Yard whose mission is to transform the building-retrofit industry.

"Based on all this data analysis, we found that about 7,000 properties, or 300 million square feet of space, meet the requirements for consideration of an energy retrofit," said Laurie Actman, GPIC's deputy director for management and administration. "That's a lot of potential activity moving forward."

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The Econsult market study and a companion study of government policies that affect or impede building improvements are expected to form the baseline for GPIC's work, funded by \$130 million in federal grants over five years.

"The purpose was really to identify what is the world of opportunity here, and what are the opportunities and hurdles in the policy world that we need to address in order to really create this market for retrofit in the region," Actman said.

The market is big. According to the federal government, buildings account for nearly 40 percent of U.S. energy consumption and carbon emissions - most of that is heating and cooling costs. Commercial buildings represent about one-fifth of U.S. energy consumption, with office space, retail space, and educational facilities representing about half of commercial-sector energy consumption.

The regional study looked at 9,058 structures between 20,000 and 100,000 square feet - the target for GPIC retrofits. The 77 percent of those structures that are more than 20 years old likely contain older heating and cooling systems.

Owners of commercial property in this region spend an average of \$2.84 per square foot a year on energy, 29 percent above the \$2.21 national average and fourth highest among 14 large cities studied.

To narrow the universe to identify the "lowest hanging fruit," the study filtered properties by their end use, construction materials, and shape. The optimal candidate for energy improvements would be an older, low-rise brick building.

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