# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An evaluation of the City of Seattle’s technical support program for building energy benchmarking and reporting in 2013 confirms that a well-staffed and service-oriented help desk, coupled with proactive outreach by help desk staff and web-based integration with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager, were essential to achieving high compliance rates among building owners, and in many cases helped transform skeptical owners into energy efficiency champions.

The City of Seattle operated a comprehensive technical support program for its building energy benchmarking and reporting ordinance in 2013. Building owners and managers required to comply with the law had access to live telephone and email support five days a week through the city’s benchmarking help desk. The help desk also proactively reached out to owners/managers to help them complete the benchmarking process and correct reporting errors. This proactive outreach was aided by the city’s direct link to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) Portfolio Manager tool, which provides real-time access to building energy data and reports.

An evaluation of Seattle’s technical support services in 2013 clearly shows that they were instrumental to the success of the city’s benchmarking program. The help desk was more than just a technical support line: It was a lifeline for building owners and managers, and played a major role in boosting compliance rates, data accuracy and creating goodwill among owners and managers required to comply with the law.”
line: it was a lifeline for building owners and managers, and played a major role in boosting compliance rates, improving data accuracy and creating goodwill among owners and managers required to comply with the law. The high level of service provided by the city was so exceptional it leaves one doubtful that the program would have succeeded without it.

The City of Seattle would benefit greatly from maintaining similarly high levels of technical support in 2014 and beyond to ensure continued strong compliance rates and data accuracy, and to help building owners and managers go beyond benchmarking and take action to improve building energy efficiency.

**Summary of Key Findings**

**Seattle’s robust benchmarking help desk resulted in the highest compliance rates in the nation.** The capacity of the help desk allowed building owners and managers seeking assistance to receive timely responses and ongoing tailored support to ensure compliance with the ordinance. Proactive outreach and education contributed to the high compliance rate, especially among owners that had not heard of the ordinance.

**Technical assistance improved data quality.** Help desk staff worked with Seattle building owners and managers to provide answers to their immediate benchmarking process questions and also to review their accounts to ensure no errors were made. During periods of reduced call/email volume, the help desk proactively contacted building owners/managers to alert them to their noncompliance, reporting errors or data discrepancies.

**Providing ample technical support to building owners and managers established greater policy awareness, understanding, acceptance and—in some cases—support.** Help desk logs tracked customer correspondence that often began with resistance and frustration, then moved to understanding and tolerance and, in some cases, created new energy efficiency champions.

**Providing building owners and managers with benchmarking support creates opportunities to engage in conversations about improving building energy efficiency.** The vast majority of building owners and managers needed assistance to comply with Seattle’s benchmarking requirement. As with any...
new process and regulation, there is a significant learning curve. By supporting those needing to benchmark and report their building’s performance, city staff were able to help owners move beyond compliance to consider the data and actions they could take to improve building performance.

Technical assistance was critical to the success of Seattle’s energy benchmarking and reporting program. Early help desk models quickly indicated that additional consistent support was needed to troubleshoot reporting issues and in most cases facilitate compliance for owners new to the practice of benchmarking. Compliance rates rose from the low 20th percentile in the early stages of the help desk to the mid 90th percentile once the help desk was appropriately resourced and staffed.

Seattle’s one-stop-shop model of technical support streamlined the benchmarking process for owners/managers and helped local utilities and EPA improve systems and customer service. Seattle’s help desk served as a centralized technical assistance center for the city’s three utilities and the EPA, in addition to providing information and support about what is required by the city’s ordinance. Help desk staff fielded thousands of calls and emails from owners/managers needing assistance obtaining, inputting and correcting energy use information from utilities into Portfolio Manager. These interactions often led to help desk staff identifying problems and finding solutions to utility and EPA benchmarking systems.

INTRODUCTION

The following report is an evaluation of the Seattle Office of Sustainability and Environment’s (OSE) technical support services used during 2013 for the city’s building energy benchmarking and reporting ordinance. The evaluation was conducted by Resource Media under contract with the City of Seattle with funding support from the Energy Foundation, and was reviewed by the Institute for Market Transformation. Resource Media participated in two orientation sessions to learn about Seattle’s benchmarking help desk and web services systems, reviewed the city’s 2013 help desk log and monthly reports, and interviewed help desk and city staff, and building industry representatives. The aim of this evaluation is to help identify and assess:

- Help desk usage trends and user experiences
- Essential services the help desk staff provided and the challenges they faced
- The benefits and drawbacks of both help desk and web services systems
- Opportunities that exist for future iterations of the help desk and web services

TOP FINDINGS

The help desk was a widely used resource in 2013.

Staff fielded a total of 9,695 inquiries via phone and email in 2013. Help desk staff assisted owners and managers of almost two thirds (64%) of all buildings required to comply in 2013 (2,451 out of 3,820).
Help desk staff were successful in responding quickly and efficiently to owner/manager inquiries. The vast majority of inquiries (83%, n=7,062) were responded to the same day, and nearly all (98%, n=7,961) were responded to in three days or less. Out of the 2,451 buildings that the help desk served in 2013, the vast majority (84%, n=2,051) had 1-5 contacts with help desk staff, over two-thirds (69%, n=1,682) had 1-3 contacts, and about one-third (35%, n=872) had just one contact.

Help desk staff and web services were instrumental in helping owners complete the benchmarking process and ensuring data accuracy. Interviews and logged interactions with help desk users and staff indicate that the help desk was essential in helping owners/managers complete the benchmarking and reporting process and ensuring data accuracy. Help desk staff frequently facilitated communications between owners/managers and local utilities, and helped obtain and input energy use data. Web services integration with Portfolio Manager also provided Seattle with real-time access to building benchmarking data, enabling the help desk to proactively contact building owners to correct errors and complete the benchmarking process.

There is a strong indication that help desk services will be needed in 2014 and beyond. Given the unpredictable and frequent changes and interruptions to the benchmarking process, the high turnover rate of individuals responsible for benchmarking properties, and the consistently high volume of calls/emails fielded by help desk staff in the 2013 reporting cycle and previous cycles, we anticipate help desk services will be needed in 2014 and beyond.

Opportunity exists to use the help desk to proactively reach out to owners and help them focus on next steps. Interviews and logged interactions with help desk users indicated there is a strong desire to learn more about how they can use benchmarking information to reduce energy use and costs.

BACKGROUND
Seattle, in partnership with the Northwest Energy Efficiency Council (NEEC), operates a help desk Monday-Friday from 8am-5pm. In 2013, staffing fluctuated depending on budget and anticipated increases in demand (e.g. reporting deadlines, violation notices, etc.), but averaged 1.75 FTE. Building owners/managers could contact the help desk via a local phone number or email. Seattle also operates a web services system that connects directly with EPA Portfolio Manager (Portfolio Manager) and provides staff real-time access to building data.

The period evaluated covers the first year reporting cycle for buildings 20,000 sq. ft. to 50,000 sq. ft. and second year reporting cycle for buildings 50,000 sq. ft. and larger. During this reporting period, the city experienced several interruptions in the benchmarking process that presented unique challenges to help desk staff and owners/managers alike. The Portfolio Manager tool was offline for one week in April 2013 due to a security breach, and for three weeks over the summer while the system underwent an upgrade.
and re-launch. Although Seattle’s web services system was updated and operational in time for the Portfolio Manager update, Portfolio Manager itself was unstable and required numerous updates by EPA to address system glitches through August and into September. Portfolio Manager was taken offline again in the fall during the 16-day government shutdown. Additionally, utility company data system upgrades were delayed following the Portfolio Manager system rewrite. Seattle City Light’s system came online first while Puget Sound Energy launched its automated energy use data delivery service part way through the reporting cycle.

HELP DESK IN-DEPTH
Resource Media analyzed the 2013 help desk log and monthly reports, and conducted interviews with help desk and city staff to identify help desk usage trends, the essential services the help desk staff provided, the challenges they faced, and opportunities that exist for future iterations of the help desk.

Technology and Data Systems
The help desk log is a shared spreadsheet on Google Drive that staff uses to manually record all interactions with building representatives via email and phone. The spreadsheet captures building representative contact information, building name and unique ID#, date of inquiry and date of response, type of request and type of response. In 2013, help desk staff fielded a total of 9,695 inquiries via email and phone. Of those, 8,131 had valid building ID numbers recorded in the log. Our results below are based on an analysis of those 8,131 contacts.

The help desk staff shared an email account with a single dedicated email address (energybenchmarking@seattle.gov). Incoming emails were color-coded by the assigned staff person. There was also a single phone number for the help desk (206-727-8484) that was answered by a recording and allowed callers to select a specific help desk staff person. If the staff person was on the phone or away from their desk, a caller could leave that specific staff person a voicemail message. Callers were not provided with direct help desk staff phone numbers initially, but rather only once a relationship was established. Early on in the creation of the help desk, other technology systems were evaluated, including adding call-logging functionality to the web services system. Due to access, cost and time limitations, the basic system of a shared spreadsheet was created in Google Docs. Review of these systems, and interview responses suggest that there are opportunities for improvement in these systems, such as using a turnkey call center platform like Zendesk (http://www.zendesk.com/).

Contact Frequency
Out of the 2,451 buildings that the help desk assisted in 2013, the vast majority (84%, n=2,051) had 1-5 contacts with help desk staff, two-thirds (69%, n=1,682) had 1-3 contacts, and about one-third (35%, n=872) had just one contact. Only 16% of buildings had more than five contacts with help desk staff, and the most contacts for any one building was 22, but only two buildings fell into this category.
Response Rates

Of the 8,131 total inquiries analyzed, 83.3% (n=7,062) received a same day response. The help desk responded to nearly all (98%, n=7,961) inquiries in three days or less. The longest response time to any inquiry was 70 days, but only one building fell into this category.
This chart above shows the response time in days for the 16.7% of not returned on the same day. A negligible number of calls (13) were not returned for more than 7 days, representing 0.15% of all support calls. This quick response rate suggests that staffing was adequate during 2013 to field incoming calls/emails.

**Monthly Reports**
Help desk staff produced monthly reports summarizing inquiry activity, including total number of contacts, types of questions asked and services provided. Call and email volume fluctuated throughout 2013, with the highest volume of contacts in March (1,275) and April (1,371), leading up to and immediately after the April 1st reporting deadline.

As noted below, help desk staff fielded numerous calls from owners/managers needing assistance correcting, gathering and/or inputting utility data into their Portfolio Manager accounts. Predictably, call and email volume increased when deadline reminder letters were sent to owners in February and March and again when violation letters went out in the fall. Many owners receiving violation letters had no idea
their buildings were out of compliance. Many owners of smaller buildings who had to comply with the ordinance for the first time had never heard of the requirement, while many larger building owners who were into their second year of reporting were unaware that this was an annual requirement.

In practice, help desk staff provided significant technical support on behalf of local utilities and the EPA, troubleshooting numerous utility data errors and manually entering Puget Sound Energy (PSE) data for many owners/managers. In July, contact volume dropped dramatically when Portfolio Manager went offline. Help desk staff used this time to review building records and proactively contact owners/managers with data discrepancies, outlier Energy Use Intensity (EUI) reports or whose buildings were out of compliance.

HELP DESK INTERVIEWS

Each interviewee was asked the same series of questions (see Appendix). As could be expected when interviewing four people involved in the same program, there was overwhelming consistency in the answers to many of the questions, while answers varied in the details, there were no significant contradictions. Interviewees were:

- Rebecca Baker, Energy Benchmarking Program Manager, Seattle Office of Sustainability & Environment
- Nicole Ballinger, Energy Benchmarking Program Outreach Advisor, Seattle Office of Sustainability & Environment
- Brittany Price, Help Desk Staff, Northwest Energy Efficiency Council
- Shino Severson, Help Desk Staff, Northwest Energy Efficiency Council

Help Desk Staffing

Staffing of the help desk evolved over time. When the desk first opened in May 2011, it was staffed by one halftime NEEC staff person. NEEC is a local non-profit energy efficiency trade association that has historically provided benchmarking education and assistance to building owners using the Portfolio Manager tool. When the City of Seattle obtained additional funding support in January 2012, the staffing level was increased to three FTE’s, one of which was filled by two part time interns trained in the technical process of benchmarking.

The part time intern model proved challenging because callers did not receive consistent support from the same person each time they called. It also became apparent that technical understanding of energy benchmarking was not the greatest determiner of the success of a help desk attendant. Rather, help desk staff with a customer service orientation were far more successful at providing service to callers.

For the majority of the 2013 implementation phase, three full time people, including one serving as a manager, staffed the help desk. In 2014, when all building owners had one or more years of reporting completed, funding for the help desk began to scale down. The current staffing level of 1.75 FTEs seems
to be inadequate for serving peak demand. Baseline demand seems to have held steady through second and third reporting years, and current staff worked overtime in the run-up to the compliance deadline.

Some owners and managers who called the help desk were clearly expecting more of a “call center” model where someone was available to answer their call immediately. The final model for the Seattle benchmarking help desk more often required a caller to leave a message and get a call back, sometimes immediately, but in almost every case within 72 hours. The help desk staff did not have dedicated phone numbers, and all interview subjects suggested that this could have improved customer satisfaction by allowing callers to directly return calls.

Support Provided
Demand for help desk services rose and fell based on compliance deadlines and the sending of compliance notices by mail or email. At periods of high call volume, the help desk updated email signatures and outbound voice mail messages to indicate that response times would be longer than normal, up to 72 hours, to manage expectations. During periods of lower call volume, OSE staff provided the help desk with lists of buildings that had begun, but not completed, the benchmarking process, were missing data, or likely to have errors in their data for proactive outreach to owners and managers. Interviewees attributed the high compliance rate and data accuracy to this proactive approach.

While the frequency of errors or mistakes decreased from one reporting year to the next, the decrease was not as significant as expected, largely due to the higher than expected number of buildings experiencing a change in ownership or management that required properties to be re-shared with the City of Seattle in Portfolio Manager or to begin the benchmarking process anew. The help desk also fielded more questions than expected from professional vendors now benchmarking on behalf of their clients. The process of creating Portfolio Manager accounts and properties, connecting them with automated reporting from the utilities, and properly sharing the properties and utility information with the City of Seattle Web Services is cumbersome enough that there will likely be continued demand for support.

"The need for [support] is just as important now as it was in the first year, in that there are always people who are new to benchmarking — buildings change hands and transfer ownership — and in Portfolio Manager there is no easy way to do that, unfortunately you have to break a lot of the utility connections and re-do them...There is a large amount of people that don’t have the computer skills, or the time, and it is complicated enough that if someone is doing just one or two buildings, there is so much room for error.” - Nicole Ballinger

The majority of callers to the help desk were primarily focused on bringing their properties into compliance with the ordinance. A minority of callers subsequently sought additional information about energy efficiency improvements, or what EUI and ENERGY STAR scores meant. Most callers left with a better understanding of the purpose of the benchmarking ordinance, if not a better opinion of it. Help desk
staff all felt that callers were not receptive to discussion of energy efficiency improvement until after the property was brought into compliance.

"Usually whenever I talk about incentives or building energy performance is after giving them the good news that their building is compliant, that is when they are in a good mood and want to learn more about things.” - Shino Severson

Engaging Owners in Next Steps
After the building owner/manager had the EUI and ENERGY STAR score the help desk staff would try to engage in a conversation about potential for improvement and follow-up with information about incentive programs. This conversation was broached when time permitted and when customers exhibited an openness or interest in what the performance data could tell them. Engaging the owner/manager in a discussion of energy efficiency improvements was easier after the second year of reporting was complete. There was more data on the energy usage of the building making year over year comparisons possible as well as comparisons with other similarly sized buildings. Additionally, reporting data analysis provides a local comparison for building owners to compare how they are performing against peer building types.

User Satisfaction
The help desk staff believe that satisfaction among callers was very high. Often callers were surprised that there was someone at the city willing and available to help them bring their buildings into compliance. The help desk assisted callers with a variety of requests, ranging from entering utility data (before PSE implemented automated reporting) to correcting building details, and adding the City of Seattle as a Portfolio Manager contact and sharing the property and meters.

"We often get emails or phone calls of gratitude from owners or managers that – at the beginning – had no idea what they were doing, but called the help desk and were able to get through the process in a timely manner, and so they were very grateful for having that support there.” - Brittany Price

This high level of support and “Nordstrom” model of helping all callers (even those whose buildings were not covered under the ordinance due to size, or even location) may have created a dependence on the help desk. Many building owners/managers had only one or two buildings to benchmark once a year, and therefore did not invest in learning the details of the Portfolio Manager tool knowing they could call the help desk for support.

Above and Beyond Support
Assisting building owners often took multiple calls, and call-backs, including to counterparts at Puget Sound Energy and Seattle City Light. Some help desk staff kept paper notes on the status of individual support requests in addition to the notes maintained in the shared log file.
In addition to the telephone and email support, the help desk was instrumental in helping the benchmarking program staff create educational materials, including the *How To Benchmark Your Building* guide, and keeping these materials up-to-date as changes to Portfolio Manager and automated utility reporting occurred. The help desk also offered regularly scheduled benchmarking workshops and weekly drop-in one-on-one support.

The technical assistance team also supported the benchmarking program staff and utility partners by identifying common errors both in reporting and the data transfer process and even with Portfolio Manager itself. The help desk held bi-monthly customer support meetings with utility staff to help identify, discuss and resolve issues that customers were routinely encountering. Owing to the fact that help desk staff are on the front line assisting a variety of building owners, they were often the first to identify major problems and their solutions (like better instructions or communication with customers.)

**Summary of Key Findings From Interviews**

- Adequate staffing of the help desk to ensure consistent point of contact for building owners/managers is important.
- Help desk staff should have a customer service orientation, not just technical expertise.
- Portfolio Manager is difficult for building owners/managers to use, especially those who have few buildings or don’t use it frequently.
- Setting up utility data sharing in Portfolio Manager is challenging and was the source of many support calls.
- Resolving support requests often takes multiple calls.
- The help desk was able to improve data accuracy through proactive contact with building owners.
- The help desk was largely responsible for the high compliance rate.
- Building owners/managers were grateful for the level of help/support available from the city.
- Buildings change ownership, or management, or management staff far more frequently than anticipated, and such changes mean recurring support requests for the same buildings/properties.

**Example Email Interactions With the Help Desk**

1) Nicole, I’m trying to see what my [carbon] footprint was for [redacted] in 2013. Can you tell me how I can get this info using my account? I am rusty with it and don’t even have current user name and password. Can you help?

2) What is the distinction between Site EUI and Source EUI on the performance statement? What’s the definition of each? Thanks.

3) Dear John & Brittany- I really need your help, [building name redacted]. The lender is getting aggressive needing the share information on the energy use. I had shared with them what I know and so far nothing has helped. The latest email from them is that they would not use my log in or pass words
[sic] and they still need this information which I have no idea on how to transmit it to them. The deadline for requested information is June 1st and I don't know the consequent of not giving them what they want. Could you please help?

Reply From Help Desk:
It sounds like [lender name redacted] is asking for a statement of energy performance which you can get (and I can help you get this) once you are able to get the data from PSE, which it looks like we are still waiting on the release forms from your tenants. If they just need the username and password for your Energy Star account, you can give them the below information to show them that you are currently working on getting the data.

I hope this helps, and please keep us posted on getting the release forms from your tenants - I believe one tenant has already submitted their release form, so you just need to get the forms from your three other tenants.

Reply from Building Owner:
Brittany - You all have been a life saver. After your email today, I got on the phone and managed to get the other 3 tenants releases which are attached. Please let me know when you have something for me to sent to the lender.

4) Hi Nicole - I spoke with [redacted] on 05/19/14. She is president of [redacted] COA and was calling me in regards to receipt of a Notice of Intent to Report to Collections. FYI- some background, she was not informed of the outstanding penalties by the prop mgr, [redacted]. During the course of our conversation, she asked me a couple of questions I did not know the answer to, so I told her I would share her questions with you and that you would get back to her. She will be out of town until June 1, 2014.

Her questions:
1. If she becomes aware of an energy drain after benchmarking, what resources are available for resolving this issue?
2. Her building has old school meters that must be physically read. How does the virtual meter work for these types of meters?

WEB SERVICES
The City of Seattle collects building data differently than other cities with benchmarking ordinances. Rather than building owners/managers submitting data generated by EPA Portfolio Manager to the city agency via a Portfolio Manager Reporting Template, the City of Seattle built a database system that interfaces with Portfolio Manager via web services. Portfolio Manager features a REST API that allows third party systems to pull data for properties to which they are granted access.
Owners/managers of buildings in the Seattle benchmarking program must add the “Annual Reporting” as a contact, and then share their properties with the contact in Portfolio Manager. Once the property has been shared and the correct level of access has been set, Seattle’s database application can pull updated data nightly, or on demand.

**Advantages of Web Services**

There are significant benefits to this system over the template data exchange system used by other cities. The clearest benefit is that Seattle has read-only access to buildings shared through Portfolio Manager and has a baseline database of all buildings that are covered by the program and those that have begun the process of submitting their data. This allows the help desk to identify buildings that may have inaccurate data, or are having trouble completing the benchmarking process. If corrections are required, the owner/manager can make them in Portfolio Manager, and the Seattle system can pull the new data on demand. OSE staff can review and energy data and also data on building characteristics like square footage and year built, which can be helpful in identifying discrepancies resulting from new construction, or from data entry mistakes.

Another outreach benefit of web services is that the City of Seattle automatically generates an email response when a new user adds the city as a contact. This automated email outlines how to share the property and reminds the user that the help desk is available. A second confirmation email is generated when the property is successfully shared. When a property share is rejected (for example, a user tries to connect to a building that is already shared) a “rejection” email is sent that provides the help desk contact information.

The alternative is for building owners or managers to complete the benchmarking process in Portfolio Manager, and then export their data via a template and transmit the exported data to the city. If corrections are required, the owner/manager must repeat the process. The city receiving the data must keep the files organized, and read the data from those files into a system for data analysis and management. Often times this process produces partial or incomplete reports that require additional follow-up once identified.

**Web Services Challenges**

Seattle’s system is not without its challenges. The process of adding the City of Seattle as a contact and sharing the property properly is challenging for some users and is the source of some support requests. During the period covered in this report, EPA updated Portfolio Manager resulting in changes to the process. When a property is sold, often the seller does not disconnect the property from their account, this can cause errors when the new owner adds the property to their Portfolio Manager account and attempts to share it with the City of Seattle. There can be a similar challenge if the property owner/manager has a personnel change.
City of Seattle | Energy Benchmarking

Seattle is responsible for maintaining the web services tool and associated database. When EPA updates the Portfolio Manager API, it is incumbent upon Seattle to make corresponding changes if any are necessary. EPA has indicated that it will release updates to web services no more than two times per year. Therefore on-going support is needed—at a minimum—to address these updates and respond to occasional unexpected bugs. It should be noted, however, that some EPA updates, such as those required to support the new ENERGY STAR score for multifamily, will likely also require updates to the templates used by other cities.

As with any software development project, new features, along with bugs, are often uncovered through normal use of the product. Seattle has identified features and bugs that would improve the utility of the system. Currently OSE does not have access to a staff developer to make such improvements or updates.

Building Owner Feedback

For this evaluation, representatives from four commercial and multifamily residential property management companies were interviewed (see Appendix for list of interview questions) about their experiences with the help desk and benchmarking process. Companies varied in size from small, local firms that manage a dozen or more properties in the Seattle and greater Washington area (Samis Land Company and Bellwether Housing), to large firms with properties in Washington and surrounding states and globally (Simon Property Group and TRF Pacific). Each interviewee held primary responsibility for benchmarking properties for their respective companies. Interviewees included:

- Steven Heim, Northgate Mall General Manager, Simon Property Group, Inc.
- Erica Bowen, Administrative Assistant, TRF Pacific, LLC
- Lynda Carey, Construction & Asset Manager, Bellwether Housing
- Chris Ulrich, Chief Engineer, Samis Land Company

Benchmarking Experience

Overall, interviewees had very limited or zero experience with benchmarking or using the Portfolio Manager tool before their Seattle buildings were required to comply with the benchmarking ordinance. Three out of the four interviewees had never benchmarked a building prior to the Seattle ordinance going into effect, and none of the interviewees had ever benchmarked a building as part of another city’s ordinance. The exception was Chris Ulrich who had worked with NEEC previously to benchmark a building to see if it qualified for LEED status. Also, TRF Pacific has 32 properties that are already benchmarked through ENERGY STAR, 11 of which are subject to the city’s benchmarking and reporting requirement. However, Erica Bowen—a new hire in 2013—did not do the original benchmarking work on these buildings.
Interestingly, Steven Heim was the first person in his company to benchmark a building, and is now the company’s resident expert. He has even written a manual on the subject to help managers of the other 400 buildings that Simon Property Group oversees globally.

**First Impressions**

Two out of the four interviewees, with the exception of Lynda Carey, who was contacted directly by the city to participate in the multifamily pilot program, and Erica Bowen, who was informed by her colleagues, first found out about the benchmarking requirement through letters from the city.

First impressions about the requirement were mixed among interviewees. The strongest negative reaction was from Chris Ulrich:

“It’s none of their business. If a tenant wants to know how much it costs to run our buildings, they can ask us. No one is going to use this information. It’s a complete waste of time.”

However he was not opposed to benchmarking per se, but the time and effort it took to report to the city.

“I have done this for 30 years. My first responsibility is to run buildings as efficiently as possible, which means to save water and energy and any commodity we can. I’ve always been a believer of that. Anything I can do to save energy I will do. My heartache comes in with benchmarking is telling the city what we’re doing. I have enough to do that I don’t need to go back and tell the city what we are spending on utilities when they already have all this information. We get energy from Seattle City Light – a government owned utility. This information exists. It might not be in the form they want it, but it exists.”

Lynda Carey’s first impression also was concern over how much time and effort benchmarking would take:

“I thought, ‘This is a law you have to comply. How am I going to have time to do this?’ It wasn’t a total negative reaction, but it was, ‘Oh my goodness, how am I going to find the resources and staff?’”

**2013 Benchmarking Process**

Three of the four interviewees had multiple buildings they were benchmarking for the 2013 reporting cycle: 15 for Samis, 11 for TRF, and 30 for Bellwether. The Northgate Mall was the only building that Simon Property Group had to benchmark in 2013, but the company has other properties that will be subject to benchmarking and reporting laws in Austin and the state of California.

Only one interviewee – Chris Ulrich – had to get permission from retail tenants to complete the benchmarking process. Steven Heim and Lynda Carey were in agreement that having to obtain permission from every tenant would have been a significant barrier to benchmarking.
“We probably would have needed a two-year extension at a minimum in order to get approvals from tenants.” – Steven Heim

“Based on the few times I’ve had to get permission, I would expect we would only get a 50-60 percent response rate if we had to get everyone’s permission. The city worked out an excellent solution with aggregated energy data.” – Lynda Carey

Overall, interviewees did not find the benchmarking process to be too difficult. On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the hardest, interviewees rated the difficulty of the benchmarking process between 2 and 5. While not difficult, interviewees characterized the process as “cumbersome” and “lengthy.” Some also indicated that if given the option, they would rank the city’s technical support very high in comparison to utility companies’ support.

“The hardest thing was time and getting in contact with the right people at the utilities and getting our building usage information. I’d fill a form out, send it in, wait 5 days, and then get data. It seems like I had to send in a new form for each time I needed information.” – Erica Bowen

All interviewees tried to benchmark some or all of their buildings on their own prior to having contact with the help desk.

**Help Desk Use**

All four interviewees used the help desk during the 2013 reporting cycle. Some initiated contact themselves, while others were proactively contacted by help desk staff. Lynda Carey and Steven Heim were notified by help desk staff that their buildings were, or ran the risk of being, out of compliance.

Most interviewees used the help desk several times during the 2013 reporting cycle. Chris Ulrich estimates he was in contact with help desk staff about a dozen times total, and Erica Bowen estimates she used the desk 1-2 times a month. Chris Ulrich was the only person to have used the help desk for all three reporting cycles (possibly with the exception of Lynda Carey). Everyone else was taking over for someone else from the previous year. All interviewees also contacted their utilities for help or to troubleshoot issues.

Everyone interviewed used the city’s *How to Comply Guide, Compliance Checklist* and three out of four used the city’s benchmarking website. None used or were familiar with the Director’s Rule. Only two – Chris Ulrich and Erica Bowen – used EPA’s FAQs, and Lynda Carey participated in one EPA webinar.
**Satisfaction With Help Desk**

Overall, interviewees were highly satisfied with the service they received from the help desk. Everyone indicated that benchmarking would probably not have been completed without help desk assistance. In Steven Heim’s case, help desk staff actually came on site to assist him.

“The help desk staff was wonderful. He sat beside me at my desk while we went through the system. I don’t know that we would have hit the deadline on time without support from the help desk.” — Steven Heim

“The help desk rocks! If they can’t find it, they are diligently figuring it out and getting back to me.” — Chris Ulrich

“I was absolutely satisfied with support I received from the help desk. They have all been wonderful. I could name every one of them!” — Erica Bowen

“Once I got a hold of the person, they were fantastic. Help desk staff were able to facilitate issues between myself and utilities.” — Lynda Carey

When asked which help desk service was the most valuable, interviewees had a hard time pinpointing one specific service. Probably the most helpful service was facilitating communications with utilities and helping to get energy use data from utilities and entered correctly into Portfolio Manager. This was a common response from all interviewees – that they experienced difficulty in contacting utilities and/or obtaining the right information (primarily from Puget Sound Energy) to complete the benchmarking process, and that help desk staff were essential in helping resolve these issues.

Interviewees had mixed opinions about help desk response rates. Interviewees indicated that most of their inquiries were taken care of in less than two days, but not everyone was completely satisfied with that response time. Some expected same day response and to get a live person, not voice mail, when they called. Some had better luck getting immediate responses via email. Lynda Carey noted she’d be happy to be put on hold for a live person, much like how computer customer support lines operate.

Interviewees also indicated that they prefer the city’s current hours of operation and would not be happy if the help desk moved to a part-time schedule.

“I would not be pleased with a model that was only open a few days a week. The biggest hurdle to jump is the communications between the utilities and the benchmarking help desk. With each utility company, they want you to wait between 1-3 days. So it takes a very long time to get a simple task done sometimes. So if the help desk is only open 3 days a week, that makes it that much more complicated.” — Erica Bowen
“It would not work to be only open a few days a week. If you get stuck you need help right away. Otherwise don’t call it a help desk - call it a comment line.” – Lynda Carey.

**Role in Building Management and Interest in Learning More**

Three out of the four interviewees play a role in managing their buildings’ operations and performance, including energy performance. The exception was Erica Bowen, an administrative assistant for TRF Pacific, who benchmarked buildings on behalf of the company’s in-house property managers.

Most interviewees used Portfolio Manager to produce statements of energy performance, with the exception of Erica Bowen, but none have used it to generate any other reports or used any other Portfolio Manager tools.

All interviewees indicated that they were interested in learning how to use the benchmarking information to help lower energy use and costs. As Lynda Carey noted,

“It’s going to be my roadmap for how we plan and finance green retrofits and help me prioritize. Out of the 30 buildings, I have a dozen that need help. That’s what DPD (Seattle’s benchmarking program) told me three years ago, that they are trying to encourage existing buildings to be more efficient. But without the knowledge, you don’t know where to start.”

**Post-Benchmarking Impressions**

Overall, interviewees were fairly amenable to the benchmarking process once they had gone through it. But key to that positive impression was the relationships they formed with and help they received from the technical assistance staff.

“Even though I don’t believe we should be doing this, the help desk was the most valuable for getting it done.” – Chris Ulrich

“They understood that we are really all trying to work together on this and get it done. I think the process worked very well.” - Steven Heim

“I hope other cities do the same. I give kudos to city staff and city council and proud to live in a city that treats this as a priority.” – Lynda Carey

“This is a pretty great idea. I like looking at the usage over time. My hope is we can decrease it.” – Erica Bowen
**Key Findings from Interviews:**

- Help desk staff are fielding inquiries from building representatives with varied roles and experience with benchmarking - from administrative assistants to general managers. They also must educate many new people each year.
- Having access to the aggregated energy use data, and having it automatically feed into Portfolio Manager is a major benefit to owners/managers.
- The help desk was essential to helping owners/managers get the job done. One of the most essential technical assistance roles was serving as intermediary between utilities and owners/managers and helping to troubleshoot utility data issues.
- Opportunity exists to use technical assistance staff for proactive outreach. Owners/managers want to know more about how to use info to improve buildings and save money.
- Opportunity exists to help owners/managers utilize Portfolio Manager tools more.
- While some owners/managers don’t think they will need to use help desk again next year, in reality they are coming. Given the amount of changes and interruptions that can happen to the benchmarking process, and the high turnover rate among owners/managers, in all likelihood help desk services will be needed in 2014 and beyond.
- Owners/managers are busy people and expect to be able to reach help desk staff during business hours and receive same day response. A part-time help desk schedule and slower response times would likely result in lower compliance rates, greater frustration and error rates, and an increase in customer complaints.
- One of the biggest complaints both Lynda Carey and Erica Bowen indicated was that they did not receive notification from the city after they finished benchmarking and were in compliance for the year.

**CONCLUSIONS**

- An adequately staffed and proactive help desk is an essential component of a successful mandatory building energy benchmarking and reporting program.
- Seattle’s help desk was more than just a technical support line, but a lifeline for owners/managers and played a major role in boosting compliance rates and data accuracy. The high level of service provided by the city was so exceptional it leaves one doubtful that the program would have succeeded without it.
- Having systems in place to automatically aggregate and deliver building energy use data from utilities to Portfolio Manager, and Seattle having real-time access to Portfolio Manager data via its web services, were instrumental in streamlining the process for owners/managers and helping the city proactively reach out to owners/managers.
- Seattle would greatly benefit from maintaining high levels of technical assistance and the web services system in 2014 and beyond.
- There is room to improve the tracking of help desk interactions with owners/managers, such as creating a more systematic, database-driven process for recording and analyzing interactions.
• Seattle would benefit from conducting a survey of help desk users to help shape future iterations of the help desk and test assumptions made through this analysis, such as: user opinions on help desk level of service, preferred hours of operation, and future proactive outreach around next steps, etc.
• Questions arose in this analysis as to the proportion of smaller vs. larger building owners/managers that used the help desk, and what types of questions were asked by and services provided to smaller vs. larger owners/managers. Learning more about these building segments, either through a survey, focus groups and/or deeper analysis of the help desk log, would help Seattle tailor its help desk to better meet owner/manager needs.

APPENDIX

2013 Compliance Rates Over Time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Buildings Compliant</th>
<th>39.7%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>80.5%</th>
<th>82.1%</th>
<th>91%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Month/Day</td>
<td>March 20</td>
<td>April 9</td>
<td>June 24</td>
<td>Sept. 26</td>
<td>Dec. 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Help Desk Staff Interview Questions

1. Were customers satisfied with response times? *(Please answer to the best of your recollection and provide examples of individual cases if possible. This will also be asked of owners)*
2. How did the structure of the help desk evolve?
   a. What changes were made and why?
   b. How did staffing change over time to accommodate rise and fall of level of inquiries?
   c. Did the city have initial estimates as to the anticipated call/email volume and types of essential services that they help desk would provide? What were those assumptions and how did reality differ (or not) from expectations?
3. What essential services were provided by the help desk?
4. Help desk staff often manually entered benchmarking and utility info into EPA system on behalf of owners. What is your best sense on how often this happened and did it happen more frequently during first year, second year or third year reporting periods, or no difference between years?
5. Did you see individual buildings undergo management transitions over the three reporting periods? Did you also see this occur with the individuals responsible for benchmarking the building?
6. What were the benefits of Seattle’s help desk model?
7. What were the downsides of this model?
8. What were the costs associated with the Seattle help desk? *(Q for Rebecca)*
9. Did Seattle consider using a help desk software platform, such as Zendesk?
10. Did higher levels of technical support provide better service? *(Please answer to the best of your recollection and provide examples of individual cases is possible)*
a. Did you see a reduced frequency of errors?
b. Did the help desk enhance data accuracy?
c. Did technical assistance increase public goodwill?
d. Did it help overcome resistance to a new requirement? Help owners accept new law?
e. Did the helpdesk help people understand the purpose of the new law?

11. Once you helped an owner benchmark their building and they had an EUI or ENERGY STAR Score – how often were you asked what the data means, e.g. if their buildings are poor/good performers and why, or how they can track their building’s performance over time?

12. Did you ever field any calls from owners of buildings less than 20K sq ft?

13. What is the right timeframe to engage owners in considering their building’s energy performance? First reporting year, second etc.? Only when they seem open to a conversation about their building’s energy use?

14. How often did you find the opportunity to lead owners into talking about what is next after benchmarking (e.g. incentives, energy efficiency improvements)? Were owners open to these kinds of conversations?

15. Did any building owners initiate conversations about next steps and/or take action on the benchmarking data, meaning call about incentives, free assessments or actual energy efficiency upgrades? How were these inquiries handled?

16. How often were customers satisfied with help desk support? (Please provide examples/quotes from owners. This will also be asked of owners.)

17. Any other key factors that made the help desk essential to the program’s success?

18. Any additional information you wish to share about the benefits of the helpdesk?

**Help Desk User Interview Questions**

**Email Qs:**

1. What is your role with the building(s)?
2. How did you learn about the benchmarking and reporting requirement?
3. Had you ever benchmarked a building before?
4. Had this building(s) been benchmarked previously?
5. Have you had to benchmark in another city with a similar policy?
6. Did you contact the Seattle Benchmarking help desk for support?
7. When did you contact the help desk?
8. Did you attempt to benchmark the building or buildings on your own first?
9. How frequently have you used support from the help desk?
10. Do you envision you will continue to need support from the helpdesk to meet the annual requirement?
11. Did you use any of the following resources:
• How to Comply Guide
• Compliance Checklist
• Seattle Benchmarking Website
• Director’s Rule
• EPA’s Portfolio Manager tutors/webinars/FAQ’s

12. Did you contact the utilities for help?
13. Did you need to get permission from tenants?
14. Have you produced a Statement of Energy Performance for your building?
15. Have you accessed any additional Portfolio Manager tools or generated any other reports from Portfolio Manager? Or did you just use the tool to benchmark and report to the city to meet the requirement?
16. Are you interesting in learning how you could use benchmarking information?
17. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the hardest, how hard would you rate the benchmarking process overall?

Phone interview Qs:
1. Tell us about your first impression of the benchmarking requirement? What did you think upon first hearing you had to benchmark your building(s)?
2. Do you currently have a role associated with the building’s operations and performance, including energy performance?
3. Were you satisfied with the support you received from the help desk?
4. Was the response rate satisfying?
5. What would be a satisfactory response time to calls and emails?
6. Other jurisdictions have used a different help desk model that operated a few days per week during set hours vs. every weekday. Do you think this model would work in Seattle?
7. In your opinion how valuable was the support you received from the help desk?
8. In what ways could our helpdesk support been more helpful?
9. What was the most useful service the helpdesk provided you?
10. Getting energy usage data from the utilities.
11. Would you have been able to benchmark, if you had to get each tenant’s permission? (I think this might help bring out some details about the value of web services.)
13. Will you use the benchmarking information? How?
14. Anything else you would like to add?