

Lights out, conservation on for city's tall towers

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The lights in Boston's tallest office buildings will be turned off tonight at 11 as part of a two-month-long city initiative to conserve electricity by darkening familiar silhouettes such as the Hancock building and Prudential Tower.

Property owners, acting at the request of Mayor Thomas M. Menino, have agreed to shut off the lights at 34 skyscrapers from the Back Bay to the South Boston waterfront - a move that will save about 25 percent in energy used for lighting. The pilot program - which involves extinguishing the lights above the 30th floor between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m. - will continue through Oct. 31, but city officials said they expect to make it a permanent program at all high-rise buildings.

"If you drive around the city at night, you see a lot of wasted energy with lights being kept on late into the evening," said James Hunt, Menino's chief of environment and energy. "We're trying to target the tallest buildings and reduce unnecessary electricity use."

The initiative, by far Boston's most aggressive effort to reduce energy use, comes as cities around the world have tried to raise environmental awareness by turning off the lights for one hour on a designated night. Boston could become the first city to keep them off year-round, if the program catches on the way officials hope.

The effort, dubbed Lights Out Boston, comes as Menino prepares to host a national green building conference in November, when more than 25,000 people will flock to Boston to discuss cutting-edge environmental policies. In 2007, the mayor set a goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 7 percent below 1990 levels by 2012 and to cut them 80 percent by 2050. Reducing lighting in buildings also reduces the emission of greenhouse gases, especially carbon dioxide, associated with the production of electricity.

The program is also timed to take effect during the fall's migratory bird season, when many bird species are thrown off course by lights emanating from skyscrapers along the East Coast. A top executive at Mass Audubon, which helped plan the initiative, said scientific studies have documented the impact of city lights on migratory birds, spurring several major cities such as Chicago and Toronto to institute lights-out policies.

"We have an incredible array of birds that migrate along the East Coast, and it's clear the bright lights confuse them and cause them to circle or run into buildings," said Laura Johnson, president of Mass Audubon. "A lot of species are threatened, so if we can do anything to help them along the way, then we should do it."

While Menino's plan carries the potential for significant environmental benefits - and may even bring more stars back into view - it could also fundamentally alter the look and feel of the city at night.

"It would take away from the atmosphere," said Lindsay Madeiros, 29, a finance associate who lives in Lowell and works in a Back Bay high rise. "A city is supposed to be bustling, so having it be dark might take away from that."

But Hunt said lights on the ground floor, where many stores and restaurants are located, will remain on. "We're not trying to shut the city down," he said. "We're committed to maintaining an active and vibrant night life, and that will not change."

Hunt acknowledged the skyline would appear different, but the visual impact will not appear overly dramatic because many buildings will maintain security lighting and navigational lights used by air traffic control.

And what happens when landlords want to root for playoff-bound teams, like when the Prudential Tower

emblazoned "Go Sox" in office lights during the team's World Series runs? "We're granting a special exemption," Hunt said.

Lights Out Boston has attracted voluntary participation from the city's largest landlords, including CB Richard Ellis, which manages eight skyscrapers, and Boston Properties, which has agreed to turn off the lights at the three buildings that make up the Prudential Center complex.

The owners of the Hancock tower, Broadway Partners Real Estate Services, said tenants in the building have been initially supportive of the program, especially as high energy prices continue to squeeze corporate budgets. Landlords said they have yet to calculate cost savings because the initiative is just getting underway.

The Hancock will host a kick-off event tonight on the building's 60th floor.

Patrick Glynn, general manager for Broadway Partners, said the Hancock's participation will be limited only by tenants such as law firms that tend to work later at night. "Any time we can reduce energy use, that's a good thing," he said. "We do have tenants that work late, but they are excited to do their part."

The city is also aiming to institute the program one month before the illuminaBoston festival, which will light up landmarks to highlight their architectural significance. The festival founder said the two events do not conflict because illuminaBoston will feature energy-efficient lighting and will shut down at 11 p.m.

"Initially, we were going to go until midnight," said festival founder Lana Nathe. "But once we found out what the city was doing, we agreed to move it up."

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