

Business leaders hear ways to save money, reduce energy

- By Rebecca Rider Center for the Environment
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Local business leaders learned about saving energy and money at a breakfast and panel discussion earlier this month at the Center for the Environment facility on the Catawba College campus. Featured panelists were Robert Williams of Schneider Electric's Raleigh office; Christal Perkins of Waste Reduction Partners' Durham office; and Maryanne McGowan of Duke Energy in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Perkins started by familiarizing the audience with Waste Reduction Partners, a North Carolina program funded by an EPA grant that conducts free energy assessments for public and private businesses, schools and organizations.

The program uses volunteers who are retired, and it focuses on energy and water efficiency and solid waste assessments. "We're engaging the baby boomers in recycling their knowledge," Perkins said. Waste Reduction Partners tailors its solutions to reducing energy consumption and lowering carbon footprints to its clients. Perkins said that Waste Reduction Partners' most common recommendations are to upgrade lighting, improve the building envelope, upgrade the HVAC, take lamps out of vending machines and use occupancy sensors. She encouraged attendees to have an assessment to see if these solutions would be appropriate for their businesses. Whether they are concerned about saving money on a utility bill or becoming more sustainable, businesses can benefit from an assessment. "The bottom line is the bottom line," she said. Robert Williams from Schneider Electric agreed with Perkins' recommendations and added that Schneider's energy performance contracting service often recommends lighting retrofits, replacing mechanical equipment and upgrading ventilation. These are more intensive changes because Schneider focuses on energy reduction investment. Williams said he often sees schools and businesses that need to save money but don't want to cut funding for other projects. "The utility budget is a great way to save," he said. Schneider engages in facility improvement programs that present little-to-no upfront cost to the client. The company's energy performance contracting service provides customers with a comprehensive set of energy efficiency measures that are often totally funded by the savings the business realizes through the recommended changes. For energy investment to work properly, Williams said, the business has to have a long-term focus and be flexible with its budget. If a business is unable to afford the cost upfront, Williams said a loan is a possibility — and he added that Schneider offers financial counseling. Clients get paid back via the savings on their utility bill and can use those funds to pay back the loan. Williams encouraged local business owners to have a proactive approach and not just focus on fixing problems as they surface. Maryanne McGowan from Duke Energy agreed with Williams on taking pre-emptive action. She said she believed that every company should have an energy savings master plan or program that moves it toward efficiency. "I believe if you fail in planning, you plan to fail," she said. Duke Power offers energy assessments to its customers. Assessments can be done self-service style online or can be conducted onsite with a shared cost between Duke and the client. While there are several assessment programs, the two most popular are custom and prescriptive assessments. Prescriptive assessments do not require pre-approval and include general, uniform recommendations like those proposed by Waste Reduction Partners: upgrading lighting, HVAC, motors and pumps, food services and information technology. Duke's assessments function like a rebate program, with the client able to use a third-party contractor and vendor, for which they receive an incentive. "We don't care who you pay the incentive to," McGowan said. Duke's custom assessments are more in-depth and focus on a building's thermal envelope and ventilation systems and take

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retro-commissioning into account. Duke Power offers several other assessments, many of which are tailored to help reduce the business's carbon footprint. When the panel opened for questions, Williams commented that most people don't follow through with recommendations because they don't have a long-term mindset. Some fittings take several years to produce returns, and many business leaders want instant, short-term profit. McGowan added that internal politics and budgeting cycles can also put the brake on improvements. All panelists agreed that in this situation, repeatedly including recommended improvements in the capital budget would at least keep the subject resurfacing, instead of being ignored. Shelia Armstrong, air quality coordinator for the Center's Campaign for Clean Air, said that she hoped to see more panel discussions that inform business owners of new technology and provide them with multiple options for running a sustainable business. "At the Center for the Environment it's very important that we keep up with the latest technology and offerings," she said. "Bringing in panelists like this is important to us, and it lets people know what's out there."