Transcript of WUSA TV9 video, “Federal Agency Headquarters Leave Lights On In DC”

WASHINGTON (WUSA) -- Night after night, year after year, this nightside reporter observed lights left on in federal government buildings. So I decided to see just how much taxpayers were spending to keep empty buildings illuminated.

For several months, we kept track of the lights left on in a dozen federal buildings, including the Departments of Commerce, Agriculture, Transportation and Energy always checking after 10 p.m., each on at least six occasions.

"Turn the lights off. That's what I do anyway. That's how I save money," said one visitor from North Dakota.

Just how much are the federal agencies electricity bills costing you, the taxpayer? First, using the Freedom of Information Act, we requested six months of utility bills for the headquarters buildings of more than a dozen agencies. Then, we asked taxpayers to estimate the price of one month in one building.

'Whew. $3,000 a month?" one woman estimated.

"$5,000 a month?" guessed a young man from New Jersey.

"Monthly? $5-10,000," said a man from Virginia.

The low end is about $200,000 a month. The high end more than a million. One month's electricity bill at the Department of Labor topped a MILLION dollars. That was a bill paid in July of last year. The month before, the department paid a bill of nearly $700,000. And utility costs of that magnitude are not unusual.

"Whoooo. That's too much!" exclaimed a taxpayer.

"Maybe the perception is, they want to tell the American people that we're always on," speculated another.

The Department of Health and Human Services paid a bill last August of $799,000 for a month of service.

"Oh my God. That is per month?" was one reaction.

The Department of Commerce paid a bill last June of $794,000.

"I used to work for the federal government. I know they waste tax dollars. Do it every day," said a man in DC.

"Turning off the lights is about the simplest way that the government can save money. There is no excuse not to do this on a regular basis," said Tom Schatz, President of Citizens Against Government Waste.

Most federal agencies purchase their electricity through PEPCO and Constellation New Energy of Baltimore. The buildings are large, and some appear to be making an effort to turn off their lights consistently, like the Department of Health and Human Services. The Department of Energy headquarters was so dark on one of our nighttime visits, we could barely see its sign.

"We're stewards of taxpayer dollars, were stewards of these precious energy resources, and it only takes a moment to turn a light switch off, but it has an impact," said Brian Costlow,

The Department of Energy may be making an effort, but its monthly electricity bills still average $260,000.

"It has to do with changing the culture," said Costlow.

The Department of Energy's 4,000 employees have a monthly competition.

"It's all about who, or what part of the building, can yield the greatest reduction in their energy demand each and every month," said Costlow.

The Federal Aviation Administration's side-by-side Wright Buildings, on Independence Avenue, administered by the General Services Administration, always appear to have the majority of their lights on, including those in the cafeteria, even though a metal gate keeps anyone from entering after hours.

The Environmental Protection Agency appears to leaves its lights on. At the Department of Education, several floors always seem illuminated. Only one time, at the Department of Agriculture, did we see a cleaning person through a window.

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*****CLARIFICATION: the live report shown in the video is in front of the GSA-administered FAA buildings on Independence Avenue SW. The Department of Transportation headquarters building is located at 1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE.**