ATLANTA -- Georgia Tech professor Marilyn Brown remembers when people thought energy efficiency boosters were tree huggers who wanted to drink warm beer and take cold showers.

Now the crowd is different. People who focus on saving energy and reducing demand on the grid wear suits and ties, work in research labs and set policy, she said.

"The message is more clear, and there are more people communicating that message," Brown said yesterday morning.

When it comes to the South, the way the utilities respond to that message will have a significant impact on the region's prosperity. It's no secret that the utility industry is transforming to one where customers want to control their energy use and are calling for more options on how to reduce their power bill.

Brown and others who focus on energy efficiency say this can happen without weakening the region's electric companies, which are billion-dollar corporations that have tight community ties and significant political sway.

Most of the utilities in the Southeast are investor-owned and tightly regulated. This means the utilities and policymakers have to figure out how they can recoup revenues that are lost to energy efficiency.

"Making the utilities whole is important here," said Brown, who is also on the board of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the nation's largest publicly owned utility.

"It's really a brave new world they are operating in," she said.

The Southeast lags in policies that encourage energy efficiency, but Brown and a national nonprofit think that will change over the next couple of decades. U.S. EPA's proposed rules to curb greenhouse gas emissions could give energy
efficiency a boost because states will get credit for reducing demand on the power grid, Brown pointed out.

"We're really looking at that, that the Clean Air Act regulations might bring new life into energy efficiency," she said. "I'm seeing a much more receptive economic system for energy efficiency because policies are aligning."

Brown spoke at a panel with the Alliance to Save Energy's "Energy 2030" event yesterday morning. Atlanta was the fifth stop on the group's nationwide tour to push its idea to double energy productivity by 2030.

The idea is to encourage states and local governments to create new energy efficiency policies. Reducing grid demand would save a total of $327 billion in excess energy costs in buildings, the transportation sector and throughout major industries, according to the alliance.

GDP would increase by 2 percent, said Nicole Steele, the group's policy and state relations director.

"It is assumed that we use more energy to create a strong economy," Steele said. "We'll be a more energy efficient economy."

It may take a while for state lawmakers and utility regulators to create policies that encourage energy efficiency. This means the more aggressive programs may come from city or county governments.

Atlanta, for example, is gearing up to start a $500 million property assessed clean energy (PACE) program later this year. PACE financing gives a line of credit to buildings that want to upgrade to become more energy efficient.

The buildings must be tax-paying properties.

The program has been in the works since 2010.

"The city has been supportive, but it's been a lot of time," said Ben Taube, CEO of BLT Sustainable Energy. "It's new, it's cutting edge, it's going to take time for the market to understand how it works."