

Southern Oregon Climate Action Now

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## SPOTLIGHT

### PUTTING THE BRAKES ON NATURAL GAS

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**THERE'S A LOT OF BUZZ LATELY** about electric vehicles and how automakers are gearing up to make the shift to EVs. Prices for EVs are expected soon to be comparable to those for gas-powered cars, and operating costs are significantly cheaper. This parity seemed unthinkable even just a few years ago.

A parallel “electrification” movement is also well underway to reduce fossil fuel use in our homes. Ashland’s most recent (2015) greenhouse gas (GHG) inventory found that 27% of our GHG emissions come from our buildings. If we want to achieve our climate goals, switching away from high-emission natural (fossil) gas is a high priority.

To take on this challenge and accelerate the transition from gas to electricity, an increasing number of cities and counties are restricting fossil gas use. The first U.S. city to make the move was Berkeley, California, in mid-2019, which passed an ordinance prohibiting gas hookups in new buildings. The ordinance initially hit very little resistance, says Tom Graly, co-leader of the Electrification Working Group of the Berkeley Climate Action Coalition, speaking at a recent SOCAN-Ashland zoom program. “Much to everyone’s surprise, our local gas and electric company came on board and said, ‘We support that, we think everybody ought to electrify.’ That’s probably because we have one company that supplies both gas and electricity. It’s all energy to them,” says Graly.

The Coalition also works to reduce emissions by raising public awareness of electrification and providing information and resources to help homeowners transition from fossil gas to electric appliances.

Two years later, at least 43 cities and counties have some form of gas ban. “Very few have an outright ban,” Graly explains. “Every city has its own take.” Most require new buildings and major remodels of existing buildings to be “all electric,” although some have exempted restaurants, gas cooking, affordable housing, or high-rise buildings.

Most of the cities that have enacted municipal gas bans laws are in California, including San Francisco in recent months. But there are exceptions. Brookline, Massachusetts passed a ban on most new gas infrastructure in November 2019. It was struck down because although it was “good policy,” according to the state’s Attorney General, it conflicted with existing--outdated--state laws.

Seattle passed an ordinance in February banning fossil gas for space heating

in new commercial and apartment buildings taller than three stories, and when replacing heating systems in older buildings. It also prohibits the use of natural gas to heat water in new hotels and large apartment buildings, and takes other steps to improve energy efficiency.

Meanwhile, the gas industry has pulled out all the stops to fight the gas bans. “Needless to say, the gas companies didn’t like the idea of their product being banned, especially when this trend started spreading across the country,” according to Graly.

Their response has been to lobby states to block municipal gas ban laws. Arizona, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Tennessee have done so, and at least four other states have introduced similar measures.

In Ashland, there’s been no movement yet to restrict fossil gas use. Instead, the city offers a plethora of programs to help residents save energy, reduce emissions, and save money over the long term. Current city programs include new construction incentives; free home energy reviews; incentives for solar panels, heat-pump water heaters, heating systems, and window upgrades. The City also plans to help community members reduce emissions by offering incentives to purchase induction cooktops, small electric engines, and low-carbon new construction.

In spite of these programs, Ashland is not meeting its climate commitments, says Ashland Climate and Energy Analyst Stu Green. “Community natural gas emissions increased ten percent in 2020 compared to the 2015 baseline, and the number of gas meters has increased five percent” says Green. “Ashland will not meet its climate goals if fossil gas use continues to expand and increase.”

So, take note: finding a path off fossil gas will be a top priority nationally and in Ashland over the coming years. While gas companies often claim that gas costs less than electricity, that’s rapidly changing, just like the EV market and the cost of residential solar. Along this path, effective vigilance will be needed to ensure that low-income consumers and gas workers aren’t squeezed or left behind. We want our city to be on the right side of the energy transition, so it’s time to bring this topic out into the light of day. We’d love to hear your questions, concerns, and ideas..

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