

# Natural gas phasing out

By **WILL SCHMITT**, THE PRESS DEMOCRAT September 15, 2019

Marlena and Barry Hirsch have found numerous rays of sunshine since the Tubbs fire of October 2017 destroyed their Santa Rosa-area home and took out about 40 trees on their property, mostly black oaks.

The Hirsches had previously thought about adding solar panels to their roof, but a technician who visited their Mark West Springs home told them the canopy overhead was too dense. Looking up in the early phases of their rebuilding process, they saw a lot more sunshine and realized they could go ahead and add photovoltaic cells to their new home, which they moved into last October.

They didn't stop there, outfitting their home with an induction stove and electric appliances to heat and cool their water and space, as well as an electric car. They didn't bother with hooking up their new home with natural gas lines or a propane tank, which fueled their old home.

"We went for the whole package in this house," said Barry Hirsch, who said he and his wife were fueled by a desire to power their home and transportation with greener energy. He acknowledged that their life situation is favorable to making such a change: He's a retired homebuilder, and the couple have good insurance coverage and no mortgage or minor children.

Homes like theirs could soon become the norm in the North Bay and in dozens of California municipalities poised to ban natural gas infrastructure in new houses by requiring most to use electric appliances.

The slate of measures prohibiting natural gas take aim at the chief source of power in the state and a nearly ubiquitous fuel for heat and cooking in many if not most homes. Scaling back that reliance is seen as crucial to meeting California's 2045 goal of being carbon neutral, meaning the elimination or offsetting of greenhouse gases linked to atmospheric warming and sea level rise.

The local measures, many of which are set to take effect next year, come on top of a state mandate effective in January that requires new homes to include solar panels, another reflection of California's first-in-the-nation role in the global fight against climate change.

"New construction is a critical first step," said Panama Bartholomy, director of the Building Decarbonization Coalition. "Ultimately, we need to get off of natural gas, and the first thing you do is get off the natural-gas network."

While climate activists and green-energy advocates are strongly in support, the push to take natural gas out of new homes faces sharp opposition from homebuilders, who fear higher construction costs and a patchwork of new regulations.

Still, a growing number of cities are opting out of natural gas. Santa Rosa is set to study and vote on banning its use in new homes in a series of meetings before the end of 2019.

The Town Council in Windsor already voted to require electric-only residential construction, and Petaluma, Cloverdale and about 50 other cities are said to be interested in taking similar steps.

Berkeley has already banned natural gas in most new homes by rewriting its local rules for building construction. Most cities considering all-electric requirements will wait to add their mandates as part of the regular statewide building code update that takes effect Jan. 1.

The new all-electric building code — which is optional for cities and requires approval from the California Energy Commission — is known as a “reach” code because it represents a local government’s desire to go beyond basic state rules for construction.

It would require new residential construction up to three stories to be independent of the natural gas network, meaning no gas hookups and no appliances like gas-fueled stoves, water heaters and clothes dryers.

California cities are banning gas because building-related emissions are a substantial component of their carbon footprints, with natural gas being both the largest single source of electricity in the state as well as the main source of building-generated carbon.

The bans will take time to decrease building-related fossil fuel consumption, as new homes represent a small segment of overall housing stock.

Climate change activists are supportive of doing away with natural gas in new homes, and the Santa Rosa City Council is poised to act after making the implementation of new climate policies a top priority earlier this year.

But local builders are concerned that the bans are happening too quickly to allow for sufficient study. Their top concerns include the effect on home prices and whether gas free homes are what most homebuyers really want. . . .

Data cited by Sonoma Clean Power, the public electricity supplier, indicates that building an all-electric home could actually be several thousand dollars cheaper, due to the ability to do without gas main extensions and connections.

Advocates note that reach codes like the all-electric policy must be deemed cost-effective by state officials before cities can adopt them.

The City Council will have its own deep-dive next Tuesday, with voting on the all-electric requirement set for late October and November.

The code would take effect Jan. 1, but with a November passage and so many cities taking similar steps, it likely wouldn’t be in place until late January, Guhin said.

Santa Rosa’s emissions decreased by about 11% from 1990 to 2015 but are set to increase without significant carbon-cutting action, according to local emissions forecasts.

Building energy use accounted for 30% of the city’s total emissions in 2015, behind vehicle emissions, the biggest local contributor of climate-warming gases, according to the Regional Climate Protection Agency of Sonoma County.

Building energy use actually declined in the city and county-wide from 2010 to 2015, but that decrease was virtually negated by a combination of emissions spikes related to vehicle transportation, solid waste and agriculture.

Still, advocates of going all-electric note that California's ambitious goals won't be met if natural gas continues to be piped into buildings new and old.

About 40% to 50% of a home's carbon can be reduced by switching to all-electric appliances, according to PG&E.

Even greater emissions savings can be achieved under a greener, all-renewable blend of power sources, said Rachel Kuykendall, programs manager for Sonoma Clean Power.

"This is one strategy of many that we can use locally, but it is not going to solve everything," she said.

"We're going to need to tackle existing buildings. We're really going to need to tackle transportation."

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