

Contribute →

News Opinion Sport Culture Lifestyle



Austin

A Texas city had a bold new climate plan - until a gas company got involved

Emily Holden for Floodlight, **Amal Ahmed** for the Texas Observer and **Brendan Gibbons** for San Antonio Report

Mon 1 Mar 2021 06.00 EST

When the city of **Austin** drafted a plan to shift away from fossil fuels, the local gas company was fast on the scene to try to scale back the ambition of the effort.

Like many cities across the US, the rapidly expanding and gentrifying **Texas** city is looking to shrink its climate footprint. So its initial plan was to virtually eliminate gas use in new buildings by 2030 and existing ones by 2040. Homes and businesses would have to run on electricity and stop using gas for heat, hot water and stoves.



Floodlight is a nonprofit news organization that partners with local outlets and the Guardian to investigate the corporate and ideological interests holding back climate action

The proposal, an existential threat to the gas industry, quickly caught the attention of Texas **Gas** Service. The company drafted line-by-line revisions to weaken the plan, asked customers to oppose it and escalated its concerns to top city officials.

In its suggested edits, the company struck references to “electrification”, and replaced them with “decarbonization”- a policy that wouldn’t rule out gas. It replaced “electric vehicles” with “alternative fuel vehicles”, which could run on compressed natural gas. It offered to help the city to plant more trees to absorb climate pollution and to explore technologies to pull carbon dioxide out of the air - both of which might help it to keep burning gas.

Those **proposed revisions** were shared with Floodlight, the Texas Observer and San Antonio Report, by the Climate Investigations Center, which obtained them through public records of communications between city officials and the company.

The moves have so far proven a success for Texas Gas. The most recently published draft of the climate plan gives the company much more time to sell gas to existing customers, and it allows it to offset climate emissions instead of eliminating them. The city, however, is revisiting the plan after a backlash to the industry-secured changes.

The lobbying in Austin is not unique. It echoes how an electricity and gas company spent hundreds of thousands of dollars scaling back **San Antonio’s climate ambitions** by funding the city’s plan-writing process, replacing academics with its preferred consultants and writing its own “Flexible Path” that would let it keep polluting.

The American Gas Association in a statement for this story said it “will absolutely oppose any effort to ban natural gas or sideline our infrastructure anywhere the

households lost power for days after a freak winter storm battered the state. Gas power plants dominate the Texas grid, providing 47% of the state’s electricity. Many of those plants and the natural gas pipelines leading to them failed in the cold conditions.

More than a third of Texas households also rely on gas for heat. Competition for gas-fueled power and heat forced prices to surge as high as 16,000%, one power company said. Utilities now face massive bills from their gas suppliers - and many are passing the costs on to customers in the form of sky-high bills.

The CEO of Comstock Resources, a gas company owned by the billionaire Dallas Cowboys owner, Jerry Jones, **described** the gas industry windfall as “hitting the jackpot” in an earnings call.

A nationwide fight goes local

The gas industry is battling climate change reforms in cities around the US - with support from Republican politicians.

In Texas, lawmakers have introduced **two bills** that would prohibit local governments from banning gas connections. “There hasn’t been a city necessarily that has banned natural gas yet, but we have whispers from the Austin city council, the city of Houston, even smaller cities,” said Jeff Carlson, the chief of staff for Representative Cody Harris, who introduced **one of the bills**.

12%
**of US
climate
pollution is
caused by
gas burned
in buildings**

Four other state legislatures passed similar laws last year, and 12 more have seen proposals for them in 2021. The gas lobby, the American Gas Association, has **said** it isn’t actively coordinating support or lobbying for state laws to prohibit gas bans, but its internal records indicate a different story.

“We are increasingly active in the States,” the association’s president, Karen Harbert, said in a November letter to members explaining how the organization spent membership dues in 2020.

She said the association is participating in several “Pro Natural Gas Coalitions” to bring allies together.

Four states have already enacted such laws.

Enacted Proposed

Guardian graphic. Source: State legislature websites

The gas burned in buildings causes about 12% of US climate pollution, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Cities are trying to shrink those heat-trapping emissions with building codes and mandates to switch from gas to electric appliances.

In Texas, they could have a significant impact. Texas burns far more gas than any other state, 14.9% of the US total.

Gas is cheap, and affordability is a major concern in Austin, where families and

and urban flooding are increasing, hurricanes are getting more intense and the Gulf of Mexico is rising. Droughts and wildfires are becoming more severe.

Those effects were what Austin was trying to help to limit when Texas Gas Service got involved.

Strategy 3: Electrify ~~Net-zero carbon~~ buildings

Adopt new codes and local amendments to ensure [transparent source](#) energy efficiency, demand response, storage and distributed generation. Set a goal of [electrifying-net-zero carbon for](#) all new buildings for which it is practical by 2025, and 25% of existing buildings [that currently use natural gas](#) by 2030.

How we'll get there:

In addition to new code adoption, encourage [electrification for gas-to-electric component replacement](#) [net-zero carbon practices on existing buildings](#) through incentives and education of contractors and residents.

Strategy 4: Decarbonize the gas sector

[Texas Gas Service Company is committed to finding ways to reduce emissions and engage in proactive conservation efforts as we move toward a low carbon future. Since the City published the first Climate Action Plan in 2015, their programs have reduced annual emissions in the City of Austin by 22,785 metric tons of CO2e, which represents one year of electric use in 14,145 homes. Texas Gas Service Company will continue its efforts to prioritize low-income communities. Their programs within Central Texas have provided rebates for affordable housing properties and assistance to low-income customers through the Free Equipment Program.](#)

months after the gas company’s lobbying efforts, the city moved the goalposts: Only 25 percent of existing buildings would need to transition off gas by 2030, although all new buildings would have to be off gas by then too.

Texas Gas would be allowed to offset its pollution, by purchasing credits for climate work elsewhere in the country, upgrading leaky pipes and using “renewable” gas from a wastewater treatment plant - efforts which environmental advocates said weren’t enough.



Texas Gas, when asked for comment, said it was “invited to participate in the revisions to the Austin Climate Equity Plan and [has] remained an engaged partner ever since”. The company said it has participated in Austin climate initiatives since 2014 and shares the aspiration of reducing carbon emissions.

“We believe that by working together we can improve our community and create effective, long-term strategies that reach the city’s sustainability goals in an equitable and affordable manner for all residents,” Texas Gas said.

In September, when the company seemed to be losing the fight over the proposal, it sent an email to customers claiming it would “severely” drive up costs and “threatens to take away the rights of people to choose their source of energy”.

San Antonio

In San Antonio, local business interests – from the city’s utility company to car

Greg Harman, a clean energy advocate with the Sierra Club who served on one of the climate plan committees, said Texas's reputation as hostile to climate action is both earned and imposed on the state by the energy industry. Like the rest of the US, surveys show [a majority of Texans](#) believe that climate change is real and a cause for concern.

“We’re a complex and interesting state, we just happen to have a lot of energy resources,” Harman said. “But the cynics are right to be cynical.”