

N.Y.C.'s Gas Ban Takes Fight Against Climate Change to the Kitchen

New York will become the nation's largest city to enact a ban on gas heat and stoves in new buildings. It's a major step away from fossil fuels that is expected to influence wider markets.



By Anne Barnard

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New York City will ban gas-powered heaters, stoves and water boilers in all new buildings, a move that will significantly affect real estate development and construction in the nation's largest city and could influence how cities around the world seek to reduce the burning of fossil fuels, which drives climate change.

The City Council on Wednesday approved a bill banning gas hookups in new buildings — effectively requiring all-electric heating and cooking — after what council members and lobbying groups described as weeks of intense negotiations. The ban takes effect in December 2023 for buildings under seven stories; for taller buildings, developers negotiated a delay until 2027.

Mayor Bill de Blasio, a Democrat who called for the ban two years ago, will sign the bill “enthusiastically,” said Ben Furnas, the director of climate and sustainability for the mayor’s office.

“It’s a historic step forward in our efforts to reach carbon neutrality by 2050 and reduce our reliance on fossil fuels,” Mr. Furnas said. “If we can do it here, we can do it anywhere.”

New York will be the largest American city to enact such a law, though New Yorkers currently attached to the blue flames of their gas stoves and their cozy gas-powered heaters will not be affected unless they move to a new building. State lawmakers have proposed a measure to ban gas infrastructure in all new buildings starting in 2024, but a vote has not yet been scheduled.

Variations of gas bans have spread from liberal enclaves like Berkeley, Calif., and Brookline, Mass., to bigger cities, including San Jose, Calif., Seattle and Sacramento, as efforts to curb climate change increasingly take aim at the burning of gas as well as oil. What made the bill a harder sell in New York — where 40 percent of carbon emissions come from buildings — was winter.

Until recently, gas was promoted as the cleanest option for heating, and proponents had to convince lawmakers that new and quickly improving electric technologies could heat and cook as well and at least as cheaply.

Real estate developers argued that the added demand for electricity in winter might lead to blackouts. Developers — along with National Grid, a utility that supplies gas in the city — said the ban’s effect on the climate would be limited until the city stops getting most of its electricity from fossil fuels, and that improved gas equipment should remain an option. A state law requires a shift to renewable sources like solar, wind and water power, but that transition is expected to take years.

Still, the proposal gained momentum from a yearlong grass-roots campaign; from candidates running on climate issues for city and state office; and from growing concerns about storms, floods and fires. It also drew support from less predictable quarters: independent energy analysts, real estate businesses betting on green development, and even Consolidated Edison, the city’s other main utility, which, unlike National Grid, supplies electricity within New York City as well as gas.

Con Ed, along with proponents like the Urban Green Council, a nonprofit group that promotes sustainable building, argued in Council hearings that the city’s grid could handle the increase, partly because its biggest strains come in summer, from air conditioning. The shift to electric heating actually has the potential to reduce demand in summers, the groups’ analysts argued, because many builders are expected to turn to heat pumps, which are already common in Europe, and which both heat and cool spaces and use less energy than air-conditioners.

“To my mind, this new law would be the beginning of the end of the fossil fuel industry in America’s biggest city and a world capital,” said Pete Sikora, the climate director of New York Communities for Change, which is part of a coalition of community and environmental groups whose yearlong campaign of street protests and rallies helped bring council members on board.

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“New York City is responsible for 5 percent of gas burned in buildings, nationwide, which is huge,” Mr. Sikora said. “As the world fails to seriously confront the crisis, N.Y.C. will take a major leap forward.”

The measure's lead sponsor, Councilwoman Alicka Ampry-Samuels, a Democrat from Brooklyn, said it would reduce air pollution and climate dangers that disproportionately kill and harm vulnerable groups like Black and poor people.

"When we prioritize profits and property over people, we might as well put a bullet in everybody's head," she told activists rallying before the vote in front of City Hall.

Bans on gas hookups are the latest challenge for an industry already besieged by campaigns against fracking, pipelines and gas-fueled power plants; permits for two such plants were recently denied by state regulators. The fuel long known as natural gas, which climate advocates prefer to call methane gas or fracked gas, is less harmful to respiratory health than oil and emits less carbon, but producing it releases methane, an even more potent greenhouse gas.

In fact, the trends have made the gas industry nervous enough to lobby states to forbid localities to enact gas bans. So far, 20 state legislatures, all of which are controlled by Republicans, have passed laws preventing the bans.

But in New York, where city and state leaders emphasized that the law will help the state reach its ambitious climate goals, its main skeptics, National Grid and the Real Estate Board of New York, were relatively muted in their criticism.

James Whelan, the president of the real estate group, which lobbied to slow the law's rollout and narrow its scope, emphasized in a statement that it supports reducing greenhouse emissions, but "in a way that ensures that New Yorkers have reliable, affordable, carbon-free electricity to heat, cool and power their homes and businesses."

Eric Adams, the mayor-elect, said through a spokesman on Tuesday that he supports the compromise delaying the ban three years for larger buildings.

The law, passed 40 to 7, covers gut renovations that require new building permits. It allows exceptions for emergency power; businesses like restaurants, bakeries and laundromats; and residential buildings where at least half the units are classified as affordable.

Without substantially raising building costs, proponents say, the law will also reduce air pollution and the danger of gas explosions, create jobs in clean energy and redress environmental inequalities.

A recent study by the think tank RMI found that the law would prevent 2.1 million tons of carbon emissions by 2040 — equivalent to what 450,000 cars spew in a year — and save electricity consumers several hundred million dollars in gas connections, whose costs are passed on to them.

Supporters also include companies like BlocPower, a company based in Brooklyn that installs energy-efficient systems in buildings, and Alloy Development, which is erecting the city's first all-electric residential tower, a 44-story building in Brooklyn that aims to open in 2024.

"We are living in a climate emergency, and it's time for leaders in government and industry to respond accordingly," Alloy's chief executive, Jared Della Valle, said in a statement. "Banning new natural gas connections will not only significantly reduce new carbon emissions and improve air quality in our neighborhoods — it will also make New York City a leader in sustainable development nationally and internationally."