

NYC moves to stop new buildings from using natural gas

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Climate activists from the #GasFreeNYC coalition and elected officials rally in City Hall Park on Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021, in New York. New York City lawmakers are poised to decide whether to prohibit most new buildings from using natural gas, a move that would make the nation's most populous city a showcase for a climate-change-fighting policy that has been both embraced and blocked around the country. Credit: AP Photo/Brittainy Newman

New York City is poised to bar most new buildings from using natural gas within a few years, after lawmakers voted Wednesday to make the United States' most populous city a showcase for a climate-change-fighting policy that has been both embraced and blocked elsewhere.

If Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio signs the measure, as expected, most construction projects submitted for approval after 2027 would have to use something other than gas or oil—such as electricity—for heating, hot water and cooking. Some smaller buildings would have to comply as early as 2024.

Hospitals, commercial kitchens and some other facilities would be exempt.

Supporters say it's a substantial and necessary move to combat global warming. Heating, cooling and powering buildings accounts for nearly 70% of the city's emissions of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases.

New buildings' stoves and furnaces would use electricity generated partly from burning natural gas and other fossil fuels, but backers say the change still would keep millions of tons of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere over time. They argue it would boost momentum ahead of a statewide requirement to use 70% renewable energy by 2030, up from [about 30% now](#).

"This is a huge, huge step forward," said Alex Beauchamp of Food & Water Watch, an environmental group. He called the legislation "a real game-changer on the national scene."



New York City Council Member Alicka Ampry-Samuel rallies alongside climate activists from the #GasFreeNYC coalition and elected officials on Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021, in New York. New York City lawmakers are poised to decide whether to prohibit most new buildings from using natural gas, a move that would make the nation's most populous city a showcase for a climate-change-fighting policy that has been both embraced and blocked around the country. Credit: AP Photo/Brittainy Newman

Berkeley, California, debuted the idea of banning gas hookups for new buildings in 2019. The measure faces an ongoing court challenge from a restaurant association, but San Francisco, Seattle and a few dozen other U.S. cities—mainly in California—have followed suit.

It's too early to gauge the impact, said Amy Rider of the Building

Decarbonization Coalition, which advocates for such laws.

The town of Brookline, Massachusetts, has passed one twice. It was retooled and reapproved this summer after the state attorney general blocked the first version, saying it intruded on state authority. The AG hasn't taken action against the new effort to date.

At the same time, states including Arizona, Oklahoma and Texas have barred cities from enacting such laws, saying that consumers should have their choice of energy sources. In Texas, the effort began before, but gained all the more steam after, a February storm spawned massive power outages that left many households shivering without electricity, heat or drinkable water for days.



Pamela Stewart Martinez rallies alongside climate activists from the #GasFreeNYC coalition and elected officials, on Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021, in New York. New York City lawmakers are poised to decide whether to prohibit most new buildings from using natural gas, a move that would make the nation's most populous city a showcase for a climate-change-fighting policy that has been both embraced and blocked around the country. Credit: AP Photo/Brittainy Newman

In New York, shifts toward electric vehicles, furnaces and appliances are "expected to create long-term upward pressure" on electricity use, according to the New York Independent System Operator, which oversees the state's electricity supply.

The organization said in [a recent report](#) that it's still studying how those trends will affect the power system, but it forecasts that electricity demand in winter could surpass summer peaks by about 2040.

The state envisions big increases in wind and solar power, among other approaches to meet its renewable energy targets and growing demand. Some projects are in the works.

Still, some building interests worried at a City Council hearing last month that banning new natural gas hookups could strain the electrical grid. It already struggles during heat waves in the city, sometimes resulting in sizeable neighborhood outages.



Eric Weltman, senior organizer of Food & Water Watch, rallies alongside climate activists from the #GasFreeNYC coalition and elected officials, on Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021, in New York. New York City lawmakers are poised to decide whether to prohibit most new buildings from using natural gas, a move that would make the nation's most populous city a showcase for a climate-change-fighting policy that has been both embraced and blocked around the country.

Credit: AP Photo/Brittainy Newman

James Whelan, who runs a landlords' lobbying group called the Real Estate Board of New York, said Wednesday that it gets the importance of moving away from fossil fuels, but "these policies must be implemented in a way that ensures that New Yorkers have reliable, affordable, carbon-free electricity."

Real estate groups also pressed to push back the deadlines for nixing gas, saying that alternative technologies—such as electric heat pumps that transfer heat between indoors and outdoors—need more time to develop, particularly for skyscrapers.

Utilities, meanwhile, have sounded economic alarms, while saying they support and are working on greening the energy supply.

"We have real concerns that, as envisioned, these (proposals) may result in increased energy costs for customers," Bryan Grimaldi, a vice president of power provider National Grid, told council members last month. Con Edison, which serves much of the city, encouraged them to help poorer renters with what it characterized as increased costs of electric heating.



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Vincent Palma, plumber and gas fitter from local union #1, protests against climate activists from the #GasFreeNYC coalition who are rallying and holding a news conference in City Hall Park, Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021, in New York. New York City lawmakers are poised to decide whether to prohibit most new buildings from using natural gas, a move that would make the nation's most populous city a showcase for a climate-change-fighting policy that has been both embraced and blocked around the country. Credit: AP Photo/Brittainy Newman



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Both utilities greeted Wednesday's vote with measured statements, with Con Ed saying that a "clear-cut path toward electrification of most new buildings is a sensible and necessary step."

Environmental groups say electric doesn't necessarily mean more expensive. In fact, they say it's just the opposite in some new, energy-efficient buildings. They also note that natural gas prices fluctuate,

having risen notably this year before recently dropping somewhat.

Considering that residents have been told to forgo plastic bags and straws and take other steps to preserve the planet, it's time for legislators to look beyond individual behavior to building emissions, Council Member Alicka Ampry-Samuel told her colleagues Wednesday before they approved her legislation by a 40-7 vote, with one abstention.

The Democrat, who represents an overwhelmingly Black Brooklyn district, has said the legislation also aims to fight air pollution, particularly on behalf of communities of color. Researchers have found that non-white people are exposed to more air pollution than whites across the country.

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