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San Mateo County eyes natural gas rules

New building electrification and EV charging regulations take shape

By Anna Schuessler Daily Journal staff 6 hrs ago

Banning natural gas in new construction, offering incentives to residents who reduce their natural gas use and doing additional outreach to the building and construction community were among the measures San Mateo County officials pegged for further exploration during a discussion of proposed “reach codes” Tuesday.

Because cities can propose ordinances more stringent than California’s Energy and Green Building codes, the proposed policies up for review by the Board of Supervisors Tuesday are dubbed “reach codes.”



Rachael Londer

Though it was the first time supervisors weighed in on a specific set of reach codes outlining rules on electrification of new buildings and electric vehicle charging readiness, county and city officials have been studying them for months as a way to meet the state’s goal of carbon neutrality by 2045, said Rachael Londer, sustainability coordinator for the county’s Office of Sustainability.

Londer said a cost-effectiveness study is required to demonstrate the codes are not an unreasonable burden to builders and those who live and work in new buildings, and added that Peninsula Clean Energy has been a partner to cities considering reach codes by leveraging a statewide cost-effectiveness analysis and drafting model ordinances. According to a staff report, San Mateo and Menlo Park have already passed reach codes, and 18 cities in the county have brought reach code alternatives to their councils for review. Any codes the county adopts would apply only to unincorporated areas. Individual cities have to pass their own codes.

Londer acknowledged Berkeley and San Jose have gone beyond reach codes and taken steps to consider municipal use permits effectively banning natural gas in new construction. As part of an effort to help residents and builders transition to new technologies, Londer said staff is recommending county officials consider requiring those building new single-family and low-rise multifamily buildings to use electric sources for space and water heating as well as clothes drying and allowing natural gas to be used on stoves, fireplaces and other decorative appliances.

Also included in the proposed codes was a requirement that multi-family buildings exceeding four stories use all-electric appliances and fireplaces as well as rules requiring two electric vehicle spaces for single-family homes and duplexes, EV charging access to all units in multi-family buildings and a greater portion of spaces at commercial and office parking lots dedicated to electric vehicles.

Kathleen Goforth commended supervisors' decision in September to declare a climate emergency, and noted she similarly appreciated their efforts to explore reach codes. Though she supported staff's recommended reach codes she also urged officials to take the effort even further and ban natural gas in new construction.

"I would encourage you to go a step further and seriously consider prohibiting new natural gas infrastructure," she said, according to a video of the meeting. "It just makes no sense to continue installing that infrastructure when we want to be moving in the opposite direction."

Supervisor David Canepa joined Goforth in voicing support for exploring how officials could enact a ban on natural gas and asked Londer what steps would need to be taken to do that. Londer said both Berkeley and San Jose have reach codes in place and have opted to explore using municipal use permit to restrict natural gas

use. She recommended officials move forward with putting reach codes in place first and said staff could present information to them at a future meeting on a natural gas ban.

Supervisor Dave Pine joined other supervisors in weighing the challenge many face in making the transition from gas to electric stoves, and asked the San Mateo County Counsel's Office to look into the legality of enacting such a ban.

“If there wasn't a legal barrier then it would come down to a policy question of how much we want to push people out of their comfort zone,” he said.

Though Londer said county staff have conducted outreach with elected officials, homeowners and the building community — which includes architects, contractors and Realtors — Supervisor Warren Slocum said he hoped the county could do another round of outreach to ensure small-size builders learn about the proposed changes. Of those they have spoken with in the building community, many reported they are already building all-electric, said Londer, who added county officials could follow up with those they haven't heard from yet.

Board President Carole Groom said she hoped to see more information on what the changes could cost homeowners when officials next discuss reach codes, adding she would also like to see if other jurisdictions have offered residents incentives for making these changes.

Supervisors also unanimously voted to restrict cannabis and alcohol advertising on billboards on unincorporated county land in an effort to curb youth exposure to drugs and alcohol.

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