

Maryland must reduce its natural gas consumption

Commentary in support of the Climate Solutions Now Act of 2022

By: Baltimore Sun Editorial Board

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There's an old saying (and song lyric) repeated around the State House whenever difficult issues arise before the Maryland General Assembly: Everybody wants to get into heaven, but nobody wants to die. In the context of legislative matters, it means that we can all usually agree on good outcomes, but it's how best to get there that proves daunting. In the matter of how to deal with the serious threat posed by climate change, most lawmakers (those who aren't outright global warming deniers) favor a reduced carbon footprint. But, aside from the relatively easy steps like encouraging renewables or providing incentives for homeowners to invest in insulation or other forms of conservation, the devil is inevitably in the details. That was evident last week when landmark climate legislation, **the Climate Solutions Now Act of 2022, received its first hearing before the Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee.**

The sticking point? Not necessarily in setting more ambitious goals like a 60% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 (the state is currently on track for a 40% reduction in eight years), but in specific measures to reduce natural gas consumption. And here's one that could prove a significant roadblock: **The legislation would mandate that all new buildings in Maryland be powered by electricity.** That prospect drew howls from Baltimore Gas and Electric and others with significant investments in natural gas distribution. And, indeed, that industry has long tried to present itself as at least a "transitional" fuel that is not as harmful as burning coal or gasoline. And there's surely no shortage of consumers who like their gas stoves, water heaters and furnaces — or at least they did prior to **recent rate hikes that have raised the cost of natural gas 24% from one year ago (and may increase further as Russia threatens Ukraine).**

In reality, the primary component of natural gas, methane, is a far more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. Production leakage is a major problem, but even if that were addressed, methane is still a fossil fuel and so produces carbon dioxide when it's burned. **Adding natural gas capacity whether in the U.S. or elsewhere will only make matters worse. There's simply no room for further fossil fuel development if the world is serious about meeting its climate goal of no more than a 2-degree Celsius rise (or 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) in average temperatures this**

century. Switching to all-electric construction is a sensible move, particularly as its followed by greater investment in greener forms of electrical generation including wind and solar.

Nevertheless, opponents of electrification have made claims about natural gas that don't stand up to scrutiny. They have said that natural gas is more reliable (which ignores how most gas furnaces require electricity to run), that it's cheaper (the Maryland Commission on Climate Change actually found the reverse to be true), and that transitioning to electricity will harm low and moderate income households when, again, the long-term fuel costs should actually prove lower. Granted, not everyone can afford new appliances, but that requirement of the legislation is aimed primarily at new construction.

Some companies and individuals may take a financial hit as the state transitions away from natural gas, of course. But setting energy policy based on gas production or pipeline jobs is like setting Chesapeake Bay water quality goals based on the convenience to polluters. And make no mistake, Maryland is particularly vulnerable to climate change because of its coastal location. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has warned that rising sea levels, worsening storms, and saltwater intrusion that ruins farmland and infiltrates drinking water supplies could spell disaster for the state, particularly low-lying areas near the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. Maryland can't afford to wait for other states or countries to make the transition to clean energy; we must lead by example.

Lawmakers should keep this threat in mind as they consider any changes to the legislation to reduce its impact or delay its implementation. There may be a price to pay for reducing our dependence on methane but there's an even greater price to be paid by doing nothing about climate change. Build more gas pipelines and we are locking in more carbon production for decades hence. And while it's all very well to transition to electric school buses or insist new or renovated schools are energy efficient, lawmakers must insist on doing the more politically difficult things as well beginning with regulating natural gas out of all new buildings.