**City gas ban sets back climate action**

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**By Thomas Cheney and Stewart Muir**

Recently the City of Victoria announced a ban on natural-gas connections for buildings built after 2025, resulting in quite a number of letters to the editor both for and against the move. While there was some support, it was also clear that not everyone buys the city’s contention that such a move is likely to advance climate action.

The situation is, indeed, paradoxical. While it’s true that natural gas today is a fossil fuel, we should be thoughtful – and so should the City of Victoria – about a sudden disruption in its use.

It’s almost as if the city has said, “what’s the best way to replace the gas energy system?” The flaw is that this approach does not consider the question of what form of renewable energy is best for meeting public goals.

That’s especially true when we’re talking about declaring a ban on a part of the energy system that is actually quite well fitted to handling the long-term challenges of climate change.

While electrification is important, eliminating the gas system is shortsighted, and will create long-term costs for society and worsen energy poverty. Electrification and low-carbon renewable gases can work in concert to deliver a just, cost-effective climate-change solution while building on the city’s leadership in advancing 100% renewable energy.

According to a study prepared for FortisBC, climate-action approaches focusing on electrification and gas system contraction double the cost to achieve emissions mitigation goals, from $393 to $839 per tonne of CO2 (the current carbon tax is $50 per tonne).

In the long term, this approach will cost the average homeowner thousands of dollars but do nothing to reduce emissions. This is because FortisBC will ensure that all new gas connections will use renewable gas from biomethane or hydrogen. Since renewable gas can have negative emissions (for example, when gas from food waste is captured before it has the chance to turn into harmful methane), a gas ban might even lead to higher emissions.

Unlike electricity, renewable gas can be stored and by converting power to gas (e.g., hydrogen or methane), we can use the summer sun or the fall wind to heat our homes on a cold January day. During the coldest day of 2020, the FortisBC natural gas system delivered twice as much energy as the BC Hydro electricity system.

As electricity through heat pumps comes to play a much larger role in heating our communities, that power will have to come from somewhere. If natural-gas infrastructure is banned, a massive expansion of the electricity system will be needed even though it would only be used for several hundred hours per year.

Since few potential large hydroelectric sites exist to be developed in BC, that future electricity will have to come increasingly from variable sources such as wind energy. Until battery storage at a large scale becomes available, these sources will always be unreliable.

Meanwhile, there is no shortage of renewable and low carbon gas. One study found over 440 petajoules of potential, more than all of BC’s current natural-gas demand. Wastes from the timber and pulp sectors can also be converted into renewable gas, helping support jobs in the agricultural and forestry sectors.

The gas grid is an essential part of facilitating the ambitious and necessary transition to renewable energy. It should not be seen as a relic of the fossil-fuel era, but rather a foundation to build the renewable energy system to power the circular, zero-waste economy many of us want.

Tackling climate change is a team effort. Kicking the gas grid off the team is an expensive, symbolic move that could even be counterproductive to the city’s renewable energy goals.

To make sound climate policy decisions, we need to separate concerns about fossil natural-gas fuel carried by the gas infrastructure and the role it is ideally suited to play in a future renewable-energy system.

This is why the outcome we now have holds back, rather than promotes, the deployment of renewable energy that is critical to meeting the city’s 100% renewable-energy goals. Victoria’s latest policy deserves a second look when a new city council takes office next month.

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