

POLICY PRIMER: ELECTRIFYING BUILDINGS

American
Cities Climate
Challenge

Bloomberg
Philanthropies

Many buildings still rely on fossil fuels—such as natural gas, propane, and oil—for things like space and water heating, cooking, and doing laundry. These fossil fuel-dependent appliances can account for up to 40 percent of a city's total emissions, despite the fact that affordable clean energy alternatives for these systems already exist. As part of the Bloomberg Philanthropies American Cities Climate Challenge, 25 cities are working to accelerate the efficient electrification of their municipal buildings as well as buildings in the private sector—allowing for a faster transition toward clean, renewable energy.

What steps are Climate Challenge cities taking?

Electrifying city-owned buildings first. Cities are leading by example. Electrifying municipal buildings not only demonstrates the real-world benefits and accessibility of such projects but it also revs up regional clean energy expertise and increases awareness among local contractors, city residents, and policymakers.

Identifying workforce development opportunities. Cities are promoting good-paying, local jobs related to transitioning buildings from fossil fuels to clean, renewable electricity. By engaging with labor unions, cities can grow good jobs with training programs, apprenticeship, job placement assistance, and workforce policy incentives.

Offering electrification education and incentives for businesses and residents. The city can take the lead in boosting building electrification in the private sector by, say, providing training for building managers and operators, homeowners, and tenants; partnering with local utilities to offer rebates; and/or streamlining the permitting process for installation.

Improving building energy codes. Cities can keep buildings safe and energy efficient by making sure their energy codes are in line with the latest technology and best practices, such as requiring the electrification of new buildings or incentivizing building owners to install new technology like heat pumps. Cities can also require that buildings meet certain energy-saving thresholds by set dates, spurring improvement in the lowest-performing buildings that contribute the most greenhouse gases.

What are the benefits of electrifying buildings?

Health. Shifting away from combustible fossil fuels improves both indoor and outdoor air quality and protects residents' health, which is particularly important as residents spend more time indoors during the pandemic. Fossil fuel pollution has been linked with serious health issues, such as asthma, lung cancer, and heart disease, as well as worse outcomes for those infected with COVID-19.

Money. The electrification of buildings will create local clean energy jobs that can't be outsourced, which will aid in economic recovery in the wake of COVID-19. All-electric buildings also cost less to build and are quicker to construct, allowing for more new housing. Shielded from gas prices that could increase rapidly, owners and tenants of all-electric buildings (particularly those with solar panels) will also tend to see lower ongoing costs.

Environment. Building electrification reduces the emissions that drive climate change and moves cities that much closer to their 100 percent clean energy goals. Transitioning to efficient electrical appliances also allows Americans to bring renewable energy into their homes—creating 100 percent clean and healthy living spaces.

Safety. Gas leaks—which can be caused by several issues, including earthquakes that rupture pipelines—can lead to devastating explosions and fires.