

# SAN JOSÉ

## San José Existing Building Electrification Plan

### Powering Up San José's Existing Building Electrification Plan

After joining the American Cities Climate Challenge in 2018, San José announced a series of policies to confront the threats posed by climate change, and that momentum has continued throughout the Climate Challenge. Last November San José became one of the largest cities to adopt a goal of carbon neutrality by 2030. With the passage of a new reach code that went into effect in January 2021, and a natural gas infrastructure prohibition—which prevents gas hookups in new buildings—that went into effect August 2021, nearly all new buildings in San José will be all-electric and required to have some infrastructure for electric vehicle charging and on-site solar. The city is also working on a long-term plan to equitably decarbonize its existing building stock.

“Buildings produce 34 percent of San José’s total emissions; they represent a huge opportunity for the city to decarbonize,” says Julie Benabente, deputy director of the Environmental Services Department, which oversees implementation of Climate Smart San José, the city’s Climate Action Plan. One major challenge to overcome are the disparate economic conditions of San José’s one million residents. In the San Francisco Bay Area, the top tenth of earners make an average of 12.2 times more than those in the bottom tenth.

Much of San José’s economic inequality is tied to its status as the largest city in Silicon Valley, home of the postindustrial economy’s biggest enterprises, producing unprecedented technological advances and enormous wealth. As a result, many longtime residents not working in the tech industry have seen living costs skyrocket without a proportional wage increase. Today San José contains a stark duality, as the greatest beneficiaries of the new economy live side-by-side



The city’s engagement team team identified four community priorities related to building electrification:

- Housing and energy affordability
  - Health and indoor air quality
  - Access to well-paying jobs
  - Access to reliable energy
- 

with low-wage workers. Building electrification and renewable energy are more accessible for some than for others; higher-income communities have more resources to invest and are in a better position to take advantage of existing incentives to do so.

“We see that many people living in wealthier communities have electric vehicles and solar on their roofs,” says Elena Olmedo, an NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council) climate adviser working closely with the city. “Full electrification might be an easy adjustment for some but an insurmountable cost for others—especially in the city’s long-standing working-class Latino and Vietnamese communities.”

To make its sustainability commitment truly equitable and actionable, San José used technical assistance from the Building Electrification Institute (BEI), a Climate Challenge partner, and Upright Consulting, an organization that helps center equity in sustainability projects and a longtime partner to BEI, to draft the Existing Building Electrification Plan. As part of this work, BEI produced an inventory of all the buildings in San José by typology and vintage to provide insights that city staff could use to create effective policies and programs. The inventory also layered on demographic, environmental, and social vulnerability data for different areas of the city.

The economic inequalities across neighborhoods made it clear that using a one-size-fits-all approach to implement the Existing Building Electrification Plan would be ineffective. “We used the building stock analysis to help San José understand where its most vulnerable communities are located and discuss where different approaches will be needed to accelerate building electrification across all communities,” says Caytie Campbell-Orrrock, assistant director at BEI. “This was just a first step, but an important step to more deeply engage with historically marginalized communities, who have both the lived experience and the ideas for solutions to more equitably share the benefits of building electrification.”

As she and her colleagues began to analyze environmental maps displaying demographic data including race, pollution exposure, energy burden, and household languages, the correlation between poverty and exposure to environmental burdens became impossible to ignore. “City staff started to understand

more about how an equity approach to building electrification could play an important role in reducing environmental and social burdens faced by marginalized communities,” Benabente says. “If we’re going to center equity in the plan, we need to focus on our underserved communities and ensure they have access to building electrification,” she adds.

To develop a decarbonization plan, Climate Challenge and BEI staff interviewed several community groups, eventually selecting Veggielution and the International Children’s Assistance Network (ICAN) to join the “co-creation team” and help the city design an equitable community engagement strategy. Both groups are local to East San José, and Veggielution is part of the Si Se Puede Collective, five organizations taking on issues facing East San José residents. Both provide community and social service programs to East San José, with particular attention on helping immigrant families navigate life in the United States. Veggielution focuses on urban farming and food distribution, while ICAN reaches stakeholders through education and child-care programs. Thus, community needs were already their focus before partnering with the city and Climate Challenge staff.

In January 2021, Veggielution and ICAN, along with BEI, Upright, and city staff, began their work to identify community priorities and raise awareness of San José’s electrification plan and its benefits. Twice a month, the local groups brought the community perspective to meetings with BEI and the city. The team identified four community priorities related to building electrification: housing and energy affordability, health and indoor air quality, access to well-paying jobs, and access to reliable energy. Though the plan was initially designed for electrification, it quickly became clear that it could be a useful tool for bringing economic opportunities to underserved communities.

“It’s going to be really important for us to try to make building electrification jobs an inclusive opportunity for individuals being trained in this sector,” says Monique Melchor, director of work2future, a workforce development program that provides job training and career services to local residents. “That includes addressing language barriers and making sure that workforce development opportunities reach historically marginalized communities.” Electrification can potentially provide high-paying jobs in manufacturing,

installation, and maintenance across the country. “This is an exciting prospect for marginalized individuals to become the future workers in this growing sector,” Melchor says. Many contractors from immigrant communities are ready and eager to participate in the retrofit market and the economic opportunities that will come from building electrification. Though policy recommendations are still being solidified, recruiting local contractors for the transition and making electrification a permanent part of vocational education curricula are on the table.

The co-creation effort was followed by general community engagement on the draft of the electrification plan. The team partnered with Winter Consulting, a local community engagement organization, to host a series of public forums with community-based organizations, labor organizations, and housing groups to ask for feedback, vet the content of the plan, and ensure that as many voices as possible were captured and integrated. City staff recently released the draft of the Existing Building Electrification Plan for public review and hosted information sessions to introduce the plan to the public.

### The Future

Ultimately, approval of the electrification plan and its equity proposals will be in the hands of the San José City Council. Olmedo says the draft plan will likely be put before the Council in May 2022 for consideration and approval. Once approved, the task becomes implementing the plan’s recommendations, including an array of programs and policies to electrify the city without abandoning the economically underserved. For example, one of the recommendations in the plan is a Retrofit Accelerator to streamline the building electrification process for single-family and multifamily buildings and to prioritize funding for low-income households. “I’ve seen incredible leadership in San José and feel really good about taking the plan to Council; it’s certainly a priority,” Olmedo says. “Having sufficient funding will be critical for plan implementation.”

### Lessons From Centering Equity in the Process

The electrification plan now has the potential to become an essential tool in San José’s fight against both the climate crisis and economic inequality. But centering equity was a learning process. “Starting early with the community was really, really important. They provided some really good feedback for us on how to shape things,” says Olmedo.

Still, engaging with the community as an institutional representative can lead to a loss in translation—literally and figuratively. Olmedo says it has become clear that a broader swath of public-facing material needs to be translated into Spanish and Vietnamese. It’s also important to avoid technical jargon and lead with issues relevant and important to the community. She stresses that transparency and adaptability are key when engaging community stakeholders. “We’re trying to give people as much information as possible so that they can make the best decision for themselves,” she says. “We want to raise awareness about the health benefits. We know that kids who grow up in homes with gas stoves have an increased risk of developing asthma. We also see a lot of potential for cost savings, but that will depend on several factors—such as energy efficiency of the home, efficiency of new electric appliances, rate structure, whether combined with renewable energy—and will vary based on the individual’s situation. We are encouraging residents to switch to electric by sharing information about the benefits, incentives, resources, and average retrofit cost.”

Honoring the agency of communities and respecting their expertise can go a long way. So can recognizing that the transition to electrification may include some sacrifices. For instance, many cultures’ cuisines, including Mexican and Vietnamese, are well suited to the gas stove. Electrification may require a different way of cooking, which could signify a big shift for a community. “We need to be sensitive to that,” says Olmedo. “One lesson we learned about equity and switching from gas to electric appliances for cooking is that it is not just about reducing barriers like cost; it’s about meeting people where they are. It’s important to let them know about the health benefits and assist them with transitioning to cleaner technology so they can continue their traditions authentically and in a way that works for them.”