While the coronavirus has many of us staying home, using video-conferencing more than we thought possible, and generally waiting for the next COVID-19 headline, I thought I’d share the success story of Berkeley’s ban on methane (more benignly known as “natural”) gas. This is an encouraging example of how a few activists focused on local action can have an unexpected and far-reaching impact.

The Berkeley example combines lessons, both old and new, that can guide activist work.

Building a Fossil Free Path
This story begins back in early 2018 when some activists gathered to promote the idea of a Climate Emergency in Berkeley, California. This action set the stage for the Berkeley City Council to unanimously approve a Climate Emergency resolution in June of 2018, making Berkeley the first West Coast city and only the third in the U.S. to declare a Climate Emergency.¹

¹Los Angeles had taken action in April of 2018 to establish a new Climate Emergency Mobilization Department, but did not formally declare a Climate Emergency. Since 2018, and as of this writing, 90 separate governments within the U.S. have declared a Climate Emergency.
Following Berkeley’s official recognition of the climate emergency, activists moved to support the city’s efforts to organize a regional “Climate Emergency Mobilization Town Hall” in August. The City of Berkeley was on center stage as representatives from other Bay Area cities came together to share their mitigation and resilience activities and discuss future strategies. Working together strengthened activist relationships with the City and led to a successful Town Hall meeting.

After the Town Hall, Berkeley activists continued their work with the City Council and the city’s Energy Commission to develop a pathway to a Fossil Free Berkeley. By October 2018 the neighboring cities of Richmond and Oakland had passed Climate Emergency resolutions and in January 2019 the Energy Commission issued its Fossil Free Berkeley report. By then over a dozen local activist groups were working collaboratively with City Council members, the Energy Commission, and with each other to advance climate related policy and legislation.2

The Phone Call
In the midst of the Town Hall work, Berkeley Council Member Kate Harrison had received a phone call. It was from a constituent who asked "Why is the Planning Department insisting that a natural gas line be brought to the new guest house (also known as an “accessory dwelling unit”) on my lot?" Well versed in climate issues and knowing that methane is a dangerous climate pollutant, Harrison's office went into action, searching for answers to questions such as: Where in California state law or the building code does it say that natural gas be brought to all buildings? What are the environmental and health impacts of gas appliances in small, enclosed spaces? What does the City of Berkeley have the authority to do in this situation?

Early answers to these questions included one that opened the door to proposing legislation to ban natural gas in new buildings. It suggested that the City’s police powers allow Berkeley to regulate anything that poses a threat to the health and safety of its residents. Certainly, methane as a source of indoor air pollution and fire risk during or after earthquakes would seem to qualify.

Building Momentum
Armed with preliminary answers, Council Member Harrison spoke with members of the activist community who had supported the Climate Emergency resolution and with other local and state officials. Most crucially, she sought opinions about Berkeley’s legal standing to create legislation controlling the use of natural gas in buildings. Soon Council Member Harrison and her staff were in regular contact with key individuals in several different organizations: Rachel Golden, Deputy Director -

2 These groups included 350 East Bay, Sunflower Alliance, The Climate Mobilization, the UN Association - East Bay, Norcal Resiliency Network, Berkeley Ecology Center, Transition Berkeley, Sierra Club, Urban Permaculture Institute, Berkeley Climate Action Coalition, Progressive Student Association, Cool Blocks & Green Mondays, League of Women Voters, and American Friends Service Community.
Building Electrification at the Sierra Club; Pierre Delforge, Senior Scientist - Building Decarbonization, Climate & Clean Energy Program at the Natural Resources Defense Council; David Hochschild, Chair - California Energy Commission; and with several others who were excited to help.

Architects, engineers, and contractors joined the conversation and confirmed that a new building featuring all-electric construction would save money compared to one that included natural gas. The Berkeley Energy Commission hosted two public outreach and educational workshops to solicit community input. These workshops provided opportunities for community members and activists to express their concerns or support for banning natural gas in buildings. Specialists from Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, Rocky Mountain Institute, and other regional and national organizations shared data and case studies that confirmed the cost, health, and climate benefits of building decarbonization.

**Berkeley’s Natural Gas Ban**
On July 16, 2019 the full Berkeley City Council voted on the proposal. Thirty-six public comments had been received by the Council with most expressing strong support for the ban, including a supportive comment from Pacific Gas and Electric, the local gas utility. The Council approved the ordinance unanimously with an effective date of January 1, 2020.
The vote, by a city with a population of slightly over 120,000 people, marked the first regulation to ban natural gas in buildings in the United States. It has been hailed by the Union of Concerned Scientists as a landmark action that “sets in motion what could be a huge breakthrough in building decarbonization.” The action has been covered by the national and international press and represents a big win for local activists and others concerned about our changing climate. See the media links at the end of this report for more detail.

Take-Away Lessons for Activists
What are the major lessons, both old and new, that climate activists, wherever they are, can take to heart?

The first lesson: never underestimate the power of people working together. Prior to the gas ban, Berkeley activists worked together for over a year focusing on actions to respond to the climate crisis. These individuals had learned to work together and to trust one another. They had established credibility in the eyes of local elected officials and were recognized as representative of the community. Certainly, the City’s openness to community engagement and a council member’s passion facilitated this connection. But it was the community of activists showing up time and time again to support, encourage, and comment on what the council members were considering that helped breathe life into the entire effort. The power of the local activists was augmented by connections to regional and national specialists who strengthened Berkeley’s justification and approach to the ban. Also critical to success was the existence on the city council of a climate champion who continuously pushed the legislation forward.

Another lesson has been provided by the COVID-19 crisis: Bold and early action can set the stage for continuous progress in addressing our climate crisis. In the case of Berkeley, passing the 2018 Climate Emergency resolution and defining a path to a Fossil Free Berkeley laid the groundwork for the legislation. It is not too hard to imagine that without the initial efforts to declare a climate emergency, there would have been no ban on natural gas. The early action also allowed the Berkeley activist community to coalesce around the idea of immediate actions to address the climate crisis; they were primed to support new and aggressive legislation.

And perhaps the most tried and true lesson for activists: never give up. In 2018 when activists were focused on declaring a climate emergency, little did anyone in Berkeley know that a phone call from a frustrated resident would serve as the spark for a first-in-the-nation ordinance that stops the expansion of methane gas use in new buildings and eliminates associated climate and health impacts for as long as the buildings exist. Don’t be afraid to start working on something even when the finish line isn’t in sight. And don’t back down from what you believe to be right.
For me, this report from Berkeley is a reminder that we are all working to save our planet. We are working together even if we live miles apart. And we can always learn from both the successes, and from the challenges we face in reaching our goal.

Links for more information:


https://www.sierraclub.org/articles/2020/03/californians-want-stop-burning-gas-their-homes


https://e360.yale.edu/features/to-cut-carbon-emissions-a-movement-grows-to-electrify-everything