

The Signs Are Clear:

Why a growing movement of local governments is taking action to prohibit new gas stations and fast track the clean energy transition

The growing SAFE Cities movement of local governments working to stop the expansion of all types of fossil fuel infrastructure includes many taking action to prohibit new gas stations in the US and Canada. Local government leaders and advocates are increasingly convinced that the negative health, environmental, equity, and economic impacts of gas stations can no longer be justified, especially in light of the need to stop expanding fossil fuel infrastructure to combat the climate crisis and the rapid growth in opportunities for the electrification of transportation. Since Petaluma, CA passed the first policy in 2021, at least four more local governments in the US have passed permanent prohibitions, and at least six more in the US and Canada have policies in development to do the same. This report from SAFE Cities at Stand.earth, the Coalition Opposing New Gas Stations (CONGAS), Coltura, and Elected Official to Protect America (EOPA) outlines the reasons why prohibiting new gas stations is right for communities.

Reason #1: Local Environmental, Health, and Equity Impact



Even small spills at stations threaten public health as over time they can add up to significant soil and water pollution. Research shows gas stations vent more toxic fumes than previously thought, including benzene, a known carcinogen and ozone, which causes respiratory problems and asthma. The US EPA says that about half of the 450,000 brownfield sites are contaminated by petroleum, with much of it coming from leaking underground tanks from old gas stations, and a US EPA study showed that 11% of BIPOC people and 14% of those below the poverty level in the US live within a half mile of a brownfield site. In Santa Rosa, CA, which has introduced a policy to prohibit new gas stations, a recent analysis found that 44 of the city's 46 gas stations are located in neighborhoods where the predominant population is lower income and people of color.

Reason #2: Financial Risks to Cities and Neighborhoods

Gas stations are a declining business in the US and Canada. A recent study found that up to 80% of traditional model gas stations may be unprofitable in about 15 years. But unlike many other kinds of businesses, when a gas station shutsters it's an expensive and complicated process to clean up the all-too-common leaks and contamination from underground storage tanks so the site is safe for a new business to open there. Cities and counties face pollution risks and costly cleanups associated with gas stations as this story from Newburgh, NY shows. Similar stories are found in Van Zandt, WA and Erie County, NY. The cost of remediating a gas station site ranges from tens of thousands to more than \$2 million, with an average cost of \$243,299 per site. Prohibiting new gas stations prevents an increase in financial risk from clean up and redevelopment.





Reason #3: Global Climate Impacts

Burning fossil fuels for transportation has huge climate impacts. [The US and Canada are first and second in the world](#) for per capita greenhouse gas emissions from road transportation. [Transportation is the largest sector for US greenhouse gas emissions, making up 27% of the total](#) – most of that from burning gasoline in cars, trucks and SUVs. [In Canada transportation is responsible for 24% of greenhouse gas emissions, making it the second largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in the country.](#) A steady transition away from gasoline cars is critical for meeting greenhouse emission reduction goals at every level of government. Ending new gas station construction may not immediately reduce the amount of fossil fuels burned for transportation. But it will send a clear signal to the markets that new gas stations are a needless stranded cost because communities expect to make the transition to transportation powered by clean energy.

Reason #4: EVs Are the Future

Fossil fuel pumps are going to be obsolete. [California plans to end new gas car sales by 2035](#), so does [Canada](#). [Washington State plans to by 2030, and the idea is gaining traction](#) in other places. [Car makers are bolstering their EV offerings](#), with GM, for example, planning to shift entirely to building all-electric cars in a little over 12 years. Existing fossil fuel pumps are more than sufficient to meet the needs during the transition. Any new gas stations will rapidly become stranded assets. This month the Biden Administration announced its plan for [making EV charging stations accessible across the US](#). And [more and more charging stations will be available](#) at workplaces, cinemas, public buildings, shopping centers, and other places where cars are parked for extended periods of time. Many local governments are also [increasing transit](#), including transit powered by renewables rather than fossil fuels, and promoting active transportation options, including walking and biking in [Canada](#) and the [US](#).





Case Study of the Home of the First Policy:

In 2021 the City of Petaluma in Sonoma County, CA passed the nation's first ban on new gas stations. Petaluma already has 16 gas stations and Petaluma City Councilor D'Lynda Fischer, who championed the policy, said that was enough. "Sixty percent of trips in Sonoma County are under five miles," Fischer told [The Guardian](#) at the time the ordinance passed. "On top of that, sixty percent of our greenhouse gas emissions are from transportation. We have an obligation to do this." The final straw for the community was when a Safeway grocery store applied to build a large new gas station near homes and a school, putting residents and schoolchildren at increased health risks from the gas station's toxic fumes. The project was unpopular but did not technically violate any local zoning laws.

"The trend now is the big box retailers are using fuel as a low cost leader to get people into the stores, and those are the gas stations that are filing applications to get into our cities," says Fischer. "They are not little mom and pops applying for the small place on the corner."

[Safeway eventually abandoned the project](#) and Petaluma's new rule will keep other new gas stations at bay. And the people of Petaluma keep calling for more policies to move off of fossil fuels and Fischer says the city staff is working hard to make that happen, with a new building electrification policy, climate emergency plan, being part of Cool Cities, and a goal of climate neutrality by 2030. The people's motivation, says Fischer, comes from the size of the community, the history of environmental commitment in the region, and the increasing impacts of climate change including wildfire. "We know we need to build a future free from fossil fuels in Petaluma and everywhere," says Fischer. Petaluma and Fischer kicked off a movement which is growing rapidly across the US and Canada.



*Petaluma Council Member
and policy champion
D'Lynda Fischer*

Partners and Resources:

The following organizations are partners on this report and provide resources to help communities prohibit new gas stations and develop and pass other policies to stop fossil fuel expansion and transition to clean energy:

SAFE Cities at Stand.earth:

SAFE Cities is a growing movement of neighbors, local groups, and local government leaders phasing out fossil fuels and fast-tracking clean energy solutions. A prohibition of new gas stations is one of the suite of SAFE Cities policies that communities can choose to stop fossil fuel expansion and phase out fossil fuels.

If you're a local elected official, staff person, or volunteer advisor to local government in a US or Canadian community that is ready to prohibit new gas stations or pass other policies to stop fossil fuel expansion or phase out fossil fuels, please [sign up to join our NEOS network for local government elected officials, staff, and volunteer advisors](#), which is supported by SAFE Cities and Elected Officials to Protect America (EOPA). If you're an advocate ready to help your community prohibit new gas stations or pass other policies to stop fossil fuel expansion or phase out fossil fuels, please [sign up to join our SAFE Cities Organizing Network](#) and connect with SAFE Cities staff.

The Coalition Opposing New Gas Stations (CONGAS):

CONGAS is a grassroots community-based coalition of hundreds of Sonoma County residents and over a dozen local organizations. CONGAS's mission is to stop the construction of new gas stations in Sonoma County and beyond. CONGAS was initiated in 2019 when Sonoma County residents became alarmed about a huge 24/7/365 16-pump gas station, car wash, and mini-mart proposal in the county. The community rose up and the application was withdrawn amid fierce community opposition. Subsequently, two additional new gas station proposals have been defeated and there are currently four active permit applications for new gas stations that CONGAS is actively opposing.



Partners and Resources continued:

Coltura:

Coltura improves climate, health, and equity by accelerating the switch from gasoline and diesel to cleaner alternatives. Coltura conducts in-depth policy research concerning gasoline. In 2021, its co-executive directors published [Governing the Gasoline Spigot: Gas Stations and the Transition Away from Gasoline](#), the leading analysis of gas station regulation.

Elected Officials to Protect America (EOPA):

EOPA brings together current and former elected officials who care deeply about protecting our planet and people from the dangers of climate change, EOPA educates through value-based storytelling, training lawmakers, and connecting elected officials to inspire strong environmental policy. We have lawmakers who are veterans and other elected officials who represent frontline communities leading our efforts.

