

Hogan Administration Officials Diverge on Building Decarbonization Plan

By **Josh Kurtz** - November 2, 2021



The Maryland Climate Change Commission backed recommendations to decarbonize homes and commercial buildings in the state, despite an effort by the head of the Maryland Energy Administration to block the provision from an annual report. Pixabay photo.

The head of the Maryland Energy Administration (MEA) tried to block a provision under consideration by the state's Climate Change Commission on Monday that would strengthen green building standards in the state.

Mary Beth Tung, director of the MEA, had contacted fellow members of the climate change commission and several state agency leaders by email late Sunday night, just hours before the panel's quarterly meeting, to outline her objections to the commission's recommendations for decarbonizing homes and commercial buildings. Workgroups of the Maryland Climate Change Commission have been meeting for more than 18 months to develop standards for new residential and commercial buildings to be heated by electricity rather than natural gas and to make suggestions for retrofitting existing homes and office buildings with electric-based heat.

The recommendations were to be part of the commission's 2021 annual report, which is due to be submitted in two weeks to Gov. Lawrence J. Hogan Jr. (R) and the General Assembly. The commission, an advisory body consisting of leaders of eight state agencies, lawmakers, environmental advocates, business representatives, and other stakeholders, serves in an advisory capacity for the administration and the legislature and makes policy recommendations to help the state meet its greenhouse gas reduction goals.



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Tung's opposition, laid out both in her Sunday night email and then reiterated at the commission's virtual session Monday afternoon, put her at odds with several other Hogan appointees who also serve on the commission — most notably, Environment Secretary Ben Grumbles, who is the panel chair.

The recommendations seek to reduce the use of fossil fuels for building heating dramatically by 2035 and call for zero direct building emissions by 2045. But Tung said that while she shares the goals of her fellow climate commissioners who want to reduce building emissions through a transition to electrification, they were acting too hastily.

“I know a lot of people, understandably so, want to get this moving, but this is not prime time yet,” she said.

Tung said the commission’s recommendations had “unclear mechanisms” for achieving greenhouse gas reductions and cost savings to consumers, and argued that retrofitting homes and commercial buildings, and the “near elimination of natural gas,” would especially impact low-income consumers and ratepayers of color.

“Energy poverty is increasing daily, really, in Maryland, and that will really be felt in low-income homes,” Tung said.

“We’re trying to get to the same place,” she said later. “We all have the same thoughts. I’m just not sure of the timeline.”

Several members of the panel said they did not believe that the climate change commission recommendations on heating buildings went far enough for reducing emissions. They debated a proposed amendment that would have spelled out more clearly that the legislature and the Maryland Public Service Commission, which regulates utilities in the state, should take a more aggressive stance when it comes to setting guidelines on building energy standards for the power companies to meet.

“If the utilities are going to be submitting plans [on retrofitting buildings], they are going to submit plans that serve the utility industry,” said David S. Lapp, director of the Office of People’s Counsel, which represents consumers on utility regulatory and policy matters in the state.

Lapp’s motion was favored by a majority of the climate commissioners present but fell short of the 60% the measure needed to be added to the overall recommendations on building efficiency.

State Sen. Paul G. Pinsky (D-Prince George’s), the chair of the Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee who serves on the climate change commission, said he wished the electrification goals were more aggressive and Del. Dana Stein (D-Baltimore County), vice chair of the House Environment and Transportation Committee, said he would have preferred setting interim climate reduction goals for 2030.

“We’re not as explicit and aggressive in the shifting of our existing building stock to electrification,” Pinsky said.

The eventual vote to approve the proposed annual report, with the building code provisions included, was 24-2, with Maryland Planning Secretary Robert S. McCord joining Tung in opposition.

Grumbles hailed the collaborative process that went into developing the green building recommendations.

“I can honestly say that no agency or organization or individual has been ignored,” he said. “There’s been robust discussions, and this is the time for an independent commission to make some bold recommendations.”



Several commission members — including state Treasurer Nancy K. Kopp (D), who **recently announced her intention to retire** and was likely attending her last climate change commission meeting — said they hoped the latest recommendations would inspire legislation or executive action in Annapolis.

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Founding Editor Josh Kurtz is a veteran chronicler of Maryland politics and government. He began covering the State House in 1995 for *The Gazette* newspapers, and has been writing about state and local politics ever since. He was an editor at *Roll Call*, the Capitol Hill newspaper, for eight years, and for eight years was the editor of *E&E Daily*, which covers energy and environmental policy on Capitol Hill. For 6 1/2 years Kurtz wrote a weekly column on state politics for *Center Maryland* and has written for several other Maryland publications as well. Kurtz regularly gives speeches and appears on TV and radio shows to discuss Maryland politics.

