

Senate unveils sweeping climate bill

By [Sabrina Shankman](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 7, 2022,

The state Senate on Thursday unveiled a sweeping climate bill that would pour money into development of clean energy, set mandates for government agencies, and allow some cities and towns to ban gas in new construction.

Unlike the broad strokes of past climate legislation that focused on setting strict targets for slashing emissions, Thursday's proposal delves into granular details of state programs and agencies perceived as acting too slow on the climate.

It includes proposals for increasing rebates on electric vehicles by as much as \$2,000 over the \$2,500 now, and a requirement that all vehicles sold in the state be electric starting in 2035. It also would require all new MBTA buses be electric starting in 2028.

Lawmakers said the bill must take urgent priority.

“Let’s face it, the improvements that we make in education or in health care policy won’t mean anything if our coastal cities and cities are under water,” said Senate president Karen Spilka at a press conference announcing the bill. “By driving climate policy forward, we can meet the moment with a clean energy revolution.”

The bill focuses on three aspects of the state’s response to climate change: the transition to clean energy on the electrical grid, the massive work of weaning homes from fossil fuel heat, and dramatically reducing emissions from the state’s 4.3 million cars.

It now faces steep challenges as it goes to debate in the Senate and a potentially difficult reconciliation with the House version of the bill — with a tight deadline of July 31 for having a bill on the governor’s desk.

The House bill, which passed last month, took a very different approach, with a narrow focus on boosting the offshore wind industry and modernizing the electric grid. Representative Jeffrey N. Roy, House chair of the Joint Committee on Telecommunications, Utilities, & Energy, said he disagreed

with the Senate proposal's focus on converting broad swaths of the state to electricity when the electric grid is still fed largely by fossil fuel.

"I'm concerned with the idea of trying to go all electric without unlocking a significant new chunk of clean energy generation," Roy said.

A spokesperson for the state Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs said only that the Baker administration will carefully review anything that reaches the governor's desk.

The Senate bill is in some ways a rebuke of the Baker administration on critical parts of the state's effort on climate, said Senator Cynthia Creem. She cited problems with programs aimed at urging homeowners to switch to clean heat and that pay gas companies to continue to lay new pipe.

"We're seeing that unless we move quickly, we're not going to meet the emissions required, and the agencies aren't taking the quick approach that they need to take," she said.

That led to the creation of a bill that is in many way prescriptive — calling for specific policy and programmatic steps.

In addition to providing \$100 million to the Massachusetts Clean Energy Center to support investment in the clean energy industry and innovation, the bill would allow for the growth of so-called agro-solar, in which solar panels are placed at agricultural farms.

To jumpstart the sluggish transition to electric vehicles, the bill would create a \$100 million fund for the MOR-EV rebate program, and beef up the existing rebates, bringing them as high as \$4,500 for purchasers who are trading in a gas vehicle. That rebate would be issued at the point-of-sale, rather than the current system in which purchasers must apply for a rebate.

On buildings, the bill includes two major challenges to Baker administration policies, said Senator Michael Barrett. One deals with a new net-zero energy code that was required by last year's climate law. The intent of the law was to allow towns, such as Brookline, to ban fossil fuels in new construction if they so choose. But when the Baker administration released the code earlier this year, it still allowed for natural gas hookups.

"There's been a battle with the administration about whether the so-called stretch net-zero energy code will give cities and town the option of going all

electric in new construction, or whether natural gas hook-ups will be at the discretion of the builder,” said Barrett, who was the primary architect of the Senate bill, and who wrote the 2021 climate law.

In the new bill, 10 communities are given the explicit right to ban new fossil fuel hook-ups if they vote to do so. So far, six communities — Brookline, Arlington, Lexington, Lincoln, Concord, and Acton — have taken that step.

The bill also addresses the state’s Future of Gas proceeding, in which it is investigating the phase-out of natural gas. The process has been criticized by legislators and clean energy advocates for appearing to favor the natural gas industry and excluding equal participation from other parties. The new bill would require that interested parties be allowed to participate fully, and would allow the next governor to oversee the completion of the process.

“The Legislature’s view is that the Baker people are trying to lock in too many policies as they exit the stage, when in truth these very important matters should be left to the next governor,” Barrett said.

Clean energy and climate advocates said they welcomed the Senate’s bill, particularly the focus on electric vehicles. “The inclusion of transportation-specific elements in the Senate climate bill is a big step forward,” said Veena Dharmaraj, director of transportation for the Massachusetts Sierra Club.

Michael Ferrante of the Massachusetts Energy Marketers Association said that while his industry is committed to helping the state reach its net-zero goal by 2050, he disagrees with some of the approaches laid out in the Senate bill. “The widespread electrification of new and existing homes is not the panacea when there are other low-cost and immediate solutions to reduce carbon emission such as renewable liquid biofuel for heating,” he said.

As the Legislature moves toward passing the Senate bill and then reconciling it with the House bill, it will be on a tight timeline to pass a final bill before the legislative session comes to a close at the end of July. But members in both houses said they remain optimistic about getting it passed.

“It is vital that we do this as soon as possible,” said Roy. “Every month that goes by global warming keeps ravaging our planet. We need to do this and we need to do it sooner rather than later.”

Sabrina Shankman can be reached at sabrina.shankman@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@shankman](https://twitter.com/shankman)