

MEMBER SUBMISSION: WHY WE SHOULD STOP NATIONAL GRID

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Photograph by Christhian Diaz

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By Hélène Filion Onserud

As a social worker living and working in Sunset Park for over 30 years, I have seen the heavy burden that utilities costs lay on a low-income neighborhood. And I know how limited the future is for today's young people and that it can only become grimmer for future generations as the climate becomes increasingly unstable. To do my part to combat this growing crisis, I have volunteered with the No North Brooklyn Pipeline Alliance for the past three years. The site of that pipeline is not close to Sunset Park. Still, I decided to join the Alliance because of its phenomenal work in fighting the climate crisis, more specifically in its work to rid our city of so-called "natural" gas.

National Grid, the gas utility serving Brooklyn, parts of Queens, Staten Island and Long Island, is a privately owned company based in the United Kingdom. The New York State Public Service Commission (the PSC) recently granted it permission to raise our rates, so it could pour five BILLION dollars into the gas system that brings toxins into our homes, exacerbates the climate crisis and forces us to pay to sustain an antiquated energy system.

We are captive rate payers. An average gas customer saw an increase in our gas bills of over \$30 a month, starting this past September, then incrementally climbing to \$67 by the end of three years. This is great for National Grid's investors but a terrible blow for the rest of us. Not only is it an economic hardship, but it's also an environmental disaster, with a significant increase in emissions from fracking, transportation and leaking of this gas—mostly methane, a potent greenhouse gas.

As we have seen increasingly over the last few years, the climate crisis is rapidly accelerating. Decades into the crisis, there is finally global recognition that the catastrophe is happening now! So, we urgently need to move away from extracting and burning fossil fuels and invest in renewable energy and distributed heat and cooling. It is possible to do it with thermal energy networks, solar and wind technologies, better storage and greater efficiency.

But in the face of this, National Grid is an expert at greenwashing, a tactic used to fool the public into believing that its infrastructure projects are needed. They use the threat of potential safety and reliability failures to claim a never-ending need for gas in the future. And we end up paying for infrastructure that will soon become obsolete. Since the utility can only make a profit when it builds or rebuilds infrastructure—rather than on the gas itself—the incentive is great to continue doing business as usual.

Gas emissions, a byproduct of National Grid's operations, create significant health impacts in the form of indoor and outdoor pollution. According to MIT, emissions from buildings contribute 37 percent of premature deaths from air pollution, more than

transport, industry and power generation. This affects us all, but it disproportionately affects people in disadvantaged communities, especially communities of color, because pipelines are disproportionately routed through those neighborhoods. The health of our community is at stake, and we must act now to protect it.

What can we do about this?

The Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA), which became law in 2019, is one of the most ambitious climate laws in the United States. Its main targets are reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 40% by 2030 and 85% by 2050. However, other legislation is needed to ensure we reach those targets.

One of the most powerful bills in the Legislature is the New York Home Energy Affordable Transition or NY HEAT Act. It would give the PSC the power to deny investor-owned utilities such as National Grid these exorbitant and unfair rate increases. One of its provisions is to limit utility bill costs to 6% of our household income. Of course, fierce opposition from the gas industry has impeded the passage of that bill despite huge efforts by environmental organizations, activists and many elected officials. But the bill is being reintroduced in this session.

We must stop National Grid's attempt to continue rebuilding fracked gas infrastructure while trying to convince the public that it is needed. We must especially target the key decision-makers, Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie (718-654-6539) and Governor Kathy Hochul (518-474-8390), and demand the passage of the NY HEAT Act. Our health and the future of our children depend on this!

Hélène Filion Onserud is a 38-year resident of Sunset Park, former deputy director at Center for Family Life in Sunset Park, and a current board member and Committee Chair of the Climate and Ecological Justice Committee of the International Association for Social Work with Groups.