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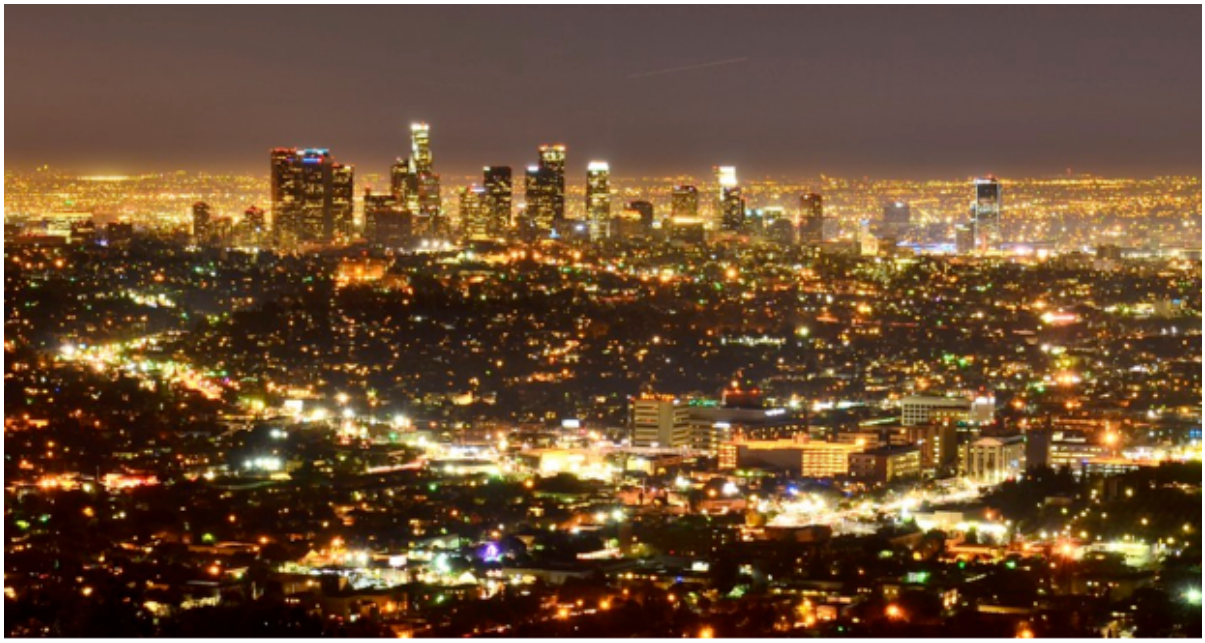
Turned On … Almost! LA on the Verge of Being 100 Percent Renewable!

Samantha Page 13 June 2016



LOS ANGELES

ENERGY WATCH-Los Angeles is a city born of Thomas Edison's inventions. The movie camera, obviously, helped propel it to become the second-largest city in the United States, but the light bulb, too, is integral to the city's heritage. Unlike many of the country's older cities, Los Angeles barely knew a time without electricity. There is even a hip bar called The Edison paying homage to the city's history in a former power plant in the heart of downtown.

VISIONARY AND PRAGMATIC--Growing up alongside the car and electricity industries, Los Angeles has long been seen as one of the country's most modern cities. But now, as our collective dependence on power has been found guilty of damaging our water, air, and climate, the city is taking steps to be part of the new future: a clean energy future.

The City Council is going to consider a motion this month that would direct the municipal utility to determine how to move the city to 100 percent renewable energy. The motion already has broad support from councilmembers, and Los Angeles officials confirmed that the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) has begun work on the report, which will be developed with research partners, including the Dept. of Energy.

The motion from council members Paul Krekorian and Mike Bonin reads:

LADWP is on the verge of making significant investments in its infrastructure, and with that 100-year-old power system in need of significant upgrades, the city has an opportunity to re-create its utility in a way that recognizes the potential for a fossil-free future, demonstrates global leadership in its commitment to clean energy, and protects ratepayers from the increasing costs of carbon-based fuels.

Mayor Eric Garcetti, who has introduced a number of clean energy policies since taking office, supports the initiative.

Over the past few years, Los Angeles has seen the beginnings of a massive transition, and the city itself has been responsible for much of it. In one high-profile move, the city spent $57 million to replace its traditional streetlights with LED bulbs. That simple, if grand, gesture is saving the city $9 million a year in electricity costs and has reduced CO2 emissions by 60,000 metric tons — about equal to 8,860 homes' worth of electricity.

CITIES KEY--In fact, cities are seen as one of the most pivotal points for clean energy transformation.

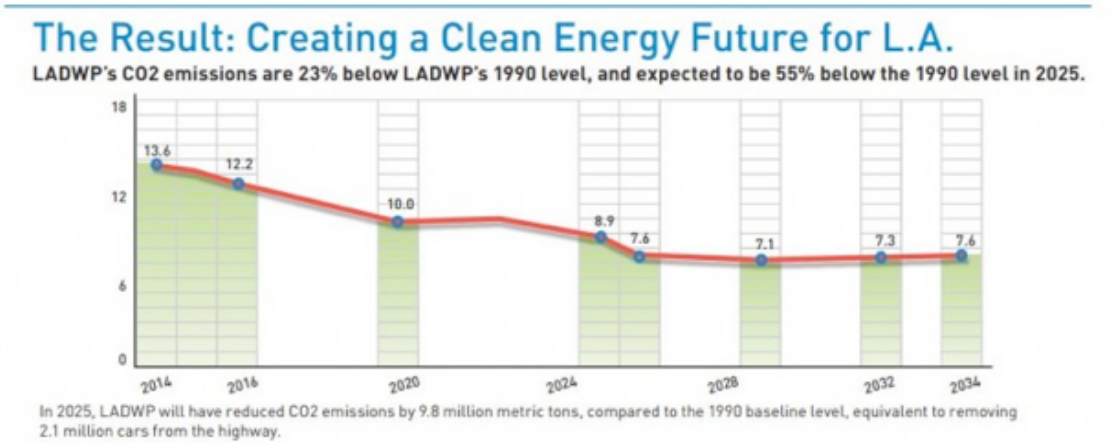
According to the most recent progress report from C40, an international coalition, 228 world cities — representing 436 million people — have set targets that would reduce emissions by 13 gigatons of CO2 by 2050. Partly, this opportunity for reductions is tied to the sheer size of cities. Cities hold more than half of the world's population, so changes can have outsized impacts.

But cities also operate differently than states and countries, where it can be much harder to change direction of policies.

"Cities have a very unique ability to be at once visionary and pragmatic," Michael Brune, executive director of the Sierra Club, told *ThinkProgress*. "It's pretty hard to get stuck in dogmatic, ideological thinking when you're the mayor of a city or you're on the council."

The Sierra Club worked with the councilmembers behind Los Angeles' current proposal as part of the group's Ready for 100 campaign, a grassroots effort to encourage commitments to 100 percent renewable energy. In the United States, 12 cities, including both San Francisco and San Diego, have enacted 100 percent clean energy goals, and four cities are already there.

Under the current plan, emissions are expected to drop. Under a new plan, they could drop to zero.



The campaign officially launched in January, but Brune said there are active campaigns now in dozens of cities. "From Oakland, Calif., to Cleveland, Ohio, Boulder, Miami, Boise — these are all efforts that just got started in the last 90 days," Brune said. He estimated there would be 50 cities with active campaigns by the end of the year.

"We hoped it would grow quickly, and it's growing more quickly than we hoped," he said. "You have cities that want to be able to show strong leadership on climate, and they see an enormous opportunity for economic benefit," Brune said.

GREEN MEANS GREEN--The importance of the economics here cannot be underestimated. Los Angeles' $57 million worth of LED lights, for example, will have paid themselves off in less than six years — a staggering return on investment.

A report published last fall found that cities could save themselves $17 trillion by pursuing clean energy options such as increased efficiency, "aggressive" solar installations, and better public transportation.

All of those tactics are part of Garcetti's Sustainable City pLAn, released last year.

Earlier this week, Garcetti announced 100 new electric vehicles have been added to the LAPD's fleet. The city also installed 104 new charging stations — which will be open to anyone. This type of city-led infrastructure is key to allowing the public to also transition to new clean technologies.

But as energy nerds know, EVs are only as clean as the electricity they are using. An EV running off coal-fired generation is responsible for as much greenhouse gas emissions as a regular gas-powered car, according to some estimates. The LADWP, which functions as the city's sole utility, already has net energy metering and has doubled down on the feed-in tariff program, which allows building and land-owners to install medium-sized solar arrays and sell the electricity directly to the LADWP.

LA READY--In 2015, Los Angeles got 20 percent of its electricity from renewable energy sources, according to data sent to *ThinkProgress*. Nuclear and large-scale hydro together accounted for another 11 percent, but more than 60 percent of the city's electricity came from coal and natural gas. Coal still accounts for a whopping 40 percent of the city's power supply. Natural gas, including from four local plants, was 22 percent.

But there is a lot of support right now in Los Angeles for changing the way Angelenos get their electricity. Over the winter, an uncontrolled natural gas leak in northern Los Angeles caused thousands of families to be evacuated from their homes. People complained of bloody noses, headaches, and other health problems, while Southern California Gas Company struggled for months to contain the Aliso Canyon facility. Subsequently, the company said the region would face potential blackouts this summer without Aliso Canyon, which provides gas to some local power plants. That statement infuriated locals, who insist that the city can go green and avoid reopening the storage facility.

"This blowout really highlights that this is just one incident in a larger ongoing disaster," said Alexandra Nagy," a senior organizer with Food and Water Watch. "We are advocating for the permanent closure of Aliso Canyon. There is really no other option. We cannot go back to business as usual."

And as the Sierra Club's Brune put it, big-city mayors are eager to head up popular initiatives:

"They know which way the parade is marching, and they want to get out in front of it," he said.

*(**Samantha Page** is a climate reporter for ThinkProgress where this piece was first posted. Previously, she launched a hyperlocal Patch site in Los Angeles, and reported for the Los Angeles Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Huffington Post, and GlobalPost.) Prepped for CityWatch by Linda Abrams.*