

Climate Change and the Role of Public Health

Date: March 28, 2022

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

SUMMARY

The mandate of Toronto Public Health (TPH) and the authorities of the Medical Officer of Health are primarily set out in the *Health Protection and Promotion Act (HPPA)*. The Ontario Public Health Standards, published by the Minister of Health under the HPPA, further describe the mandatory health programs and services provided by boards of health.

Natural gas is Ontario's most common heating source and accounts for 57 per cent of Toronto's Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions. In December 2022, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to review the potential to declare a public health emergency as it relates to the phasing out of natural gas.

This report describes the role of public health with respect to climate change and the authorities of the Medical Officer of Health to declare a public health emergency as it relates to phasing out of natural gas. While the Medical Officer of Health does not have the authority to advance the phasing out of natural gas through a public health emergency declaration, TPH will continue to provide public health advice and guidance in support of City-wide efforts to address climate change, including TransformTO, and consider public health approaches to addressing climate change as it develops its key strategic priorities following the response to COVID-19.

This report was developed in consultation with Legal Services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Board of Health receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial impacts resulting from the adoption of the recommendation in this report.

DECISION HISTORY

On December 6, 2022, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to review the potential to declare a public health emergency as it relates to the phasing out of natural gas, if the Province of Ontario refuses to implement such a policy in the coming year (2022-2023).

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2021.HL32.10>

COMMENTS

Natural Gas Use in Ontario and Toronto

The Ontario Ministry of Energy states that natural gas is Ontario's most common heating source, with currently about 3.6 million homes and 160,000 businesses in Ontario that use natural gas.¹ In Toronto, 57 per cent of Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions come from homes and buildings, primarily from burning natural gas to heat indoor spaces and water.² Canada has made a commitment to prioritize support for clean technology and end new direct public support for the international unabated fossil fuel sector by the end of 2022.³

Authorities of the Medical Officer of Health

The mandate of Toronto Public Health and the authorities of the Medical Officer of Health are primarily set out in the HPPA. The HPPA does not provide a mechanism for medical officers of health to declare public health emergencies. The legal tools in the Act that are available to a Medical Officer of Health to address emergent public health risks not otherwise covered by the Act are limited to order-making powers in respect of health hazards and communicable diseases.

1 [Natural Gas in Ontario](#)

2 [Toronto's 2019 Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory – City of Toronto](#)

3 [Canada announces commitment to end new direct public support for the international unabated fossil fuel sector by the end of 2022 - Canada.ca](#)

These tools are intended to respond to specific and often immediate risks to population health.

Obligations of health units and boards of health that pertain to climate change are otherwise located in the Ontario Public Health Standards, Guidelines, and Protocols which are published by the Ministry of Health under the authority of the HPPA.

Ontario Public Health Standards

The Ontario Public Health Standards identify the minimum expectations for public health programs and services to be delivered by Ontario's 34 boards of health. The public health requirements for climate change are described in the Ontario Public Health Standards and further outlined in the Healthy Environments and Climate Change Guidelines, 2018. They include monitoring and communicating health risks, working with community partners and municipalities to reduce exposure to health hazards, and promoting healthy natural and built environments.⁴

Boards of health are required to collaborate with local municipalities to review or provide comments on by-laws or standards that may improve health outcomes and social determinants of health such as policies that impact property standards, temperature control, or housing conditions. In addition boards of health are also required to consult with municipalities on local official plans that consider the impacts of climate change such as air quality, green space and shade policy, and flood protection.

Boards of health must also monitor impacts of climate change within their jurisdiction such as rising temperatures, food and waterborne illness, forest fires, and air pollution.

These requirements consider the board of health in a collaborative and consultative role with municipalities and their divisions (e.g., local planning authorities).

Next Steps to Support the Phasing Out of Natural Gas

Generally speaking, the City of Toronto may have authority under the City of Toronto Act, 2006 (COTA) to enact by-laws to address certain aspects of natural gas use in Toronto. The COTA includes provisions regarding the City's environmental well-being including climate change; environmental protection standards with respect to buildings; and site plan authority. However, there may be limits on the City's use of these powers, including that the bylaws enacted not conflict with federal or provincial statutes, regulations and similar instruments.

While the Medical Officer of Health does not have the authority to advance the phasing out of natural gas through a public health emergency, the Medical Officer of Health and TPH will continue to provide public health advice and guidance to support City-wide efforts to address climate change, including TransformTO. Toronto Public Health will

⁴[Healthy Environments and Climate Change Guideline, 2018](#)

further consider Health Canada's recent 2022 report [Health of Canadians in a Changing Climate](#) and options for public health approaches to climate change as part of COVID-19 recovery planning in the coming months.

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SIGNATURE

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