

# Oregon lawmakers, climate advocates push for environmentally friendly buildings

Four bills will receive hearings from a Senate committee on Thursday

By: [Julia Shumway](#) - March 14, 2023 5:45 am



Energy-efficient construction is more climate friendly, more comfortable and cheaper to own over the long run. (Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

Oregon lawmakers and climate advocates are pushing for legislative action to build more efficient homes and office buildings to protect the environment and reduce long-term homeowner costs.

Senate Majority Leader Kate Lieber, D-Beaverton, and Rep. Pam Marsh, D-Ashland, are spearheading the effort after spending much of last year leading a task force that recommended policies for making homes and office buildings more environmentally friendly and resilient to heat, smoke and air pollution. Those recommendations have turned into four bills they want passed.

Marsh, whose largely rural southern Oregon district lost 2,500 homes to wildfire in 2020, said during a Tuesday press conference that Oregonians need more resilient homes as climate change causes sustained drought and worse wildfires. With more extreme weather, Oregonians living in less-efficient homes pay more to heat or cool their homes.

“Really what is at the core of this rebuilding task force work is making sure that Oregonians are protected as conditions continue to change and that they will be able to continue to afford their utility bills,” Marsh said.

Transportation, including cars, trucks, trains and planes, is Oregon’s biggest source of greenhouse gas emissions, according to the state Department of Environmental Quality. In 2021, transportation was responsible for more than 35% of the state’s greenhouse gas emissions.

But emissions caused by residential and commercial buildings, including from electricity and natural gas use, were close behind. In 2021, residential and commercial buildings were responsible for 34% of the state’s greenhouse gas emissions – more than agriculture or industry.

The four bills are scheduled for public hearings Thursday before the Senate Committee on Energy and Environment. Chair Janeen Sollman, D-Hillsboro, must schedule a committee vote, or work session, by Friday and hold that vote by April 4 for the bills to advance this year.

- [Senate Bill 868](#) would set a state goal of installing 500,000 residential heat pumps by 2030 and make it easier for builders and homeowners to get rebates or incentives to purchase and install them. It builds on [legislation from last year](#) to pay low-income households to install heat pumps, electric appliances that can pump heat out of a house in the summer and pull it in during the winter. They’re more efficient than traditional furnaces or air conditioners, but they’re also

more expensive. The federal Inflation Reduction Act includes tax credits for installing heat pumps and [other rebates and incentives](#) are available from the state or energy providers.

- [Senate Bill 869](#) would require the Department of Consumer and Business Services to set energy efficiency goals for new construction, including requirements that new homes be built to improve indoor air quality and save money on energy bills. The measure also would require the department to look at the climate costs of building materials, including transporting materials.
- [Senate Bill 870](#) would create building standards for new and existing large commercial buildings and would provide some financial incentives for building owners who meet energy efficiency goals.
- [Senate Bill 871](#) would require state-owned buildings to lead by example in reducing energy use.

Marsh said those ideas had broad support from the task force, which included builders, climate advocates, local governments, labor unions, utilities and Republican lawmakers as well as Lieber and Marsh.

Joel Iboa, executive director of Oregon Just Transition Alliance, an advocacy group that opposes environmental racism, or the disproportionate effect of climate change on minority communities, said low-income people, people of color, rural Oregonians and people with disabilities would most benefit from more efficient buildings. Wildfires, ice storms, smoke and high heat have killed Oregonians in recent years – more than 100 died during the 2021 heat wave, when Portland reached 116 degrees, and many were in their homes without air conditioning.

“If we’ve learned nothing else for the last three years between wildfires and ice storms and heat waves, it’s that resilience starts at home,” Iboa said. “In our homes and our buildings, our first line of defense against these climate disasters, whether it be heat or wildfire smoke, we believe that we can, we must, make our community safer and more resilient by transitioning to clean energy, and making upgrades to homes and buildings.”

Stricter building codes can increase the initial cost of homes, acknowledged Meredith Connolly, state director of Climate Solutions, a Northwest nonprofit championing clean energy, and a supporter of the legislation. The bills coincide with a push by lawmakers and Gov. Tina Kotek to increase the supply and affordability of homes.

Connolly said those higher standards can pay for themselves quickly in the form of lower utility bills. The legislation also would give builders more certainty about what to expect over the next 10 years, she said.

“Even if there were a little more upfront costs, it actually made it cheaper to live in the home as well as more comfortable and more resilient,” she said. “And it paid for itself very quickly.”

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