

Net-zero emissions measures advance despite cost concerns in Mass. Senate

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BOSTON – Republican lawmakers from Worcester County cast the only two no votes when the Massachusetts Senate recently passed a trio of bills aimed at climate change. One of them declared that the state “can’t afford this legislation” aiming to move the state to net-zero emissions by 2050.

The bills, passed by a 36-2 vote on Jan. 30, would move to create an all-electric MBTA bus fleet, reduced utilities bills and net-zero greenhouse gas emissions within three decades.

The vote came after hours of debate as legislators worked through more than 120 amendments to a trio of climate bills. They will now be considered by the House, and Gov. Charlie Baker expressed his goal of achieving net-zero emissions in his State of the Commonwealth address last month.

“We are very serious about asking the question ‘How?’ as in, ‘How are we going to reduce emissions in Massachusetts in a way that leads the country, gives hope to all our constituents and actually gets the job done?’ ” said Sen. Michael Barrett, D-Lexington.

But Sens. Ryan Fattman, R-Sutton, and Dean Tran, R-Fitchburg, said the net-zero proposals are not the answer.

“Residents of the commonwealth can’t afford this legislation,” Fattman said. “This bill will only make housing prices more expensive, by requiring solar panels on all new construction, which will increase development costs for new homes by \$30,000 to \$70,000. Nearly all new homes will also require electric based heating systems and appliances, placing upward pressure on utility rates across the state because wood, natural gas and oil based appliances would be out of compliance with a net-zero stretch energy code.”

Balancing the state's responsibility to reduce emissions with the potential costs to Massachusetts residents was a main concern for Central Massachusetts senators.

Among the three measures, S.2477 calls for net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, and S.2476 would require the MBTA to buy and lease zero-emissions vehicles only, starting in 2030, and to have a completely zero-emissions bus fleet by the end of 2040. It also contains an existing rebate program for those buying electric cars.

The third bill, S.2478, sets efficiency standards for fixtures and appliances, including new faucets, toilets and computers. Environment Massachusetts projects that by 2035, these standards could reduce utility bills by \$282 million and lower Massachusetts' annual carbon emissions by 271,000 metric tons, equal to taking 57,000 cars off the road, the State House News Service reported.

Senate Minority Leader Bruce Tarr, R-Gloucester, said he has concerns similar to Fattman's and Tran's, although he voted to move the measures to the House.

Tarr proposed sending the net-zero emissions bill back to the Senate Ways and Means Committee for a public hearing, emphasizing that the "bipartisan issue" of climate change needs more attention, and saying that the number of amendments suggested "deficiencies" in the legislation.

Tarr called for mandating cost estimates for emissions reduction efforts and protections for lower-income families that could be affected by the bill's carbon pricing requirements. After the Senate rejected his motion in a 33-4 vote, Tarr again focused on the potential cost to Massachusetts residents.

"I would be the first to tell you that there may be benefits as well, by the creation of new jobs and different industries," Tarr said. "There may be savings, but in the end, to be responsible lawmakers we have to ask the question, what is this going to cost?"

But Barrett emphasized a commitment to seeing these goals through, by having incremental check-ins every five years, beginning in 2025. "We are dead serious about making certain that we have a way of checking ourselves and getting where we commit Massachusetts to be," Barrett said.

“We need an independent, authoritative expert and credible source of perspective on whether all of us are doing our jobs,” Barrett said of the proposed Climate Policy Commission to check the progress of the measures.

Other Worcester-area senators backed the bills, with Sen. Harriette Chandler, D-Worcester, calling them “essential to mitigate the worst effects of climate change.”

“I am especially supportive of the policies included in this legislation to electrify MBTA buses and municipal-owned vehicles,” Chandler said. “If we can transition our publicly-owned vehicles from fossil fuels to electric power, we can lead by example and reduce the state’s own emissions.”

Sen. Anne Gobi, D-Spencer, while supportive of the measures, emphasized the importance of considering Massachusetts residents in rural areas to ensure “regional equity.” She also called for greater transparency and provisions that help lower-income people deal with potentially increased costs of utilities and appliances.

“Right now in Massachusetts, any fossil fuels that come in are coming from out of state, and so the cost to businesses and individuals is estimated to be about \$20 billion a year, because we have to import everything, so we need to look at what we can do to cut the amount of fossil fuels coming in and grow other renewable energy sources within the state,” Gobi said.

Sen. Michael Moore, D-Millbury, echoed Gobi’s emphasis on the need for transparency. He said, “If we are going to have constituents calling up about the effects of some of these changes, we should be able to inform them of the changes and answer their questions.”

Still, Moore was enthusiastic about the bills’ advance, saying it shows Massachusetts’ commitment to being a model for combating climate change effectively and efficiently.

“I’m very pleased that we have a Legislature and an administration that is going to continue to prioritize the need to address these issues of climate change,” Moore said. “For those of us who have children, and really for society in general, if we don’t address these issues, they will have a lot of negative impacts on our future.”

