Eugene City Council right to fight fracked gas

Kitty Piercy Special to Eugene Register-Guard USA TODAY NETWORK Two Mondays ago, we saw a glimmer of hope that Eugene will continue to be a leader regarding climate change. Eugene City Council weighed in on the ongoing franchise negotiations with Northwest Natural, the fracked-gas utility in the city and chose not to take action.

These negotiations offer a critical avenue to regulate Eugene’s greenhouse gas emissions, and the city council must refuse to sign any agreement that does not put us in line with the climate goals set in the 2014 Climate Recovery Ordinance.

Our city has been working to address the threat of climate change for years, and this past summer’s wildfires serve as a reminder of the urgency of this crisis. Yet, if we are not willing to take on the fossil fuel corporations responsible for the bulk of our emissions we will never truly lead on climate action.

Additionally, fracked gas negatively impacts our community by creating toxic indoor air, up to the point where the air quality would be illegal if measured outside. Exposure to these pollutants increases the risk of major health issues, such as pulmonary and heart problems, and has been shown to increase the chances of children developing asthma by 42%. These risks are felt disproportionately in our community by those living in small households, where the pollutants are more concentrated, and by those without the means to transition to electric appliances.

NW Natural has been acting in bad faith throughout these negotiations as our council has worked to incorporate the climate action into its agreement with the utility, even threatening council with negative PR campaigns and litigation. As Councilor Claire Syrett so aptly put it, the corporation was offered an opportunity to be a partner in our clean transition. Instead, it has employed the tobacco industry’s playbook of obfuscation and intimidation.

After close to two years of strenuous negotiations with little to no concessions from the utility, it is time for the city to say enough is enough and take bold measures to rein NW Natural in.

In doing so, Eugene would join the over 40 cities across the west coast that have passed ordinances to stop the expansion of fracked-gas infrastructure and curb their greenhouse gas emissions and create a model for cities across the state.

Eugene also has an opportunity to create a just transition off of fossil fuels by implementing a justice fund, similar to the Portland Clean Energy Fund. This fund could be created by levying a fee on NW Natural and other polluters and would pay for BIPOC and low-income households to transition their homes to electric stoves and furnaces. The Portland Clean Energy Fund made history by being the nation’s first-ever municipal climate justice fund, and Eugene has a chance to follow in its footsteps and guarantee a just transition for front-line communities while building Eugene’s green economy.

So, I commend councilors Syrett, Jennifer Yeh, Matt Keating and Mike Evans and our mayor for their bold stance in the face of the climate crisis and encourage them to go even further.

We must spend the next 10 years transitioning our beautiful city away from fossil fuels, not building pipelines and increasing our emissions.

Kitty Piercy is a former mayor of Eugene. Protestors call for action from Governor Kate Brown during a rally at the Oregon State Capitol on Nov. 21. Hundreds of people showed up to protest the Jordan Cove project, which includes a liquefied natural gas (LNG) export terminal and a natural gas pipeline in Coos Bay, Oregon. file photo