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Houston City Council Votes to Increase Energy Efficiency Standards and Move towards New Model Codes

HOUSTON- Today the Houston City Council voted to adopt energy efficiency standards for residential buildings five percent stronger than the new state minimum and set a path for achieving 15 percent greater efficiency by 2014.

“Today’s decision demonstrates the City of Houston’s commitment to reducing energy use, limiting pollution associated with electric generation, lowering energy bills, and reducing dependence on fossil fuels through energy efficiency,” said Tessa McClellan, Field Associate for Environment Texas. “Houston is leading the way by establishing strong standards for efficiency this year and adopting a plan for moving towards the 2012 model codes in the next few years.”

The decision was the result of a campaign by Environment Texas, the Energy Efficient Codes Coalition, the Sierra Club, and others in favor of the City of Houston adopting the newly published cities 2012 IECC codes, which offer significantly greater energy efficiency at a cost that is quickly recouped by energy savings. The 2012 IECC is nearly 17% more efficient than the 2009 International Residential Code that state law requires for Texas cities by January 1, 2012.

“Houston has been recognized as a national leader in energy efficiency and green building work in municipal buildings and commercial offices,” said Laura Spanjian, City of Houston’s Sustainability Director. “We now are leading in the residential sector, and want to continue to work with all stakeholders to save energy and, more importantly, save residents money over time.”

The increase in efficiency standards comes a week after the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) released a report warning of continued threats of rolling blackouts, partly attributed to a rising demand for electricity.

“The Houston region is projected to gain 3.5 million people and over 500,000 homes by 2030. These could last over 70 years,” McClellan said. “By building these homes to be as energy-efficient as possible, Houstonians can worry less about keeping the lights on and secure a cleaner future.” A new Environment Texas Research & Policy Center report, *America’s Emerging Clean Energy Capital: How Houston Can Lead the Nation to a New Energy Future*, found improvements in energy efficiency in homes could save an amount of energy equivalent to 7.8 percent of Houston’s current demand.

Net utility bill savings after paying for efficiency improvements would put thousands of dollars in the wallets of Houstonians purchasing a home built to the 2012 IECC, according to an analysis conducted by the Energy Efficient Codes Coalition. The break-even point – when out of pocket costs are recovered by lower energy costs – comes less than two years after the home’s purchase.

“That’s why we hope the city pulls its code provisions right out of the 2012 IECC – 5% each year over the next three years,” said William Fay, EECC Executive Director. “This historic code was developed by state and local officials from across the nation, including Houston. They took care to ensure it uses readily available products and technologies. The transition to the 2012 IECC will be relatively simple, since it builds on the 2009 code that is already in place in Houston.”

In 2008, Houston updated its Residential Energy Conservation Code such that new homes used 15 percent less than energy than homes built under the state standard. Texas then followed Houston’s lead by requiring all cities, effective January 1, to adopt a roughly equivalent code.

The ordinance establishes standards five percent more energy efficient than the 2009 IECC, effective January 1, 2012. It also requires the Houston City Council to vote on proposals developed by the Department of Public Works to increase energy efficiency standards by up to an additional five percent in 2013 and again in 2014.

Though Environment Texas and others called on the City of Houston to adopt standards 15 percent stronger than the state minimum this year, they said today’s decision marks a major step forward.

“The decision by the Houston City Council to set a goal 15% beyond the current state minimum should provide a path for the state itself to adopt the 2012 IECC codes sooner rather than later,” Cyrus Reed, Conservation Director, Lone Star Chapter, Sierra Club. “As more and more cities discover they can go 15% beyond the state minimum, the state itself will have to set their own timeline for going 15% above current codes.”

The Energy Systems Laboratory is currently examining the model 2012 International Code Council codes. Cities may be required by law to move to the 2012 ICC codes as soon as January of 2013.

The adoption of the 2012 ICC is also endorsed by a variety of groups and individuals including Representative Jessica Farrar, the American Chemistry Council, the Texas Organizing Project, John Hofmeister, former CEO of Shell Oil, and the Houston Chronicle.

“The widespread support for this effort demonstrates the public is behind investing in energy efficiency as a way of meeting our future energy needs while protecting public health and the environment,” McClellan said. “Today’s victory will help as we continue pushing for improvements in energy efficiency in Houston and around the state.”

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Environment Texas is a statewide, citizen-funded advocate for clean air, clean water, and open spaces.