

# Taking a Swing at Air Pollution from a Municipal Level

By Salt Lake City Council Member Erin Mendenhall

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At a local level, the Salt Lake City Council has flexed its legislative and budgetary muscles to improve air quality. For example, in the last two years, the council enacted regulations that link city-funded fireworks to the Air Quality Index (AQI), banning displays during periods of "unhealthy" conditions. The council worked with the Downtown Alliance to fund alternative New Year's celebration displays, replacing fireworks with lasers, light shows and the giant Mirror Ball.

However, vehicular emissions remain the number one source of particulate matter less than 2.5 micrometers (PM 2.5) pollution. As part of our local solution, Salt Lake City is laying the groundwork for an electric vehicle (EV) future. To encourage residents' transition from traditional fossil-fueled vehicles to electric alternatives, the council mandated one EV charging station per 25 parking stalls provided in new construction of parking lots (as you might have noticed at the newly-expanded Costco on 300 West). That law was recently amended to require at least 3% of the minimum required parking spaces to be wired with EV charging equipment. Salt Lake City is committed to installing 25 public-charging stations downtown and throughout the city in the next two years. Another incentive created by the city is the "Green Vehicles" program that provides a special parking permit for high fuel efficiency vehicles to park for free in all Salt Lake City metered parking stalls. Additionally, thousands of Salt Lake City residents have shifted their travel habits to drive less by taking advantage of the HIVE pass, a 50% reduced-cost monthly transit pass developed out of a UTA-Salt Lake City partnership.

In the coming decade, we know our fleet of vehicles will produce fewer emissions and the buildings we occupy—from homes to schools, businesses, offices, and all the warehouses in between—will become the Wasatch Front's leading polluters. To meet this upcoming challenge,

Salt Lake City is already working with Utah Clean Cities and other local NGOs on Project Skyline. This city-wide initiative aims to evaluate the energy use of large commercial buildings and provide building owners with extensive inspection-based feedback on energy efficiency upgrades that will save them money through lower utility bills. To help reduce the pollution associated with meeting buildings' energy needs, the city has streamlined regulations around residential installation of photovoltaic panels, recently including homes in historic districts, so they can produce their own emission-free energy right from their rooftops.

The challenge of achieving cleaner air is intensified by the collective nature of the problem. Dozens of cities collectively share one airshed along the Wasatch Front; the pollution from a building in one city can worsen pollution in another city 30 miles away. In recognition of this reality, governments with jurisdictions larger than municipalities also must act. The Salt Lake County Board of Health acknowledged this a year ago when they voted to ban solid fuel burning, such as wood, coal, and pellets when the AQI reaches moderate levels (known as "voluntary air action days"). Indeed, there are strong scientific foundations to enact these restrictions. For example, one wood-burning fireplace emits as much air pollution as 3,000 natural gas furnaces producing the same amount of heat per unit. State regulators should follow this proactive policy by declaring mandatory no burn days for moderate AQI levels in addition to red AQI levels.

The federal government also has a role to play in solving local air quality problems and municipal leaders have been at the forefront of encouraging federal action to help clean Salt Lake City's air. In November 2015, the Salt Lake City Council and then-Mayor Ralph Becker passed a resolution encouraging federal adoption of carbon-fee dividend legislation. This would involve placing a fee per ton of carbon at the source and distributing those monies equally amongst all American households to offset the costs of transitioning to renewable and alternative energy options. This legislation could help catalyze the transition away from fossil fuels by empowering consumers to choose their preferred energy source and making fossil fuels more expensive to burn—a double impact that would also decrease the pollution caused by this combustion. Surveys have repeatedly shown Wasatch Front residents' willingness to adjust their behaviors to improve air quality.

A carbon-fee dividend is one available tool to empower and incentivize consumers to act on this willingness to create a cleaner Wasatch Front airshed.

Given fossil fuels' negative impacts on air quality, efforts to reduce carbon emissions from burning fossil fuels is directly related to improving air quality. While the council's work supports our city's carbon emissions reduction goals (20% below the 2005 level by 2020; 50% below the 2005 level by 2040; and 80% below the 2005 level by 2050), we know we must make even bolder changes to our predominantly coal-powered energy consumption. Salt Lake City's 2016 renewal of its franchise agreement with Rocky Mountain Power is the critical opportunity to make expanded renewable energy and emission reductions a reality. Mayor Jackie Biskupski and her admin-

istration will have an unprecedented opportunity to negotiate the coming quarter-century of power to our city and ensure the success of our carbon-reduction goals through this franchise agreement.

Federal regulations regarding pollution standards, allowable vehicle and power plant emissions and other standards bring the greatest opportunities for improvement of the air we breathe, particularly in a state whose political appetite typically favors economic growth over progressive policy for a healthy environment; however, municipalities, such as Salt Lake City, have a duty to continue exercising legislative, budgetary, and administrative creativity to address air pollution. In the twenty-first century, municipalities are leading the way to cleaner and healthier air quality.

