

City of North Vancouver first for climate change warnings on gas pumps

City of North Vancouver first municipality in Canada to require climate change messages on gas pumps

Justin Beddall / North Shore News

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West Vancouver teenager Emily Kelsall has been lobbying since 2014, when this photo was taken, for municipalities to require warning labels at the gas pump. file photo Cindy Goodman

The City of North Vancouver wants to drive home an important message about climate change.

On Monday, council unanimously approved second and third reading of a business licence bylaw amendment that will require information labels about greenhouse gas emissions to be placed on all gas station fuel pumps in the city.

The initiative stems from a June delegation led by West Vancouver teenager Emily Kelsall, a member of Our Horizon, who implored the city to consider requiring gas stations to put warning labels on fuel pumps.

Our Horizon is a non-profit environmental organization and the concept of labelling gas pump nozzles was developed by its founder Robert Shirkey, a Toronto lawyer.

When formally adopted, the bylaw, which must still receive a fourth and final reading on Monday, will be the first of its kind in Canada – and possibly North America, with the Californian cities of Berkeley and San Francisco believed to have draft bylaws still being considered by council but not yet adopted, at the time CNV staff wrote its bylaw report.

The staff report on the proposed bylaw change notes that the city has a history of progressive action towards addressing climate change dating back to the late 1990s and includes initiatives like the Lonsdale Energy Corporation and the city's Carbon Fund.

While Our Horizon suggested “warning” style messages with bold graphics and facts, similar to cigarette messaging, city staff favours a more educational approach with informational labels “about the link between burning fossil fuels and climate change while also highlighting ‘can-do’ actions and choices available for people to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.”

The staff report notes that fear-based or negative campaigns may work with some people but can have the opposite effect with others, triggering reactions of denial, minimizing or avoidance.

"It is thus important to deploy labels that will be effective not only in raising awareness but in motivating individual action (specific behaviour changes) that result in lower greenhouse gas emissions."

Some sample messages from staff included: "Save fuel through properly inflating your tires; Idling your vehicle for more than 10 seconds wastes more gas than restarting your engine; Burning fossil fuel contributes to climate change; 49% of GHG emissions in the City of North Vancouver are from transportation."

Staff reported that the labels will come in two sizes: a 3-inch square "nozzle topper" and a 4x5-inch sticker to put on gas pumps.

If the bylaw is passed staff will then return to council with proposed messaging for the pumps for approval. The messages would likely evolve over time and be tested with focus groups. City staff contacted all gas station owners in the city to discuss the initiative but received no response.

During the public input portion of the discussion on fuel pump labels, a representative from Western Convenience Stores Association directed council's attention to information on enhancing fuel efficiency available at the website smartfuelling.ca. Some council members expressed interest in the tips and suggested some could potentially be incorporated with the messaging. Some examples from the website include: maintaining tire pressure, shedding unnecessary cargo and removing roof and bicycle racks when not in use.

"I do see the education and awareness as a critical step and the labels as a way to remind and really establish the link to the consumer of the cause of climate change and the effect that burning fossil fuels has on that," said Coun. Linda Buchanan.

In terms of the appropriate messaging on the pumps, Buchanan added, "I don't want it to be so watered down that the message gets lost. Directly establish the link between burning fossil fuels and climate change."

Coun. Craig Keating supported the proposal and staff's proposed approach for the gas pump labels.

"I think our staff have come up with a great set of ideas about the kind of positive messaging that we need to put on there and I think we need to build on what's included in the staff report about the kind of positive messaging we have," he said.

"I have no problem going further down the road showing leadership on this issue here with a message that provides people with some practical alternatives and some things that they can take a look at that we are building on within our community. I don't think we need to lecture to people and be paternalistic about what climate change is and the role of fossil fuels in climate change. People get it and want to do the right thing."

Coun. Rod Clark noted that he's received a torrent of emails congratulating the city on its leadership on the gas pump labels but he said the credit belongs elsewhere. "We are saying yes to something that came in front of this council. So I believe the credit should go to the three people in front of us, the people at Our Horizon's, especially Emily because she brought it to us. And if there's leadership being shown it's because you showed us the way," said Clark.

Staff estimates the initial cost of the gas pump label initiative will be \$5,000 or less.

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