

Subject: Regarding gas generators for 711 Church and other developments

From: Eric Goldberg

Sent: Wednesday, February 7, 2024 6:49 PM

To: Planning <Planning@a2gov.org>

Cc: City Council <CityCouncil@a2gov.org>

Subject: Regarding gas generators for 711 Church and other developments

This is Eric Goldberg writing from the 5th Ward.

I keep revisiting a view that gas generators should make approval of housing developments a “no” — recently with regards to approving 711 Church, but this isn’t the only time I’ve heard this. I grapple with it, because I hate burning fossil fuels and I hate that our grid is largely powered by dirty energy sources.

However, I want to explore some of the dynamics about why I think disqualification of developments that want to offer backup energy generation is a problematic requirement or factor in approving developments in Ann Arbor:

1. We must remember the “net” in “net zero” — concentrating people close to the urban core has a huge carbon offset effect. Taking the stance that a gas generator invalidates a dense residential development is, in effect, saying “We are OK with a 100% chance of increasing VMT in order to avoid a 3% chance that a gas generator will run in a given year. I’m using 3% as a proxy based on my own experience of outages, but my neighborhood (Abbot) has a lot more outages than the areas adjacent to campus.

2. It is not practical to expect DTE to be able to deliver power reliably, given their track record. At the same time, battery backup technology is not ready for such a large building in 2024. Even for single family homes, battery backups last like a day or so at best. I’ve experienced 4 day outages in 2023.

3. It’s cruel to block energy generation for students and renters in general. Imagine what will happen if there’s a 3 day outage in a cold February. Do we have the hotel capacity for our residential high rises to re-bed 600-1000 residents? Do we expect people to pay double rent for those days — hotel board and their normal rent? Is the city going to arrange for propane truck deliveries or swapping of backup batteries that are only designed to smooth out short outages, for the duration of the outage? Do we think industrial size propane tanks and the trucks that deliver them are logistically feasible and practical?

4. Density is a carbon reducing value in itself. Consolidating 160 six-bedroom Burns Park rental houses into a tower adjacent to campus has massive positive effects on the environment. Superior, Scio, and Pittsfield Township commuters could have rental or purchasing opportunities as residential high rises soak up student demand and concentrate students closer to campus. Think of all the 20 mile pickup trucks, sedans, and SUV commutes you’re taking off the board. I am disheartened that this sort of climate math isn’t obvious and uncontroversial to everyone involved. Even if a backup generator had to run for a few days, those emissions pale in comparison to millions of vehicle miles zeroed out.

I'm not questioning motives or wanting to push for more and more ambitious sustainable initiatives. It's just that overall I found the statement very theoretical and not a constructive requirement to put on developments.

Look, very few people in this town like DTE. Most of us would be on all renewables if we could. But because of the energy monopoly DTE has, it's not a lever we can pull. What are the levers we can pull? There are many:

- Approving dense development
- Taking good deals that pay massively into our affordable housing fund
- Doing whatever we can to get commuters into the city
- Providing transit, bike, and walking infrastructure to further reduce VMT in the city
- Rooftop and ground level solar generation

I urge CPC to take a holistic view on climate and tally the savings we get by basic location and commute dynamics, and give those proper weight vs. marquee features like being able to say something is 100% gas free.

Thank you,
Eric