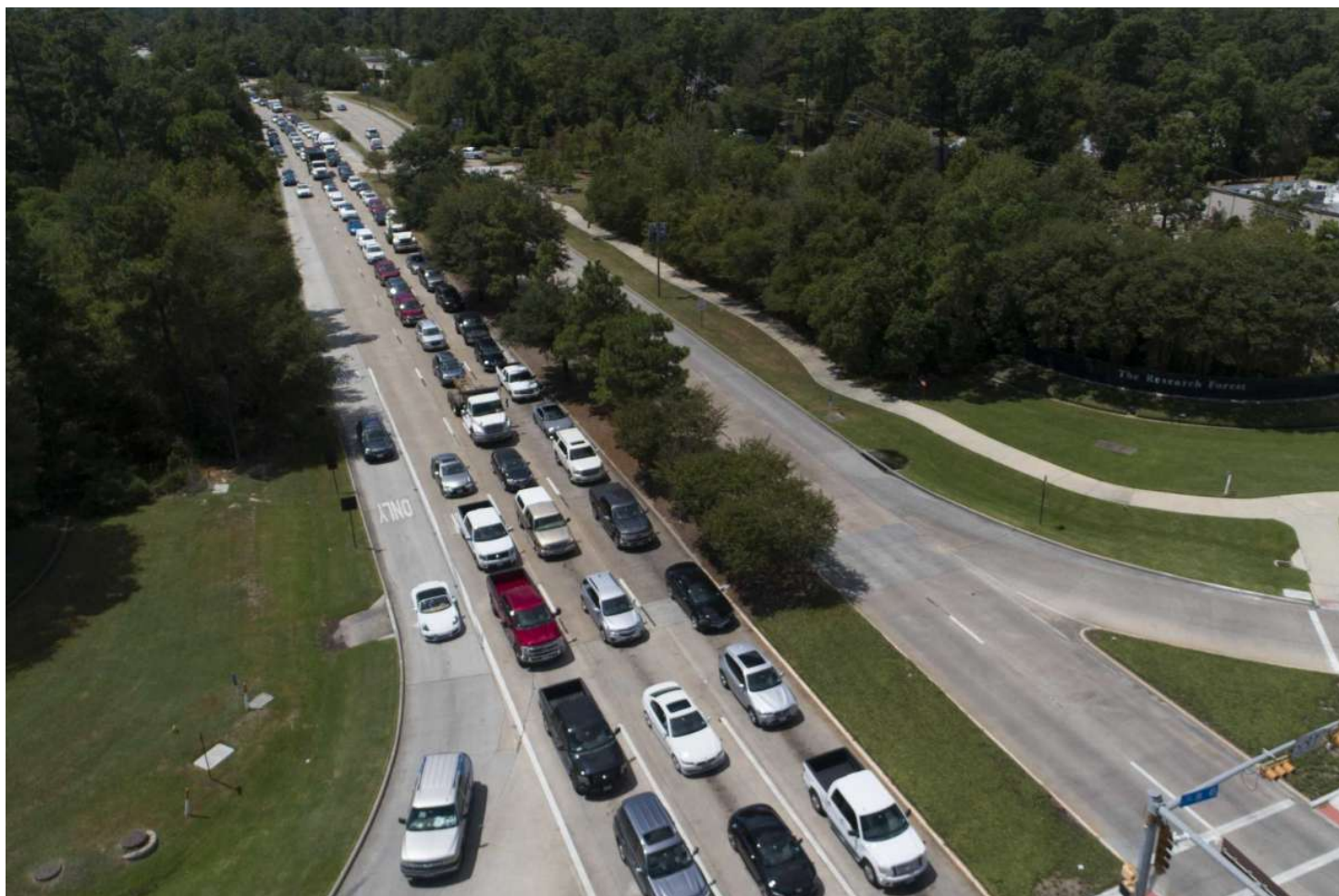


LOCAL // TRANSPORTATION

Switching to electric vehicles could save lives, cut health care costs in Houston, report finds

Dug Begley

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Vehicles clog Research Forest Drive near Interstate 45 after power to many of the area's traffic lights went out on Aug. 27, 2020. A new study estimates making all vehicles electric could save 148 annually in Houston.

Photo: Jason Fochtman, Staff photographer / Houston Chronicle

Houston in 2050 could save 148 lives, avoid 3,333 asthma attacks and reduce health costs by \$1.7 billion annually by electrifying its entire transportation system, according to a report released Tuesday by the American Lung Association.

The analysis, which concluded 582 lives could be spared each year in Texas, builds on other reports that say one of the most aggressive actions the nation can take to improve air quality is changing what is under the hood of Americans' cars and trucks.

“We simply cannot address clean air for all Americans without transportation,” said William Barrett, lead author of [“The Road to Clean Air”](#) and director of clean air advocacy for the American Lung Association.

Based on various criteria compared by lung association researchers — such as total miles traveled, population and how electric power is produced for the region — Houston ranks eighth in the country among metro areas that could benefit from electric vehicles. Dallas ranks fifth, behind Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco and Chicago.

Researchers based its estimates on total electrification of all private automobiles by 2040 and all heavy-duty trucks by 2045, then using 2050 air quality estimates as the metric.

EV impacts

According to a new American Lung Association analysis, a complete switch to electric vehicles would yield annually:

Houston

148 lives saved

3,333 asthma attacks avoided

\$1.7 billion in health benefits

Texas

582 lives saved

11,554 asthma attacks avoided

\$6.7 billion in health benefits

United States

6,293 lives saved

93,337 asthma attacks avoided

\$72.1 billion in health benefits

Source: American Lung Association

SPACE FOR FREIGHT: The Texas economy is booming, leaving big rigs in a bind for places to park

The report aligns with other studies on the effects of electric vehicle use. A report last year by a team including University of Houston researchers found complete conversion to electric vehicles could avoid the deaths of up to 240 people annually and eliminate up to 5,500 missed school days for children with asthma and other breathing issues in Houston.

Proponents of electric vehicle use in the region estimate there are about 12,000 electric vehicles in the Houston area today — out of nearly 5.6 million vehicles registered in the eight-county area, meaning the region has a long way to go to see any of the benefits outlined in the report.

A switch to electric vehicles should not make Houstonians who rely on the petrochemical industry nervous, said Deborah Gordon, a senior fellow at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University. Houston, a hub of the petrochemical industry, also has an opportunity and should view electric cars as a chance to innovate rather than a threat, Gordon said.

“First, nothing is happening overnight,” Gordon said, noting gasoline will remain in demand even as the shift happens.

As gasoline wanes, Gordon predicts the petrochemical industry, which is far larger than the fuel people put in their cars, will evolve.

“We are not talking about no refining, but remaking refining,” she said, noting that new products made with petroleum could help address pollution.

“You don’t only have to burn it,” Gordon said.

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Not burning gasoline to get around could improve the quality of life for those with severe health problems, researchers said.

Dr. Karen Jakpor, a physician who lives in Southern California and spoke with Lung Association officials during a discussion of the report’s findings Monday, has severe health problems related to asthma.

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“My friends often call me a barometer or canary in the coal mine,” Jakpor said, noting how she checks air quality information for the Riverside, Calif., area constantly. “It determines whether or not I can go outside.”

In Houston and elsewhere, the health effects of air pollution are especially damaging in minority and low-income communities. A 2017 study by the Houston Health Department and Rice University found children living in zones where transportation emissions were higher experienced more asthma attacks requiring an ambulance.

“We must target solutions so all communities and all people benefit,” Barrett said.

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To achieve the results estimated in the report, lung association researchers said federal, state and local officials must work collaboratively, addressing challenges at each level of government. Federal and state officials must set reasonable but aggressive emissions targets and leverage their economic might via grants or tax incentives to spur change. Locally, researchers said, officials should lead by example and commit to cleaner fleets.

Some efforts locally are in motion. Evolve Houston, a public-private effort to increase investment and implementation of cleaner transportation options, includes gasoline makers, notably Shell, while BP has worked with Houston elected officials on the city's climate action plan.

Houston officials, in the plan released in April, pledged to convert all non-emergency municipal vehicles by 2030 to electric or low-emission alternatives, while offering incentives to private companies to go electric.

dug.begley@chron.com

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