
City's antique lanterns to sport a greener tint

By Brian R. Ballou

Globe Staff / June 6, 2011

For decades, they have been Boston's eternal flames, burning bright day and night — vintage gas lamps strung along narrow, twisting streets of Beacon Hill and Charlestown, Bay Village, the North End, and the Back Bay. Hardly beacons of energy efficiency, the 2,800 lamps are environmentally retro in a world turning greener.

But 600 gas lamps will soon be fitted with automatic igniters that make them flicker on at nightfall and off at daybreak, and save the city roughly \$140,000 a year in fuel bills while reducing carbon emissions. The \$450,000 cost of the devices — which work much the same as a grill igniter, by creating a spark — will be covered by an energy efficiency grant awarded by the state's Department of Energy Resources.

"Those gas streetlights are so important for the character and history of Boston," City Councilor Matt O'Malley said. "But right now, it is so counter-intuitive that they are left on during the day."

The first gas lamps came to life at Haymarket Square in 1828, installed by the Boston Gas Company as a demonstration. Six years later, they appeared around Faneuil Hall.

By the late 1800s, electric lamps were in vogue, supplanting their quaint gas forebears. And so it remained until 1962, when the city, hoping to recapture the charm of an earlier era, reverted to gas lamps in Boston's historic neighborhoods, a back-to-the-future transition that continued through the 1990s.

Gas lamps were originally designed to be extinguished manually, and when they were the main source of lighting, they were put out and relighted daily by residents or gas company workers.

"We love these historic lamps, and they really add charm and character to our communities, but they burn all day, and that's not good for Boston's energy efficiency goals," said James W. Hunt, Boston's chief of environment and energy. "And they also give off greenhouse gases, so doing this would reduce those emissions by over a million pounds a year."

Installation of igniters, which takes about 30 minutes per lamp, by the city's Street Lighting Division is supposed to begin in the fall and be complete by early winter. The igniters will not be noticeable because they are internal.

The solar-powered devices come with a timer, and the igniter remains in the off position until activated by the timer. They were tested on 10 gas lamps last year to make sure there were no safety concerns and Hunt said they worked well.

The city is in talks with National Grid about energy efficiency rebates it may be eligible for with the installment of the igniters.

Any rebate would probably stretch the grant money and allow for the purchase of more on-off devices, Hunt said. The city hopes to receive more grants to eventually put igniters on the remaining 2,200 gaslights.

"I'm all for saving money in the city," said Geoff Smith, who has lived on Beacon Hill for seven years. "With fossil fuels being such a problem, it's good to hear they're doing this."

Cities such as New York, New Orleans, and Cincinnati also have thousands of gas lamps dotting their streets. Cincinnati has about 1,100, none with automatic igniters.

"We've been looking to ways to cut down on the fuel expenditures with the lamps," said Larry Whitaker, spokesman for Cincinnati's Department of Public Services. "Those devices sound like a great idea."

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