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# 4 DEVELOPMENT TYPES THAT NEED COMMUNITY PROPANE SYSTEMS



**IF YOUR NEXT PROJECT FACES ONE OF THESE FOUR CHALLENGES,  
COMMUNITY-WIDE PROPANE MIGHT BE AN IDEAL ENERGY  
SOLUTION.**

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The developer of the Century Ranch, Wolf Crossing, and Dry Creek Estates communities in Austin, Texas, faced a costly problem.

Extending multiple off-site utilities to these neighborhoods was causing lot prices to soar. To maintain competitive lot prices in this 4,900-lot master planned community, the developer made a savvy decision: He eliminated the need to extend natural gas distribution lines to the property by switching to a community propane system, saving hundreds of thousands of dollars while still allowing for gas-fueled appliances.

The Austin development is an example of one of the four primary reasons a developer would turn to a community propane system. These four uses cases are highlighted in a new [Propane Training Academy](#) course from the Propane Education & Research Council. “[Community Propane Systems: An Energy and Technology Solution for Developers, Builders, and Homeowners](#),” developed in partnership with engineering consultants [Newport Partners LLC](#), describes how community propane systems work and why it’s important for builders and developers to know about them.

“They offer a valuable option when the developer and the builder really want to have the ability to include gas amenities like cooking or fireplaces or space heating,” says Jamie Lyons, Newport Partners senior consultant. “It gives them another option that they can consider using if they fall into one of these different use cases that we identify in the course where traditional solutions or strategies might not work as well.”

The course highlights four types of developments where community propane systems can provide an important energy solution:

### **1. Natural gas is not an option.**

Natural gas is commonly used for popular home systems such as cooking, water heating, central heating, and fireplaces, but its availability is limited to high-density population areas, and it is often difficult and expensive

to expand. In developments such as Century Ranch, Wolf Crossing, and Dry Creek Estates, there can be an expensive fee for a land developer to get natural gas distribution extended to a new project site. It's a situation that's become increasingly common over the past decade, Lyons says.

“As land development is looking further out at projects, they are finding they might not have viable access to natural gas and they're looking for alternatives,” Lyons says. The Austin communities used a community propane system that mirrors a natural gas system and was significantly less costly to the developer, resulting in competitive lot and product pricing.

## 2. Need an alternative to heating oil.

Although heating oil has traditionally been one alternative to natural gas in some markets, many new communities are looking for alternatives due to concerns about price volatility, finding a cleaner fuel, and getting access to gas amenities such as ranges and fireplaces. Community propane systems can fuel an array of gas-based appliances — including cooking equipment, fireplaces, and water and space heating — while also offering lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions compared with heating oil and the ability to keep storage tanks located away from homes, out of sight.

## 3. On-lot propane storage challenges.

The move toward denser construction throughout the country means that traditional on-lot propane storage isn't always a good option, Lyons says. “There is this steady movement toward higher density and more townhouse development in many, many markets,” he says. “The national metrics show that townhouse construction is approaching its historical high for percent of new starts.” But for offerings such as luxury townhomes, the ability to offer gas amenities is still a critical consideration.



*In dense developments with townhomes or condos such as Carriage Hill, community propane systems eliminate the need for on-lot propane storage.*

Community propane systems eliminate the need for on-lot propane storage by using a central propane storage tank with distribution piping throughout the community, similar to a natural gas system. Carriage Hill, for instance, is a large development in Plumstead Township, Pennsylvania, that includes single-family homes on narrow lots, townhomes, and condo units. Gas appliances were an expectation for the builder and the market. The development used a community propane system comprising 52 1,900-gallon tanks located in common spaces around the community. The 563 homes are individually metered, with their propane usage read remotely via satellite.

## 4. Natural gas impacts project schedule.

Even when natural gas access is feasible in terms of costs, there may be delays in getting natural gas infrastructure approved, designed, and implemented. These delays can be the difference between whether or not a project pencils out for the developer. Community propane systems frequently offer a more flexible option that can be implemented without the uncertainty or need to wait for natural gas access.

### When on-lot propane storage is better

While community propane systems offer an energy option that many developers don't know about, they're not the most effective strategy in every project. In some cases, environmental conditions don't allow for underground piping runs throughout the community. And some developments are simply too spread out.

"There are some economies that the community system can bring, but the reverse is also true," Lyons says. "If the economies aren't there because of really low density, then builders and developers can look at the numbers and come up with the best solution. It might not be the community system."

On the other hand, the ability to leverage propane not only for new homes but also for community-based buildings and applications such as backup power, community centers, golf courses, and retail centers may make a community propane system more appealing.

"Mixed-use has become a more popular development model," Lyons says. "Community buildings or even commercial buildings within the community can take advantage of that menu of gas-based appliances for commercial buildings, like cooking or backup power."

The Propane Training Academy course includes additional details on propane applications that can be served by a community propane system, as well as regulatory considerations and resources that can help builders and developers get up to speed quickly on community propane system guidelines. [Check out the full course here](#), and stay for the quiz to qualify for credit with the American Institute of Architects Continuing Education Systems and the Green Building Certification Institute.

*Top photo: Contractors install the community propane system at Carriage Hill, a 563-home development in Plumstead Township, Pennsylvania.*

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