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A Line in the Yard: The Battle Over the Right to Dry Outside

By [ELISABETH ROSENTHAL](#)

AURORA, [Ontario](#) — Rob and Laurie Cook are not prone to breaking the law, but these days they have been given to a regular act of civil disobedience: hanging their laundry to dry out in the backyard. The deed to their home — like most in this upscale suburb — prohibits outdoor clotheslines as eyesores.

“I thought people passing by couldn’t see it, and the developers wouldn’t see it, so it didn’t bother my conscience too much,” said Mr. Cook, a retired businessman and former officer in the Canadian Air Force who is part of a citizens group trying to get the clothesline ban overturned, arguing that line drying is better for the environment.

“Using a dryer may have made sense 30 years ago when energy was cheap and we weren’t aware of [global warming](#),” he said. “It doesn’t any more.”

The Cooks are part of a loose global network of people who are rallying around what they call the “right to dry.” While not necessarily abandoning the electric dryer, they are adding the clothesline and the drying rack to their stable of household appliances, or fighting for the right to do so.

Ontario is among a number of places that is considering striking down the clothesline bans that have been common in North America and parts of Europe, arguing that they are environmentally irresponsible. Laws seeking to overturn clothesline bans are now pending in Connecticut, Vermont and Colorado.

“If we can’t change simple stuff like this, we’ll never handle the big things we need to do for the planet,” said Aurora’s mayor, Phyllis Morris, who earlier this year petitioned Ontario’s government to declare clothesline bans an illegal “barrier to conservation” under provincial law. “People say, ‘Oh, Phyllis, you want to turn women back into the laundry lady,’ and I say wrong: This is about rights. It’s about the environment.”

Motivated by environmental concerns and skyrocketing energy costs, consumers like her and the Cooks are re-evaluating their drying habits. The British retailer ASDA said that in the first four months of 2007, the most recent period for which numbers were available, sales of clotheslines and washing lines rose 150 percent and sales of clothespins over 1,000 percent. Hills Industries of Australia, whose core product is drying racks, reported that revenues in its home division jumped 15 percent in 2007.

Tumble dryers, like sport utility vehicles, are verging on an image problem: once symbols of economic success, they have morphed into icons of environmental disregard. The gas guzzlers of household appliances, electric dryers use about as much energy as a refrigerator — consuming more than 6 percent of household energy — even though they are used only intermittently.

And there is a cheap and easy, carbon-free alternative. “A clothesline is not a solar panel or a Prius — it’s something that everyone can afford,” said Alexander Lee, founder of Project Laundry List, which promotes sustainable technology in the home.

None of this means the tumble dryer is dead. Over the past three decades it has become a fixture of domestic life in the developed world. As of 2005, they were in more than 50 percent of households in the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, Belgium and Britain.

Even in the Netherlands, known as environmentally conscious, the number of dryers has been doubling every 10 years. The only country to have withstood the trend is Italy, where laundry hangs from balconies, even in cities.

But conservation experts say that to avert a temperature increase of 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit above preindustrial levels, global emissions must be cut by 80 percent by 2050. To reach that goal, they say, household emissions, which make up a quarter of the total in developed countries, will have to take a big cut. At least a third of the carbon savings in the residential sector comes from behavioral changes, according to a recent study by the Environmental Change Institute of [Oxford University](#).

Dryers, which must heat air and spin clothes around, cannot be made much more efficient, or at least no one has figured out how to do it yet. The United States Environmental Protection Agency’s energy star system, intended to direct consumers to more efficient models, does not rate dryers because they all use “similar” amounts of energy. In fact, for more energy-efficient clothes drying, it recommends choosing a model that detects when clothes are dry and shuts off, or “air drying clothes on clotheslines or clothes racks.”

Appliance manufacturers say they are “continually looking for ways to improve efficiency,” with sensors and the like, said Allison Eckelkamp, public relations manager for General Electric’s consumer division.

But she added: “When it comes to drying clothes, we find that our consumers are very busy and are looking for the fastest dry time. Of course, line drying is a more energy-efficient option, provided the weather is good, but it is not very convenient or time efficient.”

Aurora is exactly the kind of hip, upscale, well-educated town where conflicting values are put to the test. Its picturesque Victorian heritage district is lined with coffee shops, bookstores, spas and lawyers’ offices. Its newer districts consist of immaculately maintained developments featuring spacious homes (five different models), with balconies and two-car garages, on manicured parcels of land. Recycling bins — one blue and one green — stand in front of each driveway, placed out only on Fridays.

Laundry is not part of the landscape.

Here, legal line drying is often impossible because developments tend to ban clotheslines under longstanding “restrictive covenants” — laws to protect homeowners that, for example, forbid satellite dishes beyond a certain size, fixing cars on the street or keeping farm animals in the yard. Most of the provisions date back decades. “The people who moved here wanted convenience and a suburban paradise — sheets and clothes hanging out symbolized a less affluent time,” Mayor Morris said.

Some homeowners and developers still support the bans. “I can see why people would want to do it for the environment, but the houses here are so close together, you don’t really want to look at your neighbor’s laundry,” said Danielle DeCastro, 28, who was walking in the Great Gulf Homes development with her baby.

In New Hampshire, an attempt to overturn clothesline bans was defeated this month by a coalition of businessmen and representatives of community associations, who said they felt such measures unduly restricted homeowners’ contracts.

“We spend a lot of money on architecture and design — we tell builders what windows they may use — so this is a long list of protections that evolved to protect homeowners, to keep things looking nice for everyone,” said Nik Mracic, vice president of Metrus Development in Ontario, noting that his developments typically allowed umbrella-type clotheslines, while forbidding those strung across the yard.

Still, he said, such covenants typically reflect clients’ priorities at the moment and “this is the right time” for the clothesline issue to be reviewed. Recently, he has deleted the clause from new developments, adding, “I think many developers would gladly delete it — but some people will not like the fact that they’re seeing their neighbors’ underwear.”

In Ontario, a 60-day comment period on the new proposal has just ended, and the government will be addressing it shortly.

Mayor Morris has already begun to proudly hang out her laundry again. “I’m not worried,” she said. “These days the people who are skulking around aren’t the ones drying their clothes outside, but the ones who oppose it.”

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