

Union County Environmental Justice Community Engagement Meeting

Where: Peterstown Community Center, Elizabeth, Union County

When: Thursday, February 24th @6:00pm-7:30pm

Roughly 47 participants in-person, meeting also streamed online via Zoom

Summary: NJDEP Commissioner Shawn LaTourette along with Deputy Commissioner Olivia Glenn, Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ) Director Kandyce Perry, and EPA Region 2 Director of Strategic Programs (SP) David Kluesner, led a community engagement session with residents of Union County. Opening remarks were also given by Mayor J. Christian Bollwage of Elizabeth and members of local branches of the NAACP.

Question and Answer with Community:

1. How can the youth and other members of the community get involved with Environmental Justice (EJ)?
Deputy Commissioner Glenn: The [EJ Law](#) passed in September 2020, [meetings](#) were held to stakeholder rules NJDEP will develop to implement the law, and we hope to publish the resulting draft rule proposal this spring. This is the perfect opportunity for public to listen to past stakeholder meetings, review the draft rules, and provide feedback. The goal is to have the final rule adopted by the end of 2022.
2. Concerned with the length of time allotted in this one session to discuss EJ issues and asked what has changed with EJ efforts. Also concerned that Rahway is being overlooked.
Commissioner LaTourette: DEP is increasing enforcement presence at these facilities, especially in EJ communities. This increased presence will push facilities to hold their operations/equipment to a higher and cleaner standard. Our enforcement procedures are being strictly applied.
3. Can a youth task force be created for EJ-related efforts?
Commissioner LaTourette: Yes!
Deputy Commissioner Glenn: Three cohorts will be accepted this year for a paid DEP youth inclusion program, which will open doors for different types of DEP career opportunities. This program creates a pathway for youth to visit and connect with our state's natural resources and consider careers in various environmental fields.
OEJ Director Perry: The [Environmental Justice Advisory Council](#) (EJAC) has considered ways to create opportunities for youth. This is on the Council's work plan for further discussion. Also, EJAC currently has a few [vacancies](#) for a few specific sectors. The application deadline for consideration into the Council is March 15th.
4. Appreciates the acknowledgement of injustices in our state and for the opportunity to ask questions to the panel. Concerned about the increasing climate crisis contributed by greenhouse gases through burning of fossil fuels. Understands the injustices of overburdened communities and stresses that everyone is faced with the same climate crisis. Comment raised about a possible powerplant in an overburdened community in Middlesex County and concerned with continued state approvals of proposals for fossil fuel facilities.

Commissioner LaTourette: I want to keep the discussion focused on Union County for this engagement session. However, there is no escaping the fact that there is a climate crisis, and all facilities in and out of New Jersey contribute to the climate crisis. Information regarding a permit application decision cannot be shared with the public before the decision has been made final. DEP put together some of the most aggressive climate action plans in the country to limit pollution from stationary sources. DEP proposed rules to limit pollution from stationary sources, such as power plants, and is continuing to move down that path, especially taking serious consideration for facilities in EJ communities as required by the Law.

5. How does the community get included in EJ discussions/decisions from the State? How does information from the State get back to those active in the community so they can pass discussions to their colleagues/peers. Mentioned Covanta and how the community does not receive any benefits from the facility. Suggested that DEP continue discussions with activists and collaborate on efforts going forward.

Commissioner LaTourette: DEP will follow up to get to Rahway for a meeting. Through the EJ Law, there is an opportunity for these longstanding facilities to make improvements that are out of reach now. This EJ Law is a new tool to assist communities that have borne the burden described and we need the help of communities to implement this tool.

EPA Director of SP Kluesner: One of the priorities of the Regional Administrator of the EPA is to be a champion of community-based environmental organizations. The community and organizations that represent those communities know what the issues are, and youth involvement in those interactions is very important. The whole country is watching what New Jersey is doing, and this increases transparency in enforcement. With the bipartisan infrastructure law, there is a large increase in funding and municipalities need to be made aware of application opportunity for those grants.

Deputy Commissioner Glenn: Also wanted to add that the EJ Law reaches into 331 of the 565 municipalities in New Jersey, and it is the intention of the Law to define overburdened communities and get down to the community level. EJ issues are present in all parts of the state, whether they be urban, suburban, or rural communities, and the Law will help in reaching each of those areas.

6. Idea raised that suburban communities need to accept fair share of environmental burdens/consider citing more facilities in suburban areas. It is time for suburban communities who want the advantage of affordable power/recycling to accept some burden of acquiring these resources.

Commissioner LaTourette: There is a misconception that someone always must have the “bad thing,” but none of us has to have “the bad thing.” Some of the rebuttal that the DEP gets about EJ involves what the commenter mentioned, but the point is by doing better, expecting more from facilities, and having stricter standards to protect human health and the environment, we do better for everyone. We must start in communities that have had too much to bear for far too long.

7. There are very limited environmental-based courses in higher education. How can DEP assist in this issue and provide building-blocks for youth to learn about the environment?

Commissioner LaTourette: In part, that is what our Youth Inclusion Initiative is about. Folks who grew up without exposure to the environment can get engaged by bringing them to the environment. The program includes 20-30 youths, and those participants are brought to state parks so they can see themselves in these spaces that we should all share. There are so many opportunities at DEP for future environmental career growth as well.

Deputy Commissioner Glenn: First Lady Murphy is working to incorporate environmental classes into K-12 curriculum. Another important consideration is in spaces outside of the schools, such as parks. There needs to be more representation in community parks and parks services. DEP is trying to be more mindful of inclusion and representation in staff. Reiterates opportunity for exposure in environmental careers is by bringing students to DEP to pursue a career in which they are interested.

EPA Director of SP Kluesner: EPA has an [environmental education program](#) program to engage the youth and partnering opportunities with schools. One example is Science Day, where students can visit the Edison EPA location, learn about environmental careers, and engage in interactive tours. Towana Boutin, the EJ Coordinator with EPA, is heavily involved in the Children's Environmental Health program and organizes monthly activities relating to children's health.

8. Efforts to incorporate youth in EJ do not help with the issues that adults in that community are facing now. This person also mentioned that they applied to EJAC four separate times but does not meet the sector representation criteria. A person who is a member of the community and is active in EJ should be able to participate in EJAC without having to be affiliated with a specific organization.

Commissioner LaTourette: The way that EJAC is set up is to ensure representation from a variety of community organizations and incorporate geographic diversity. Maybe we don't have enough at large slots, and that's something that we can work on because we want folks that want to roll up their sleeves and do the hard work to help and guide us. Maybe the structure of EJAC is something that could use a refresh. I will ask the OEJ team to review and consider this concern.

9. The NJ EJ Alliance provided themselves as a resource (njeja.org) for anyone who was interested.

Closing remarks from the panel.

NJDEP Follow-Up Action Items:

- Review membership structure of Environmental Justice Advisory Council
- Continue discussions on youth engagement within NJDEP and with EJAC.
- Follow-up with Rahway community members to establish relationship and hear concerns.