



Gloucester County Environmental Justice Community Engagement Session

Where: Sons of Italy Lodge, 525 W Broad St, Paulsboro, NJ 08066

When: Tuesday, February 27th, 2023

Spanish interpretation provided.

Summary: Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Commissioner Shawn LaTourette, Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ) Director Kandyce Perry and EPA Chief of Staff for Region 2 Olivia Glenn led a community engagement session with residents of Gloucester County to discuss environmental justice in their area.

Introductory Remarks

Kandyce Perry, the Environmental Justice Director at New Jersey's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced Shawn LaTourette, the State's Commissioner for Environmental Protection, and Olivia Glenn, the U.S. EPA Chief of Staff for Region Two (including New Jersey).

DEP acknowledged disproportionate environmental burdens including contaminations and extreme climate events endured by minority, non-English speaking, and low-income communities commensurate with limited access to environmental benefits such as green space. Gloucester County is understood to be particularly vulnerable to water contamination and the economic hardships of managing those issues.

DEP emphasized the importance of hearing directly from overburdened communities to inform government actions by incorporating their lived experiences.

Special thanks were extended to partners, Sons of Italy Lodge and all the community members that led the site tour for their support and warm welcome.

Recognition was given to the DEP's Office of Environmental Justice staff for their assistance and availability for questions following the meeting.

DEP Commissioner Shawn LaTourette expressed gratitude to the Sons of Italy and the former mayor for their hospitality and taking time out of their schedule.

The DEP explained that the purpose of the meeting is to discuss environmental justice in Gloucester County and invited attendees to raise their comments, questions, or concerns.

Engaging with communities and understanding their issues is crucial for the DEP to make informed decisions. The Commissioner emphasized the importance of being on the ground and hearing directly from the people they serve. He highlighted that lessons learned from community engagement shape their daily work and that the government's role is to serve the people. The DEP is present to listen and learn, acknowledging that they don't have all the answers, but they will work hard to get them.

Olivia Glenn, Chief of Staff for Region 2, expressed gratitude to Commissioner LaTourette, Director Perry, and Gloucester County for their partnership and hosting the meeting. She emphasized the importance of engaging in person and hearing directly from the community to improve their work.

Recognition was given to the DEP for continuing to extend invitations to these sessions, knowing government does more when done together. Panelists also recognized EPA Region 2 staff for their assistance and availability for questions following the meeting.

Discussion

1. **Comment:** Former Mayor of Paulsboro, Gary Stevenson, summarized the train derailment in 2012 that released hazardous vinyl chloride and contaminated land and groundwater sources. This event had catastrophic consequences for the local economy that are still felt, but the borough never received sufficient retribution from either responsible party. The PFAS drinking water contamination further diminished Paulsboro's reputation, and they haven't been able to recover since. Stevenson reiterated that their town is in distress, and desperately needs government assistance and on the ground support. He emphasized that they need help to make this a place where people want to stay.

Response: The Commissioner shared that he was one of the lawyers that represented the town to get Conrail to clean up their mess and that even though it can feel like state government is a stranger to South Jersey, DEP is not.

2. **Comment:** A lifelong Paulsboro resident recalled receiving phone calls in 2009 from concerned peers worried about family members with rare cancers and kidney ailments. She personally lost three loved ones to similar causes. People looked to her for guidance and advocacy, but there was no way to definitively link resident illness to local environmental issues. Resident also mentioned train derailment, and how, despite seeing the smog from the accident, residents were told it was not a problem. Paulsboro residents want a system of accountability and a way to be heard. Resident warned that unless they take advantage of these opportunities, residents will not be able to better the town.
3. **Comment:** Former resident of Paulsboro shared that she has been diagnosed with terminal pulmonary fibrosis. She shared how this diagnosis has impacted her life, how there was no compensation for the harm caused, and expressed concerns about public health as a result of the train derailment and other issues in Paulsboro. She raised concern about sluice gates in Gibbstown and asked what The DEP can do to help residents in relation to flooding and subsequent farmland contamination. Resident called on DEP to assist in bringing economic prosperity back to the area and helping the people who are struggling with health issues as a result of contamination.

Response: The Commissioner thanked resident for her bravery. He explained that DEP has no oversight over rail transport of hazardous material, and that DEP can only clean up the mess after it happens. He emphasized that there needs to be preventative measures and rail safety reform at the federal level so that these crises don't happen in the first place. He said this community has dealt with the consequences of the train derailment for 14 years, and still no significant change has been made to improve rail safety. The Commissioner affirmed DEP commitment to standing up for people

and holding polluters accountable even though there are lobbyists that stand opposed to safety.

4. **Comment:** Resident from Greenwich Township appreciated that government was finally taking a proactive rather than reactive approach to these issues. Resident raised concern about damaged dikes, sluice gates, and ditches that have been neglected for 40 years. The county cannot afford the necessary improvements to prevent flooding and ensure drainage through proper channels. Resident warned not only of disastrous flooding if these issues are not addressed, but of increased risk of disease in the area due to mosquitoes' proliferation in stagnant waters.

Response: The Commissioner wondered if a watershed management plan had been developed in the area and encouraged county to work with the DEP to create one. Municipalities could collaborate to identify problems in shared waterways and potential nature-based or engineered infrastructure enhancements. A Watershed Management Plan also allows for greater funding opportunities from DEP, EPA and other agencies. Gloucester County could be entitled to funding under the federal Coastal Zone Management Act.

Chief of Staff Glenn pointed to many federal resources under the Inflation Reduction Act including Community Change Grants which fund climate justice initiatives taken on by community-based organizations.

5. **Comment:** Logan Township Resident shared personal experience and had a lot of ideas to rebuild the community. Resident was interested in 3D concrete printing and curious about grant opportunities for developing that technology and building a team.

Response: The Commissioner thanked resident and directed her to resources at the welcome table.

Chief of Staff Glenn directed resident and whole audience to the Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Centers, designed to help people in EPA Region 2 understand the grant process and develop their own applications.

6. **Comment:** Long-time resident raised concern over recycling in Paulsboro and that since the borough can no longer afford curbside pickup service, residents are required to drop off their materials at the recycling center. This system has severe limitations as it is not accessible to people who physically can't make it to these sites and the recycling center has very restrictive drop-off hours. Resident cited pictures of residents struggling to bring recycling to sites and complaints of those affected. Due to this inaccessibility, trash is piling up everywhere and illegal dumping is widespread. Resident also raised issue of public communication, referencing lack of recordkeeping, no penalty for violators of local rules, and no comprehensive guidance for everyday people on where and how to recycle. She called on DEP and Paulsboro representatives for solutions.

Response: The Commissioner validated concern and interpreted the problem as two big issues. One is the recycling drop-off problem and the desire for curbside pickup, and the other is public communication and compliance. He suggested an app to download called Recycle Coach that geolocates you and tells you how to recycle in your area. Commissioner also added that DEP will set up a menu with opportunities listed to share with communities following this meeting.

Chief of Staff Glenn noted that under the Bipartisan Infrastructure law the [Solid Waste Infrastructure for Recycling](#) grant program is available to local governments in order to fill gaps in recycling infrastructure.

7. **Comment:** Resident asked what prevents Paulsboro from only recycling bottle caps, and how much discretion towns have in determining recycling rules. Resident is frustrated because Recycling is federally mandated, privately performed, and federally punished; he stressed an urgent need for aid from DEP and EPA to help communities fund mandated recycling practices that towns themselves cannot afford. Residents asked about permitting for a proposed recycling site at the port.

Response: The Commissioner answered that federally, the Solid Waste Act has some base requirements. However, requirements often vary by locality based on the available technology in the region. Counties may contract certain services to a private company. Permitting depends on structure and distance from waterway. If you develop on a waterfront, typically DEP requires a waterfront development permit, and a federal permit is needed for things in the water.

Chief of Staff Glenn stated that under the Inflation Reduction Act, money is saved for developing the ports.

8. **Comment:** Director of National Wildlife Federation for NJ, NY and Connecticut and Chairman for Progressive Equitable Energy Coalition expressed gratitude to EPA and staff for hosting listening sessions. He has attended these meetings throughout the state and has appreciated seeing the complexities of environmental injustice in each area. He asked what the communication loop between governing bodies and communities is, and how to create more effective means of communication so that concerns are heard, and municipalities are held accountable. Further, he asked how community hubs like the Sons of Italy, can be brought into that engagement approach.

Sons of Italy is a great start, but participant requested an intentionality in coming to community staples that get a consistent following but might not otherwise be reached by government agencies. It's not necessarily a responsibility of DEP alone, but programs mean nothing if people don't know about them. He recommended that DEP create funding opportunities for communities and municipalities to do this type of connecting work collaboratively.

Response: The Commissioner highlighted the work DEP does to close the loop and make sure government officials hear these concerns. Part of the DEP's approach is to engage communities where they are, especially when there might not be formal community-based organization, so information can spread organically in local gathering places. The work is sort of necessarily incomplete, but he was very open to suggestions.

Audience suggested outreach through schools, parent portals, gathering places.

Director Perry spoke to the outreach efforts the Office of Environmental Justice makes in finding community leaders and taking their recommendations. She hoped next time DEP comes back they can double the number of attendees. Increasing the turnout requires people in the room to be

change agents and spread the word in their own networks. She said that it's a bit of an art and OEJ is tailoring it overtime, but these sessions can also serve as a point of connection with other community members. Director Perry offered [the Office of Environmental Justice's newsletter](#) as a resource. She also said that the DEP can and should extend invitations to other state agencies to attend these engagement sessions through the Environmental Justice Interagency Council.

Chief of Staff Glenn elaborated on the importance of closer, consistent touch points with communities. EPA recently developed the Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights Department to this end. She also recommended that everyone join the EPA environmental justice listserv.

9. **Comment:** West Deptford resident agreed that government needs to reach more people. She asked if other chemicals are tested for beyond annual PFAs water reports. Additionally, she said that Solvay is responsible for another byproduct chemical in the water too, known as third generation PFAs. She asked if those byproducts are tested for, and if there is research being done on the effects to residents' bodies.

Response: The Commissioner shared that New Jersey has the strictest water quality standards in the nation and was the first state to identify and adopt PFAs standards in response to contamination. He cited the Drinking Water Quality Institute and NJDEP's Division of Science and Research as advisors that inform water standards. These standards currently regulate 4 types of PFAs. Standards have also been established for other emerging industrial chemicals. Water treatment technology removes not only those chemicals that have established standards, but chemicals that do not yet have set standards.

The Commissioner shared that while NJ's robust drinking water standards use the best available technology to protect public health, extensive treatment increases costs for local governments that operating drinking water facilities. He stated that, therefore, DEP's approach is to maintain high drinking water standards, while also providing increased funding to municipal governments for affordable treatment. He offered examples of ways in which DEP is already trying to adopt this through the [NJ Water Infrastructure Investment Plan](#) and legal action against all responsible parties for PFAs contamination. DEP is hoping that the Solvay settlement will provide relief for residents and fund clean-up efforts.

10. **Comment:** Resident from the township of National Park expressed concern about the Severa v. Solvay settlement. It has taken a long time to acquire materials and improve the filtration system, but he is concerned about the borough's capacity to maintain these systems overtime. He asked what the people will get from the Severa and DEP settlements, and what aid will be provided for research and blood testing. He asked if the settlements will be sufficient.

Response: The Commissioner clarified that class action lawsuits over personal health concerns brought by a group of individuals would privately settle. However, at the state level, DEP has an obligation to sue a polluter for contaminating groundwater as a shared natural resource. DEP is going to make sure that the funding received gets back to communities in Gloucester County. DEP may not be able to get enough settlement money to fund county water treatment forever, but the

settlement can set the affected municipalities on a good path.

11. **Comment:** Resident raised concerns about the refinery that exploded in Philadelphia. They said that the refinery was built over the aquifer that Gloucester County gets its water from and that reports indicate that pollution is found in groundwater. He asked if the Commissioner could find out what's going on. They also brought up concerns over Covanta's incinerators. As a member of Camden for Clean Air, they oppose Covanta incinerator permits. He asked what New Jersey's incinerator regulations are.

Response: The Commissioner understood the difficulty of protecting shared resources that that don't fall neatly under or effect just one jurisdiction. He did not know the exact circumstances of this case, but in situations like these, the federal government consults the state and determines next steps. He said he will follow up. In regard to Covanta, the Commissioner stated that NJ's Air Pollution Control Act and EPA's Clean Air Act requires daily emissions monitoring for any major source of pollution.

12. **Comment:** Gibbstown resident raised flooding concern regarding pumps that were put in to control river flooding but never seem to be active. They added that the sluice gates are insufficient. When it rains, he said that he needs to run to his basement every 5 minutes to check for flooding. Resident asked who operates these pumps, and why they aren't running.

Response: The Commissioner echoed what another resident mentioned— that climate change and extreme rainfall have increasingly forced towns and homeowners to invest in pumps. DEP operates various flood control projects across the state, but not this specific one. The Commissioner said he will find out. He shared that there is a Federal Emergency Management Agency program with available funding that might be useful, [the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities \(BRIC\) program](#). Local emergency managers can collaborate and submit a grant application for operation and maintenance of the flood control system which could be a starting point for a BRIC application.

13. **Comment:** Resident asked when Solvay contamination happened and when the tap water was initially tested. He asked if they have been drinking contaminated water all this time and wanted to know when Paulsboro was initially notified. Additionally, he asked about the town that had an individual Solvay Settlement, including what compensation or correction the town is supposed to get. They also asked if filters can be paid for by Solvay to be put on every resident's faucet, especially since standards set by the state still allow a certain level of toxins. He concluded that he does not trust State's water quality standards.

Response: The Commissioner asserted that the contamination dates back to the 90's, but groundwater PFAs testing began in 2009. However, residents have not necessarily been drinking contaminated water since then. Contaminants can take years after discharge to get into the aquifer. The Commissioner clarified that the state settlement with Solvay is pending. Ideally the settlement would result in funds that both reimburse towns for past treatments or pay for future ones. If a water source exceeds acceptable drinking water standards, it is shut off or switched to a compliant source. In the case of Paulsboro, this might mean turning off one well. The Commissioner explained that residents shouldn't have to use filters as it is not the individual's responsibility to clean water

sold to them, though having a filter is a good idea and he could understand the lack of trust.

The former Paulsboro mayor added that town was first advised about the issue around 2014-2015. He was not sure if there were appropriate standards at the time. He stated that Solvay agreed to contribute to water treatment plant and filter costs. Solvay was supposed to pay for a fixed number of filter sets, but because Paulsboro's water was much more contaminated than data initially showed, the town went through the filters within 2 years though they were supposed to last for 15 years. He stated that the town also needs financing for another water treatment plant. He supported the Commissioner's points, explaining that Paulsboro water costs went up due to the increased cost of sewer services and treatment at the plant that were passed on to the residents. Further, he said that residents cannot rely on landlords in town to change filters or continuously test water and that the tap water is safest.

14. **Comment:** Long time resident and Chair of the Historic Commission asked about grant opportunities for remediation to a public access property on the waterfront.

Response: The Commissioner highlighted the Green Acres grant programs for municipalities and non-profits to acquire or maintain open space. The window of funding has just closed but he urged the resident to prepare for when funding rounds reopen in October. Watershed Restoration grants are also available. DEP can follow up with more details on those opportunities and with the water working group led by the Environmental Justice Advisory Council.

Chief of Staff Glenn provided again the Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Centers as a resource. These centers focus on EPA money but also share details on pots of money from other agencies.

15. **Comment:** Resident asked what can be done about repeated violations of drinking water standards. She asked why her water smells like bleach and her entire family's skin is itchy.

Response: The Commissioner did not know the exact cause, but violations are pursued by DEP based on results submitted. Residents can see the annual water quality reports submitted for each municipality through DEP's online tool called [Drinking Water Watch](#). If a water system has any violations, residents can use this tool to see them and what steps were taken to address it.

Closing Remarks:

Director Perry thanked everyone for sharing their experiences and frustrations. It is so important that the work of DEP has this context and is informed by community member testimonies. She acknowledged that DEP may not have golden solutions, but that this is the start of a conversation.

Gloucester County Engagement Session Follow-Ups/Next Steps

- **Drinking Water:** To respond to residents' shared concern about water quality, and the cost of filtration at the plant, DEP will share most recent updates on the Solvay settlement and provide a link to [Drinking Water Watch](#) as a resource. DEP will also share the [Emerging Contaminants in](#)

[Small or Disadvantaged Communities grant program](#) which provides states with grants to public water systems in small or disadvantaged communities in order to address emerging contaminants, including PFAS. DEP will also look into other water treatment funding opportunities, including monies available for new plant construction.

- **Flooding and Water Infrastructure Improvements:** DEP will provide Gloucester County with resources to develop a comprehensive and proactive [Watershed Improvement Plan](#) and investigate the efficacy of all dysfunctional gates mentioned. DEP will also notify municipalities of relevant state and federal funding opportunities related to water infrastructure improvements.
- **Recycling:** DEP will talk with EPA about opportunities to improve recycling programs in local municipalities and share information on available municipal tonnage grants and aid for towns that cannot afford garbage collection costs. Residents may also be interested in applying for the [Solid Waste Recycling Enhancement Act \(REA\) County Grant](#) in 2025. These projects could help identify and apply waste management best practices for Gloucester County and provide frameworks for shared recycling service between neighboring towns. DEP will share information on the [Recycle Coach](#) app, which shows users locally accepted materials and prevents contamination.
- **Technical Assistance:** DEP will share the [Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Centers \(TCTAC\)](#) as a resource to all meeting participants. These centers provide training and other assistance to help overburdened communities build capacity for navigating federal grant application systems, developing strong grant proposals, and effectively managing grant funding.
- **Port Development:** DEP will share port development grant opportunities as they are released by the EPA, including EPA's [EPA Ports Initiative](#) program.
- **Residents interested in learning more about EJ events and resources:** DEP and EPA will continue to build relationships with Gloucester County residents and will share the OEJ and EPA Environmental Justice newsletter with all attendees. To encourage greater intergovernmental collaboration and coordination, DEP will consider inviting the Environmental Justice Intergovernmental Council to future meetings. DEP will also continue to seek out organic community hubs as venues for these engagement sessions.
- **Food Security:** DEP will connect Paulsboro representatives with food security advocates from the EPA and NJ Department of Agriculture.