



Mercer County Environmental Justice Community Engagement Session

Where: Greater Mount Zion AME Church, 42 Pennington Ave Trenton, NJ 08618

When: Tuesday, June 5th, 2024

Spanish and Haitian Creole interpretation provided.

Summary: Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Assistant Commissioner for Watershed and Land Management Program Katie Angarone, Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ) Director Kandyce Perry, and EPA Region 2 Deputy Regional Administrator Alyssa Arcaya led a community engagement session with residents of Mercer County to discuss environmental justice in their area.

Introductory Remarks

Kandyce Perry, the Environmental Justice Director at New Jersey's Department of Environmental Protection, welcomed everyone to the meeting. She introduced DEP's Assistant Commissioner for Watershed and Land Management Program Katie Angarone and EPA Region 2 Deputy Regional Administrator Alyssa Arcaya.

DEP acknowledged that minority, non-English speaking, and low-income communities have historically endured disproportionate environmental burdens in their neighborhoods. These same neighborhoods have been under resourced and often have limited access to environmental benefits like green space and the ecosystem services it provides. In Mercer County, overburdened communities contend with many environmental justice issues including flooding, lead contamination, and illegal dumping.

DEP emphasized the importance of hearing directly from impacted communities to inform government actions and incorporate their lived experiences.

Special thanks were extended to partners, including Greater Mount Zion AME Church for hosting and community advocates for their guidance and warm welcome.

Assistant Commissioner Katrina Angarone, asserted that the government's role is to serve the people, and it cannot effectively do so without engaging directly with communities about their unique environmental challenges and priorities.

EPA Region 2 Deputy Regional Administrator Alyssa Arcaya thanked community members and DEP staff for making the session possible. She spoke about EPA and DEP's joint efforts in the county to remove and replace lead service lines, noting that Trenton is part of the [Lead Service Line Accelerators Program](#). Further, EPA's soil testing initiatives at local Superfund sites and schools have helped identify and remove lead contaminants, reducing exposures through soil and better protecting public health. She recognized [Lead Free New Jersey](#) as an active partner in raising awareness, highlighted local enforcement actions EPA has taken to hold polluters accountable, and shared the [Community Change Grant program](#) funding environmental justice initiatives led by community-based organizations in overburdened communities.

Discussion

1. **Comment:** A representative from the Trenton Cycling Revolution stressed the need for safer, more accessible bike and pedestrian infrastructure, citing that only 46% of Trenton residents have cars. The resident shared related concerns about a stalled Brownfield remediation project at Amtico Skate Park. They said that noise and air pollution barriers between neighborhoods and major roadways that exist in the suburbs are absent in Trenton, sharing the story of a child in Mill Hill who has permanently damaged hearing from highway noise. She expressed the need for coordinated action between decisionmakers in Trenton to increase green space and reduce noise and air pollution near residential areas.

Response: Director Perry suggested that Trenton participate in DEP's [Brownfield Designation Area \(BDA\) District Program](#), which recognizes special districts as areas for brownfield redevelopment, develops a community board on Brownfield Redevelopment to ensure sites identified by residents are prioritized, and provides special districts with designated state and local resources. The program leverages resources in order to accelerate remediation projects in priority areas. Regarding air pollution, Director Perry noted at least one existing [air pollution monitor run by DEP's Air Monitoring Program](#) in Trenton and discussed opportunities for expanding state monitoring programs. She shared that there are several ongoing citizen science projects in the area that the resident may be interested in.

Deputy Regional Administrator Arcaya assured the resident she would follow up with additional federal resources for air monitoring, infrastructure improvements, and brownfield remediation. Specifically, she shared that [EPA's Community-Engaged Research Collaborative for Learning and Excellence](#) in Edison, NJ provides technical assistance for community air monitoring projects and lends equipment to residents regularly.

2. **Comment:** A long-time Trenton resident emphasized the ecological and historical significance of trees in the area but expressed concerns about the affordability of tree maintenance for residents. The resident asked what resources or technical assistance were available for homeowners to help support tree maintenance in their neighborhoods.

Response: Director Perry highlighted the DEP [Urban Community Forest Program](#) and [Leafing Out Program](#) grants, which provides technical and financial assistance with tree education and maintenance. She promised to reach out to city officials and encourage them to apply before the application deadline and encouraged commenter to do the same.

Assistant Commissioner Angarone added that Philadelphia and Boston are models for how municipal governments can partner with non-profits to coordinate community tree education and maintenance. She shared that it might be beneficial to look to other municipalities as case studies and share research.

3. **Comment:** An East Trenton resident expressed concerns about high lead levels in soil at St. Joel's Park. The resident has been working with the Trenton Parks and Recreation Program to implement a summer breakfast and lunch program in the park for kids but has found that many

parents fear bringing their children there. The resident expressed interest in developing a partnership with DEP to implement the program and provide affected families with lead risk awareness education. Community organizations are struggling to provide key services at public spaces like parks because community members are afraid of lead exposures. The resident noted that the sign posted about lead at the entrance of park deters people from attending events.

Response: Assistant Commissioner Angarone validated the concern, agreeing that some interpretative statement explaining what exactly the sign posting means is necessary to ensure that lead risk is effectively communicated, and that people still feel safe recreating at public parks.

Deputy Regional Administrator Arcaya expressed the desire to partner with communities to perform outreach and develop educational materials that address community misconceptions and informational gaps.

Director Perry agreed that a partnership would be beneficial. With community advocates' longstanding relationships with residents and critical local knowledge, and DEP's technical resources, they can address fears and effectively communicate risk about lead exposures. She said she could follow up to plan coordinated outreach efforts.

4. **Comment:** A representative from Trenton Area Soup Kitchen raised concerns about inadequate and unsafe pedestrian access to the soup kitchen which deters community members from using the soup kitchen's resources. She also advocated for more public drinking fountains and safe, affordable housing.

Response: Director Perry thanked the commenter and emphasized the interconnectedness of social and environmental issues. While these issues are not within the DEP's jurisdiction, DEP would connect the commenter with other government contacts to see what can be done to address these issues.

5. **Comment:** A Trenton resident raised a number of environmental justice concerns related to air pollution, tree maintenance, the Battle Monument State Park, and roadway barriers limiting park access. They recognized current efforts to reduce air pollution but stated that many community members don't actually know what or how much is being done. The resident insisted that there needs to be more transparent, frequent, and consistent communication between the government and communities. They emphasized a previous commenter's point about the need for tree maintenance programs to protect Trenton's declining urban forests. The resident also asked for DEP's help in reopening the battle monument at a local park, which used to be a big tourist attraction. They added that the walkable trails and bike paths in and adjacent to Delaware and Raritan Canal State Park are difficult to access.

Response: Commissioner Angarone agreed that reframing our understanding of trees as a type of infrastructure that require maintenance just the same as any other type of infrastructure would lead to the better care and more sustainable tree programs in communities.

Director Perry offered urban forestry's Leafing Out Program again as a resource. She noted that DEP recently hired a new Urban Parks Director and said that she would reach out to discuss issues with the D&R Canal and the Battle Monument.

Follow up Comment: Trenton's grant acquisition coordinator confirmed that the municipality received funding through the Leafing Out Program for tree maintenance as well as grant from the Department of Transportation to address DNR Canal recreation access issues. The coordinator also shared that the city is in conversation with the state about the Battle Monument, and that Trenton has applied for a Community Change Grant for brownfield remediation activities.

- Comment:** A lifelong Trenton resident shared their personal connection with the historic Trenton pottery industry through the passing of his father who died of health complications related to his work there. The resident raised concerns about hazardous air quality in Trenton and its public health consequences, citing high rates of asthma and respiratory diseases, particularly among Black residents. They argued that car and truck traffic on major highways closely sited near residential neighborhoods are the main source of the pollution. Vehicle electrification is a potential solution, but electric vehicles will not make up a majority of the automobiles on the road for a while. To reduce present emissions and mitigate pollution today, the commenter called for community-based programs that install catalytic converters on diesel-powered cars.

Response: **Director Perry** thanked the commenter and assured that she would pass the commenter's data along to the DEP Air Quality program.

Commissioner Angarone provided the [NJ Healthy Community Planning Tool](#) as a resource. The tool compiles environmental and public health data at all levels at the municipal, county, and state level and provides summary reports for users. The tool can be used to understand health stressors like poor air quality and design policy that will lead to better health outcomes.

- Comment:** A representative from the East Trenton Collaborative discussed challenges with the municipality's capacity to do environmental work. A lot of the time, Trenton might be able to secure grant funding or collect data, but it doesn't have enough people to implement a project or to apply that data in policymaking. The resident expressed appreciation to the DEP and EPA for listening to the community but stressed the need for further collaboration with both agencies to help Trenton. The resident elaborated on previous statements about traffic issues and added that lead pollution that affects housing and water infrastructure can impact the IQ, personality, and learning ability of children. Organizations like Lead Free NJ have been key in implementing lead testing campaigns, identifying pathways to youth exposure to lead, and amplifying the voices of Black and brown communities dealing with these types of environmental injustices, but they need government resources and support to do this work.

Response: **Director Perry** assured that DEP will continue to be in discussion with residents and organizations and will offer help wherever possible.

Deputy Regional Administrator Arcaya highlighted the commenter's point about the many lead exposure pathways that kids are particularly vulnerable to. She reiterated EPA's desire to help with outreach and testing related to Trenton Historic Potteries site.

Assistant Commissioner Angarone added that DEP does work closely with the Department of Health to address lead exposure but added that there are always ways to improve communication.

The Commenter mentioned the success of a community science program run by East Trenton Collaborative and Rutgers. The partnership trains and pays community members to take soil samples and equips them with transferrable skills that help them get jobs. The commenter called on a representative from the Rutgers program to speak.

8. **Comment:** A Rutgers Program representative outlined details of how the community partnership began. Initially, they only tested lead in the soil, but the program has expanded to testing for paint, dust, and water found in homes. The representative asked what EPA does to address lead dust from soil that makes its way into homes. They also asked what DEP does to reduce Environmental Justice stressors including lead exposure, cumulative air exposure, and heat vulnerability due to the Urban Heat Island Effect in communities.

Response: Deputy Regional Administrator Arcaya assured that she will follow up after bringing the question back to her team.

Director Perry shared that listening sessions like these are one of the DEP's biggest information gathering tools where staff can hear directly from communities about their priorities and establish relationships. She further explained that after sessions like these, the Office of Environmental Justice brings feedback back to DEP staff to develop strategies that reduce stressors residents are most concerned about in each county. Director Perry cited the [Environmental Justice Law](#) as a key tool to reduce stressors because it gives the DEP power to consider the amount of pollution a facility requesting a permit facility produces. If the pollution places a significant burden on Overburdened Communities, the DEP can either reject the permit entirely or add conditions such as reducing emissions over time or recirculate truck traffic. Applicants are required to hold a public hearing, which provide residents with the opportunity to learn more about a proposal and provide feedback that influences our decision. She also noted that DEP [just received an Urban Heat Island Government-to-Government grant for \\$1 million](#) that will be used to install and collect data from community science heat sensors (both mobile and stationary) in order to develop a statewide Urban Heat Island map. Temperature monitors will be included, as temperature affects particulate matter and ozone levels.

9. **Comment:** A Trenton resident asked whether the passing of the proposed New Jersey Green Amendment in NJ legislature would strengthen DEP's ability to regulate the environment. The proposed amendment would guarantee residents' constitutional right to clean air and environment, but they asked if the amendment would only have impact on the judicial level.

Response: Assistant Commissioner Angarone said that as a part of the executive branch, DEP must follow mandates, like the Clean Air Act or the Clean Water Act, passed down from the legislative branch. Ultimately, DEP cannot advocate for legislation.

10. **Comment:** A local organizer explained that his group has been attending many of these listening sessions in overburdened communities. During the listening session in Newark, commenters had mentioned that the Mayor was able to push past administrative barriers to allocate necessary funding and accelerate lead service line replacements there. They wondered if that same process could be applied to Trenton, and if DEP could reach out to the mayor to get his insight. They also mentioned the environmental justice grant available through Fordham University that might be useful to residents who are trying to build a park.

Response: Director Perry thanked the commenter for mentioning the grant and encouraged Fordham representatives to speak on the [Flourishing in Community Grant Program](#).

A Fordham Representative shared that the program funds community projects that support people disproportionately impacted by climate change, pollution, and environmental stressors. Any 501 c3 org can apply, and the applications are accepted on a rolling basis. Office hours can be scheduled to provide applicant assistance.

Deputy Regional Administrator Arcaya added that [EPA's Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Grantmaking Program](#) provides historic funding to organizations that are not traditionally given federal grants so that places like Fordham University can act as liaisons between the federal government and disadvantaged communities. Regarding the Lead Service Line Replacement in Newark, she explained that the DEP and the city partnered to respond urgently in a way that could be modeled elsewhere. The project required a change in the municipal code to allow for the replacement of lead service lines that were on private property.

11. **Comment:** A representative from the Clean Water Action raised concerns about air pollution and asthma rates and expressed particular concern about warehouse development. She asked what the DEP can do to address warehouse development that exacerbates air pollution, and cause flooding. She asked if EJMAP includes warehouses, and if warehouses are regulated under the EJ Law.

Response: Director Perry stated that a reliable data set is required in order to add a stressor to the EJ Map; unfortunately, a reliable data set does not currently exist for warehouses. DEP is open to adding warehouses to the map, but the state does not currently have the data to do so. She further explained that warehouses do not typically fall within the EJ Rule, only if they are seeking a major Title V air permit which is very uncommon. The EJ Rule does, however, cover incinerators, power plants, and recycling facilities.

Assistant Commissioner Angarone added that the most powerful tool to address warehouse development is local zoning. She shared that the DEP has a guide for zoning best practices and

encouraged the commenter to talk to local officials. She explained that while DEP does have jurisdiction over natural resources, municipal zoning and planning boards dictate local land use decisions.

Closing Remarks

Director Perry thanked the audience for their courage in sharing their comments and stories, which are often deeply personal. She reminded the audience that this can be the first step in building local connections, and that commenters can expect follow-up conversations in the near future. Community voices are important, and that the DEP will never know their experiences unless they share them.

Assistant Commissioner Angarone echoed Director Perry's sentiments, and added that DEP cannot do this alone, and stressed the importance of understanding community priorities in order to make effective policy. She expressed gratitude to the audience for taking time out of their day, and to the organizations and community leaders who do this work everyday.

Deputy Regional Administrator Arcaya expressed appreciation to all community partners and looked forward to working together in the future.

Mercer County Engagement Session Follow Up/Next Steps:

- **Trenton Historic Potteries Site:** Commissioner LaTourette proposed adding East Trenton's historically significant pottery manufacturing area, to be included in the National Priorities List (NPL) as a Superfund Site. EPA will continue to provide updates on the pottery site's inclusion in the NPL, which could secure additional EPA funding and prioritize the protection of public health and the environment in East Trenton. Funding is available to municipal, tribal, intergovernmental, and nonprofit entities through [EPA's Reducing Lead in Drinking Water Grant Program](#) to support infrastructure investments, water treatment improvements, and lead remediation in schools and child-care facilities.
- **Resources to learn about Lead Exposure:** The EPA has resources to support communities in providing testing, identifying and replacing lead service lines, and raising awareness [available online](#). Residents can use the [NJ Potential Lead Exposure Mapping Tool](#) to identify potential lead exposures in their community and understand associated health risks.
- **Tree Maintenance Assistance:** DEP will share information regarding the [New Jersey Urban and Community Forestry Program's Green Communities Grant](#) which assists local governments in conducting tree inventories and developing a Community Forestry Management Plan (CFMP). A CFMP is a planning document, guiding community efforts to establish and maintain urban and community forests. Stewardship and park development grants are also available through [DEP's Green Acres program](#).

Trenton has received funding through the [Leafing Out Program](#) for tree maintenance as well as a

grant from the Department of Transportation to address D&R Canal recreation access issues.

- **Environmental Justice and Continued Community Engagement:** DEP will share [Fordham University's Flourishing in Community Grant Program](#) with attendees as a resource to 501(c)(3) organizations supporting environmental justice initiatives in overburdened communities.