

January 2, 2020

Remarks for Public Comment

Allegheny County Courthouse, 4th Floor - Gold Room
436 Grant Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

Congratulations to the new members of this council and to all members for a new session for 2020. We wish you all good health and a Happy New Year. I am Matthew Mehalik, Executive Director of the Breathe Project, an organization dedicated to improving our region's air quality working together with over 39 regional organizations and institutions with science and public health at our core.

I am here, hopefully, to alert this new council to the dire need for institutional leadership to protect the health of our county's residents from both chronic and acute air quality issues in our county. From a chronic perspective, our entire county's air quality ranks at the 8th percentile nationally, with over half of our days having air quality rated as "not good." We are out of compliance with the Clean Air Act for particles on an annual basis. This affects everyone from Warrendale to West Elizabeth. Fixing this will take long-term institutional leadership and commitment.

2019 was a year of acute air pollution: The Clairton Coke Works emitted over 10 years' worth of pollution in 101 days when its plant blew up on Christmas Eve 2018 because of poor maintenance. Another fire erupted in June 2019. And over Christmas 2019 the region experienced 8 days of horrific air. We were in the top 5 worst air sites in the US for 8 consecutive days (often #1) between December 20 – 28. There were seven days of violations of the Hydrogen Sulfide 24-hour standard and six violations of the 24-hour Particulate Matter 2.5 standard during this period. Numerous complaints about bad smells throughout the region were recorded on the Smell PGH app. And monitors have recorded high levels of benzene in the Mon Valley.

What was the response from the County Health Department? Blame the weather. What was the response from the Board of Health? Silence. What was the response from the County Executive? Silence. Who is protecting the health of county residents from these acute and harmful situations?

As if this lack of responsible leadership isn't bad enough—it should be pointed out that there was never any sort of review of the Health Department's lack of rapid response to December 2018's plant explosion when the public had to wait for 3 weeks to learn any details while air pollution violations were occurring. No lessons learned. No changes. No accountability. No wonder that on the 1-year anniversary of that explosion our county was once again subjected to a Christmas present of air quality violations while the weather was used as an excuse and leadership hid (and is hiding) from the situation.

I call on this Council to step into this leadership vacuum: Only appoint members to the Board of Health that commit to protecting county residents from polluted air. Only approve a new Health Department Director who will lead on air quality enforcement. And hold the County Executive accountable for protecting the health of county residents from air pollution. No more blaming the weather. Commit to protecting county residents.

Sincerely,

Matthew M. Mehalik, Ph.D.