

May 13, 2020

Remarks for Public Comment

ACHD Board of Health Meeting
542 Fourth Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15219

Thank you for allowing me to comment today. I am Matthew Mehalik, Executive Director of the Breathe Project, a regional organization that constantly avails itself of top-level health, epidemiological, and air quality science and public health information.

I want to send a warm welcome to Dr. Debra Bogen, who began her new role as ACHD Director very recently amidst challenging circumstances. We appreciate her new leadership for our county. We appreciate her openness to suggestions for improving our region's air quality and for the opportunity to forge new, stronger relationships with regional air quality organizations. We appreciate the opportunity to move beyond some of the institutional cultural limitations that have resulted in community voices being dismissed and diminished. And we appreciate the spirit of moving forward in order to escape the ethos of creeping institutional paralysis concerning air quality in our region.

At core is the need for institutional leadership to protect the health of our county's residents from both chronic and acute air quality issues in our county. This was true before the current pandemic, and it is especially true during this pandemic.

Communication about Pittsburgh's air quality requires nuance. While on one hand it appears that traffic-related pollution has declined since the mid-March orders to protect everyone by physical distancing, the story about PM 2.5 particle pollution, our region's dominant air quality challenge, appears less sanguine. Clean Air Task Force's analysis of regional monitoring data over the prior four years shows that there is no demonstrable reduction in PM 2.5 pollution this year for the Liberty monitor. The 2020 PM 2.5 levels at Liberty are all within the range of weather variability when compared with past years. Because our region's air pollution is dominated by industrial sources (coking operations and steel manufacturing), and because these sources were not ordered to stop emitting pollution during the pandemic, we have seen no appreciable change in PM 2.5 pollution levels. So, there is no victory lap or celebration to be had just yet for regional air quality.

There is consensus and clear communication from the country's top public health analysts and officials stating that reducing air pollution in the midst of a virus such as Coronavirus, which is known to cause tissue inflammation and organ damage, should be a top priority. ACHD recognized this fact in its announcement to curtail open burning in the County. Can ACHD message to industrial polluters to curtail their emissions voluntarily to protect the health of county residents, too? Can ACHD send a strong signal that our region's PM pollution has not gotten better? Can ACHD adopt a public health communications frame for air quality rather than stating bureaucratic reasons for no action to be taken? Thank you.

Sincerely,

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Executive Director

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