

July 17, 2024

Remarks for Public Comment

ACHD Board of Health Meeting
Gold Room, Room 410 (4th floor)
Allegheny County Courthouse
436 Grant Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

Dear ACHD Board Members and Leadership:

I am Matthew Mehalik, Executive Director of the Breathe Project. Thank you for this opportunity to provide public comment.

The Allegheny County Health Department needs to have its air program fully funded. The costs of the program should be carried by the significant polluters seeking pollution permits. Additional costs should be covered by the county's budget. Equipping ACHD with the tools it needs to protect our 1.3 million residents is a no-brainer.

Earlier this year a group of residents from the Mon Valley released updated [2020 – 2022 findings](#) from a report, "[Fine Particulate Matter and Mortality in Allegheny County, Pa.](#)," that soot pollution kills between 640 -1,373 people each year in Allegheny County. Low-income communities had 33% higher proportions of these deaths than higher income communities. Communities of color had 18% higher rates of these deaths than other communities. This means that 3.5 to 7 times more people are dying each from air pollution than Covid-19 in our county. We are having a 911-scale event in our county every 2 years.

The report's release was covered widely by media.

The response from our public health allies at ACHD was silence. This has been the case for other high quality science reports, such as NYU's study that showed significant decreases in emergency room visits as well as pollution levels immediately following the closure of the Shenango Coke Works for economic reasons in 2016.

There is a lot of noise about a meagre \$1.9 million out of our county's budget of about \$1 billion. Actuarial [valuation of human life in the U.S. ranges from \\$1 million - \\$10 million](#). FEMA uses \$7.5 million in its valuation. Even at the lowest end of this scale, Allegheny County experiences damages between \$640 million - \$1.4 billion in lost lives EACH YEAR from soot pollution. The cost of the budget shortfall is the cost of saving 2 lives per year from air pollution. The additional 638 – 1371 lives saved from reduced pollution means potentially \$1.3 billion that can be banked in our county.

It is for these reasons that the Clean Air Act is hugely successful. Its benefits are estimated to be more than 40 times greater than its cost, saving our economy trillions of dollars. The same is true for our county.

The fact that this is in any way controversial reflects larger, institutional governance issues that must also be addressed. I [raised many of these issues exactly 6 months ago at the January 17, 2024, BOH meeting](#). It is time to address them:

- Appoint new, responsive BOH members. Their terms have expired.
- Reconstitute the air advisory committee, which has not mustered a real quorum since the November election, and which does not provide any meaningful input on the most basic matters of ACHD operations
- Remove US Steel as chair of the Pollution Prevention and Education Committee, which basically has done nothing for several years
- Meet with impacting community members instead of stonewalling them.

Reform is required at the root of the organization so that priorities to protect public health from toxic air pollution and listening to community voices becomes a core value. It is time to make major changes at ACHD.

Sincerely,

Matthew M. Mehalik, Ph.D.