

## **Community gathers to discuss aftermath of fatal explosion at U.S. Steel plant**

*Several environmental groups hosted the community conversation on Wednesday.*

**By LADIMIR GARCIA/ Mon Valley Independent, May 29, 2026**

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More than 50 residents attended a community conversation Wednesday to get a larger insight into last year's explosion at the U.S. Steel Clairton Coke plant, with some raising concerns and frustrations about pollutants and their perceived lack of accountability.

Wednesday's event was hosted by multiple Pittsburgh- area organizations and environmental groups at the Clairton Municipal Building to allow area residents to talk with experts about the explosion on Aug. 11, 2025. The blast claimed the lives of Timothy Quinn, 39, and Steven Menefee, 52, and injured several U.S. Steel workers.

Since the explosion last year, some residents said they had concerns about pollutants from the U.S. Steel facility and raised questions about what would happen if another accident happened at the coke works. For Phillip Dequeiroz, a Glassport resident, Japan's Nippon Steel acquisition of U.S. Steel brings up more concerns.

"Knowing that Nippon is also very much involved with this, I remember when they were doing interviews with NPR and on other news stations; they said that they would invest a lot more money in the Mon Valley area, and I feel like that's not happening," Dequeiroz said. "I wake up early to go to my job, and when I go

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out there in the morning, in the morning sunlight, I can breathe that heavy air.

"And I know that in Japan, Nippon Steel, they have the best filter quality on all of their plants. I don't understand why Nippon hasn't implemented any of that technology here in their own plant that they now own here."

A panel of four experts addressed the efforts made in response to the explosion over the past year. The group included Dr. Iulia Vann, director of the Allegheny County Health Department; William Steiner, a chemical investigator with the U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB); and Qiyam Ansari, director of Valley Clean Air Now.

On the day of the explosion, Vann explained that the Allegheny County Health Department put out a recommendation for residents around the coke works to stay indoors. Vann said that after receiving some additional information, they lifted the recommendation, which was mainly shared through news outlets or social media.

Vann said that since the explosion, the Allegheny County Health Department has been working on a more efficient way to share alerts with residents in case of a similar incident.

“Moving forward, July 1, the county is going to implement a new alert system, which is called Code Red, and Code Red is going to give us the ability to quickly alert people within a specific geographic area on their phones,” Vann said. “That is one area where we could have done this notification faster if we had a system like this in place. However, we are moving in that direction now, and in any other emergency situation, we’ll be able to notify the community right away.”

Some residents asked why the county doesn’t have sirens in place to respond to such incidents, but panelists said that such an effort would have to include buy-in from multiple municipalities.

Vann said the health department has an ongoing investigation to learn if U.S. Steel complied with Article 21, which is a county air quality regulation. Vann noted that after the explosion, the county also went over data from its air monitoring sites surrounding the Clairton Coke Works.

Vann added that the weather on the day of the explosion helped mitigate some of the worst effects of the explosion.

Carnegie Mellon University and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection also provided additional help to the county to further monitor and analyze data after the explosion.

Steiner explained that the incident happened during maintenance involving a gas isolation valve near one of the coke oven batteries. Steiner said that after the explosion, the U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board interviewed people involved in the explosion to learn what caused it.

Steiner said that their goal is to provide U.S. Steel with a final report, but said that they released interim recommendations for the company to follow shortly after the incident. He emphasized that an investigation for a final report is still ongoing.

Steiner explained that U.S. Steel conducted multiple Process Hazard Analyses (PHAs) of their coke oven gas system and intentionally excluded “facility siting issues.” Steiner added that U.S. Steel management rejected a 2003 PHA recommendation.

In their interim recommendations, the CSB asked U.S. Steel to do a siting evaluation for all buildings on the site of the Clairton Coke Works and to mitigate hazards based on guidance created by the CSB. Steiner emphasized that CSB is not an enforcement agency and can only make recommendations.

Ansari touched on the pollutants produced by a facility like the U.S. Steel Clairton Coke Works.

“It was a tragic event that took place, but we have to live with this toxic pollution in our lungs and in our homes every day, right. So it’s constant for us,” Ansari said. “We know that PM2.5 (Particulate Matter) is a huge problem. It damages our respiratory health. And then we have another category of toxins called VOCs, or volatile organic compounds, so that includes sulfur dioxide. It comes from the coal. It harms our lungs. It creates acid rain. If you go outside and look at a leaf and you see all the black spots on it, that’s from the acid rain. That’s not supposed to be there.

“There are about 34 other chemicals that I can name, but we’re doing our best to try to talk about these and why they’re dangerous, but it is something that we need to be aware of.”

During the public comment period of the event, Dan Gomez, a North Braddock resident, raised concerns about no public officials and U.S. Steel representatives being at the event.

“Are there any U.S. Steel representatives, upper management, or mid management here? And are there any borough representatives from the boroughs that have the sites here in this meeting, which is supposed to be for community transparency and accountability?” Gomez asked. “No, because U.S. Steel is having a Mon Valley government and community leaders invite-only meeting at the very same time, so that they can do whatever they’re doing to convince our representatives to vote for a hot strip mill at the ET (Edgar Thompson) works that’s going to increase the PM2.5 emissions on the site up to 30%.”

Breathe Project Communications Manager Debra Smit said they are planning to have another similar meeting, which might include current or former U.S. steelworkers.

“We want to hear their concerns,” Smit said. “You heard Dr. Vann from the health department, she wants to hear from them, and nobody else was doing it, so that’s why

we decided with all these partner organizations to make this happen. There will be another one.”

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**Glassport resident Phillip Dequeiroz speaks at Wednesday’s event. *Ladimir Garcia / Mon Valley Independent***

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