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Omar Abdel-Baqi for The Latino Press

Residents of southwest Detroit are forced to deal with heavy pollution emitted from the many factories within Southwest and surrounding areas, automobile and semi-truck traffic and other environmental stressors affecting the health of those in the community.

There are over 150 sites in southwest Detroit releasing chemicals and particles which result in air pollution. These sites emit dangerous chemicals and particles such as PM2.5, sulfur dioxide, nitrous oxide and ozone.

Zip codes 48217 and 48209 are home to the highest levels of greenhouse gas emissions in the city of Detroit. Moreover, the areas in Detroit with the highest concentration of PM2.5 are also the areas with the highest Latino population.

The air pollution in southwest Detroit causes numerous health issues for residents of the community including respiratory diseases, cardiovascular problems, kidney failure and cancer.

Asthma hospitalization rates in southwest Detroit and surrounding areas are nearly triple the state average; cancer rates are also higher than average.

The International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health reported that air pollution in the Detroit area has led to over 10,000 DALYs (the sum of years of potential life lost due to premature mortality and the years of productive life lost due to disability, according to the World Health Organization), in addition to 6.5 billion dollars in economic losses. Moreover, they concluded that about 5.5 percent of annual deaths in the area are due to exposure to PM2.5.

“These particles and chemicals can penetrate our body and enter our bloodstream and wreak havoc on health,” said Guy Williams, president & CEO of Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice. “We have only recently realized the serious damage PM2.5 can cause.”

Steve Tobocman, director of Global Detroit and former Michigan state representative, cites the Marathon Oil Refinery, The Detroit Intermodal Freight Terminal, the Detroit Water and Sewerage facility, Zug Island and traffic as main polluters that have led to these health issues.

Marathon Oil, located on Fort Street, produces up to 140,000 barrels of oil a day – the site operates 24 hours a day, all year round. In 2014, the oil refinery emitted 430 tons of nitrous oxide, 83 tons of PM2.5 and 211 tons of sulfur dioxide.

Williams said the pollutants emitted by Marathon and other factories in southwest Detroit cause terrible outdoor air quality and can get trapped in homes, resulting in poor indoor air quality as well.



Contaminated Air

Health issues potentially caused by pollution is prevalent among the youth living in southwest Detroit. At Munger Elementary-Middle School in southwest Detroit, asthma is the number one reason students miss class, according to Charlotte Moss, a Henry Ford nurse stationed at Munger.

Due to high asthma rates in the community, Munger Elementary initiated a six-session program educating students about the respiratory disease and medication.

Moss said she encourages children to exercise and play outside, but she is fearful about the contaminated air the children would be

breathing.

Another school in southwest Detroit, Harms Elementary, faces similar issues regarding pollution, according to Community Schools Coordinator Ana Martinez.

“There are so many factories near Harms, there is so much trash on the streets and there are so many nearby houses deteriorating,” Martinez said. Adding that the fact that the government is aware of the issues prevalent in southwest Detroit and is yet unwilling to take action in the area is very frustrating. She said she cannot come to terms with seeing the major developments taking place in midtown and downtown, while southwest Detroit – a community she has been a part of for 25 years – continues to deal with very serious problems.

“I am all for the rising up of Detroit and investors investing in our city,” said Martinez. “But, don’t just invest in the property, invest in the people who have been here for a long time... Our children deserve better than this.”



Martinez said Harms

Elementary makes every effort to assist students in being able to access resources that lead to a healthy lifestyle by offering after-school programs. And although these programs help students when they are at school, healthy habits often are lacking once students get home.

With over 23 percent of southwest Detroiters having no access to their own vehicle, their ability to get around town is severely hindered. Martinez cited this issue, in addition to financial hardships, as reasons why many families are not able to access gyms and parks, and enjoy a healthier lifestyle.

“These companies that are polluting our air and causing our health to deteriorate need to be held accountable for the actions they are committing. They should put into the communities as much as they take out,” said Martinez. “I think it would be a great idea for the polluting corporations in the area to fund a free gym for the children of southwest Detroit.”

Gordie Howe International Bridge

In addition to factories and traffic, the proposed Gordie Howe International Bridge is stirring controversy and is a potential cause for concern among the southwest Detroit community.

If the bridge is built, between 324 and 414 houses would be relocated; up to seven places of worship would be lost; between 685 and 920 jobs would be relocated from the Delray area; the Community Health and Social Services Center (CHASS), a major provider of healthcare to the southwest Detroit community would be relocated; three cultural/historic buildings would be destroyed; three parks/recreation centers would be removed; light pollution would be increased; there would be a potential increase in semi-truck traffic and a change in the way southwest Detroiters get around due to permanent road closures near I-75.

Semi-truck traffic, in particular, is already a major issue plaguing southwest Detroit – as trucks constantly go through neighborhood streets to reach the Ambassador Bridge. Semi-trucks emit PM2.5 and other harmful pollutants into the air.

According to Tobocman, the State of Michigan does not have a role in the development of the new international crossing and it will be up to the Canadian government and whatever operator is chosen to implement policies that mitigate environmental factors.

“Unfortunately, U.S. residents have limited their ability to impact the project when the Michigan Legislature decided it would not be a part of the project,” said Tobocman. “We have far less a voice in this important economic asset and potential environmental threat.”

Stephanie Chang, state representative for District 6, said, “While there will no doubt be increased pollution, both noise and air, during construction of the Gordie Howe International Bridge, once it is constructed, its freeway-to-freeway connectivity may help to ensure shorter idle time.”

Chang added, “However, I remain concerned about the pollution because there will be increased traffic due to this bridge.”

Government Action

Although the government has been criticized by many for its inaction to enact policy that will reduce the amount of pollution emitted into the air, there have nevertheless been several efforts to do so. The impact of the laws, however, is often debated.

For example, the Detroit City Council imposed regulations that bar certain commercial vehicles from idling for over 5 minutes within Detroit city limits. Although Williams praises the effort, he notes that because this rule is hard to enforce, it ends up not impacting any reduction in air pollution.

Chang has also introduced and supported bills that focus on environmental issues. These bills include HB 4200, which calls for citizen oversight of MDEQ and HB 4257, which set requirements for the proper and safe storage of pet coke.

Chang said she is working on establishing legislation that would “create a fund that companies who have violated the Clean Air Act would pay into in order to fund air quality improvement projects in communities directly impacted by their pollution.” This is in addition to a bill that would “create an ombudsman for air quality who would have the ability to receive and process complaints, initiate investigations and request injunctive relief and prescribe penalties.”

Raquel Castaneda-Lopez, city council member of District 6, said her office is “beginning work on legislation to create necessary buffers between pollution sources and residential areas, and creating ‘complete streets’ to encourage walking and biking.” Her office has also worked with the Delray community to try and secure community benefits for those who will be impacted by the Gordie Howe International Bridge.

Ultimately, everyone agrees that enacting and implementing policies that protect residents from environmental harm will require cooperation between community organizations, policymakers, and corporations. Competing interest and objectives, however, often make such efforts difficult to achieve.

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