

White Paper: EJ Town Hall

Science Facts and Analysis from Science for Georgia
Summary of Oct 28, 2023 Environmental Justice Take Action Forum and Listening Session
By Jessica Shin

Summary

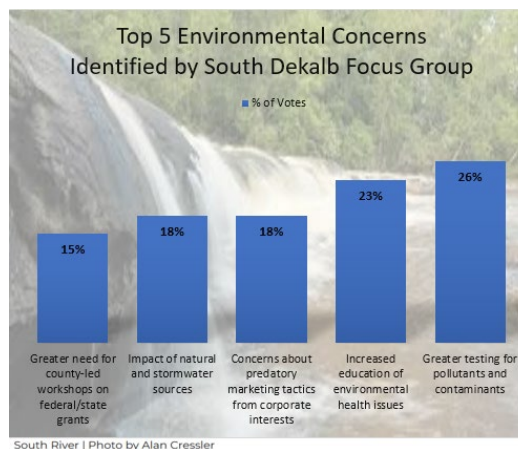
In collaboration with Representative Becky Evans of District 89 and New Life Community Alliance, Science for Georgia co-hosted the Environmental Justice Take Action Forum and Listening Session (“EJ Town Hall”) to gather community leaders, experts, and South DeKalb residents for an open discussion on salient issues affecting South DeKalb.

The EJ Town Hall was structured into two major components. One, partners and organizations offered presentations on current, known, issues in S. DeKalb. Two, community members participated in break-out groups to identify issues they deemed to be most important to their area.

Residents heard from organizations, such as the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Georgia Conservation Voters (GCV), Georgia Power, Snapping Shoals, Georgia State University (GSU), Chapel Hill Organization, Citizens for a Healthy and Safe Environment (CHASE), and South River Watershed Alliance. Topics ranged from information on publicly available tools used to monitor air and water quality, energy burden, risk factors of indoor air pollutants, community mobilization, ecological threats to the South River Watershed, and science advocacy.

The presentations provided a glimpse of the environmental challenges facing South DeKalb and highlighted the often-conflicting messages that shape regional public health efforts.

The breakout sessions conducted at the EJ Town Hall shed light on the concerns of the South DeKalb residents and provided a basis for the follow-up town hall event scheduled for January 27, 2024. The follow-up event will present additional research and information on the top two issues identified in the EJ Town Hall: greater testing of pollutants/contaminants and education of environmental health issues. The Town Hall and subsequent research into providing greater education on local environmental health issues supports Science for Georgia’s mission of bridging the gap between scientists and the general public.



Presentations

DeAnna Oser, Assistant Branch Chief of the Georgia EPD Air Protection Branch spoke about Georgia EPD’s efforts to monitor and protect Georgia’s environment. Georgia EPD is the enforcing body of the Clean Air and Water Act in Georgia under the authority of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and maintains compliance through rigorous testing and monitoring of air and water quality. In 2022, the EPA determined Georgia to be in full attainment of all air quality standards for the first time since the 1970’s. Despite this ruling/designation, representatives from GSU, Chapel Hill Organization, CHASE, and South River Watershed Alliance highlighted the persistent environmental challenges in South DeKalb that contradict this determination and place residents at risk of adverse health outcomes.

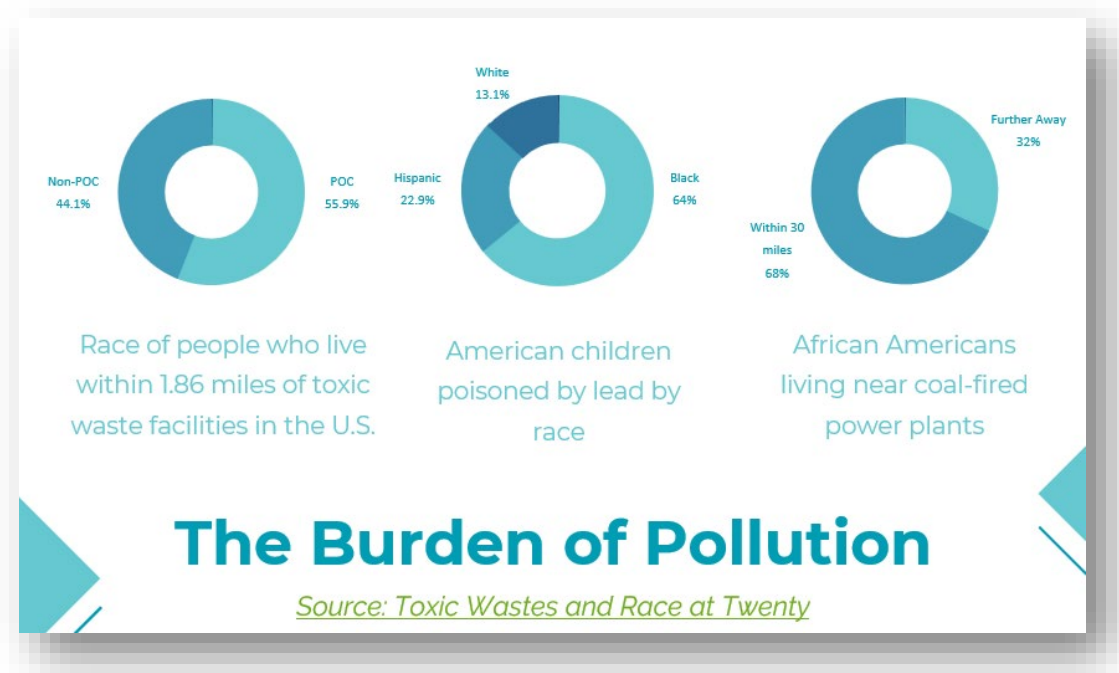
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Dr. Dajun Dai, Associate Professor of Geosciences at GSU, spoke about the dangerously high levels of indoor radon gas in Georgia, particularly southern DeKalb County. Radon gas, a colorless and odorless naturally-occurring radioactive gas, is the second leading cause of lung cancer for smokers and the leading cause for non-smokers (EPA, 2023). To better understand the contributing factors of low radon testing rates in Georgia, Dr. Dai and his research team investigated areas in Georgia with the lowest proportion of radon testing according to the U.S. Census data.

Dr. Dai's team found that the South DeKalb area, an area with a predominantly African-American demographic, had lower rates of testing, compared to the rest of the County. They sampled 217 households and found that 4 percent of households had radon levels greater than 4pCi/L (picocuries per liter), the maximum radon level that is deemed safe according to the EPA (EPA, 2023). His team concluded that lower testing rates were strongly correlated with African-American residents, regardless of socioeconomic indicators, such as education and income level.

Brionte McCorkle, Executive Director of the Georgia Conservation Voters (GCV) Education Fund, provided additional insight into the typical demographic most impacted by the burden of pollution and shared the steps to address the root causes. According to the EPA, people of color and low-income individuals are most disproportionately impacted by air pollution (EPA, 2023). In addition to the general decline in quality of life associated with air pollution, negative health outcomes such as asthma, reduced lung function, cardiovascular disease, and premature death are of higher risk.



McCorkle attributes the prevalence of air pollution sources to the lack of meaningful involvement from community members and advocates for greater education and stronger relationships among stakeholders. She highlighted the importance of voting and speaking with elected officials to influence positive outcomes for the community. One of the ways McCorkle cites the power of communicating with elected officials is in reaching out to the Georgia Public Service Commissioner to advocate for affordable energy policies.



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Energy burden, the percentage of gross household income spent on energy costs, remains a critical issue in South DeKalb (U.S. DoE). In 2018, Atlanta was ranked fourth highest median energy burden levels and third among low-income households (Brown et al., 2018). In the past four years, the Georgia Public Service Commissioner has allowed Georgia Power to raise customer rates by roughly \$3.6 billion and recoup \$9.7 billion in costs. Despite the available energy assistance programs, McCorkle states that they are not enough to handle the scale of energy burden in Georgia.

Carmalitha Merriwether serves as the Energy Assistance Coordinator for Georgia Power and spoke about the assistance programs available through Georgia Power. The programs assist senior citizens, displaced workers, low-income groups, and individuals with special needs by providing special senior citizen discounts and assistance with living expenses in partnership with the Salvation Army.

Chris Wood, Community Affairs and Development of Snapping Shoals EMC, a not-for-profit electric cooperative, shared assistance efforts through energy efficiency rebates and replacement programs for aging equipment programs.

Local South DeKalb advocates, Clarence Williams of Chapel Hill Organization and Renee Cail of Citizens for a Healthy and Safe Environment (CHASE), spoke about the importance of local advocacy and mobilization. Chapel Hill Organization started in 2017 from a small grassroots movement based in the Brook Glen and Chapel Hill subdivisions with a mission to cultivate a community of informed activists dedicated to reviving the local quality of life. Through their advocacy, they shed light on important local epidemiological trends and provide greater education on the importance of testing. CHASE was founded in 2009 to attempt to halt the development of a Biomass Plant in Lithonia. The effort to block the project took four years but was accomplished through strong local support and collaboration with environmental justice leaders to workshop solutions.

Dr. Michael Czajkowski discussed Science for Georgia's role in improving communication among scientists and the public through greater engagement and advocacy. They highlighted the resources developed by Science for Georgia, such as the Environmental Justice Advocacy Map and Advocacy Toolkit to empower the public with greater information on how to advocate for change through evidence-based methods. Among other things, the organization can offer direct trainings, such as the Climate Survival series to provide basic skills to alleviate energy burdens, develop community gardens and more. Science for Georgia will continue to guide and support the EJ efforts in south DeKalb, through additional townhall-type events, and by supporting canvassing to increase capacity of the grassroots side of the effort.

Julia Singer spoke on behalf of South River Watershed Alliance and spoke about the organization's commitment to the ecological restoration of the South River and surrounding communities. South River Watershed Alliance's main concerns center around the South River pollution, swap of 40 acres of intrenchment creek park by DeKalb County, and construction of the Atlanta public safety training center. They continue to fight for the protection of green spaces in the local area and advocate for greater preservation.



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Breakout Sessions

Attendees were split into groups of five and challenged to identify critical issues most impactful to South Dekalb. Each group presented their number one issue, and then every community member voted for their top choice. The results of the vote were as follows:

1. 26% wanted more testing of harmful pollutants and contaminants;
2. 23% percent voted for more awareness and education of environmental health issues present in South DeKalb;
3. 18% voiced concerns over predatory marketing tactics from corporate interests;
4. 18% were most concerned about the impact of natural and storm water sources on community health;
5. 5% wanted more county-led workshops on federal and state grants.

References

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About Science for Georgia

Science for Georgia is a 501c3 dedicated to bridging the gap between scientists and the public through training, outreach opportunities, and direct contact with the public, policymakers, and the press. Science for Georgia highlights how science can impact people's lives and advocates for the responsible use of science in public policy.

Please reach out with any questions or comments info@sci4ga.org

