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City holds town hall on Brunswick odor

By TAYLOR COOPER tcooper@thebrunswicknews.com

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Residents in the Brunswick area are becoming increasingly frustrated by an elusive and foul odor that seems to crop up most often at night and on weekends.

Unfortunately, government officials had few answers at a Thursday town hall meeting.

Residents in Brunswick, outside the city limits, on Blythe, St. Simons and Jekyll islands and around Exit 29 of I-95 have reported powerful odors, attracting the attention of the state Environmental Protection Division's Brunswick office and the Atlanta-based Air Quality Branch.



Officials have been investigating the issue since late last year.

Rachael Thompson, executive director of the Glynn Environmental Coalition, said residents are experiencing symptoms, including coughing, sore throat, watery eyes, irritation to the skin, difficulty breathing and more as a result of whatever is causing the odor.

Air quality monitoring might help pinpoint the source, Thompson told The News in an interview earlier this year.

According to Brett Berry, environmental compliance specialist for the EPD, over 30 facilities within a five-mile radius of Brunswick have air quality permits, meaning they either are emitting or may emit chemicals.

Per federal law, all chemicals emitted should be completely harmless.

Berry also noted that odors are not necessarily under the purview of the EPD. If no underlying emissions violation is uncovered, the only answer may be legislative action by the Georgia General Assembly.

“With that number of air quality permits, it’s also striking that there are no active air quality monitors in the city of Brunswick,” said Lance Sabbe, a Brunswick resident and downtown business owner. “That really brings to question the health of our citizens.”

City commissioners asked a few questions but mostly took a backseat at the town hall moderated by Mayor Cornell Harvey, allowing experts from the state EPD and other government agencies to do most of the talking.

“Because there is an odor, that permeates in my mind that there is a problem to it. If that hasn’t been persistent before, then there’s a reason for it happening now,” said Mayor Pro Tempore Felicia Harris.

Berry said six of the 17 coastal district staffers have been investigating the issue.

Steve Allison, Chemicals and Minerals Compliance Unit manager at the Air Quality Branch in Atlanta, said his unit is responsible for the larger and more complicated facilities in the state, including Georgia Pacific and Pinova.

A weeklong on-site inspection of Georgia Pacific’s Brunswick plant turned up nothing, Allison said.



That does not mean the company has been ruled out, however, as the investigation is not concluded.

An inspection of Pinova hasn't happened yet.

Symrise AG, another local manufacturer in the business of fragrances, flavors, cosmetic active ingredients and raw materials, is being looked at, Allison said.

Thompson suggested industries may be cleaning up their acts and putting on their best front for inspectors when they show up but violating air quality standards when they're not under scrutiny.

City Commissioner Johnny Cason asked whether the odor could be coming from a facility outside Glynn County.

It's very unlikely, especially for a prolonged period, said Allison. He was backed up by Thompson, who said the odor is almost assuredly coming from within the county.

Air quality monitors were set up around the Golden Ray when the salvaging operation began, said the state on-scene coordinator for Unified Command, John Maddox. Data has been collected for more than a year, and none of it suggests any changes in air composition or quality in that time.

When asked whether the EPD could set up similar monitors around the city, Allison said nearly all air quality testing resources are tied up in another ongoing study.

In some cases, local governments have contracted with companies to do their own studies. He listed Cobb County, Forsyth County, Smyrna and Atlanta, among others.

Leslie Manoukian, aide to state Sen. Sheila McNeill, R-Brunswick, said she and the senator could smell the odor on the plane when landing upon their return from Atlanta. McNeill is very interested in figuring out the cause and how to fix it.

The business community, organized by the Brunswick Golden Isles Chamber of Commerce, is doing some investigating on its own.

Ralph Staffins III, chamber president, said the Brunswick-Glynn County Joint Water and Sewer Commission, Golden Ray Unified Command and local industries were working together to find any anomalies in their operations that could be causing the issues.

He also noted many of the industrial businesses have been in the area for quite some time, while the odors are recent. He also objected to the insinuation that some may have been covering their tracks before visits from regulators.

City Commissioner Julie Martin said the way forward seemed clear: the city needs to pinpoint who can help or to bring more resources to bear on the issue and start working with them.

Cason said the city needs to begin requesting quotes and proposals from contractors for air quality testing, but it didn't make sense to Martin why the city should have to bear the burden of air quality testing and monitoring.



Taylor Cooper