

https://thebrunswicknews.com/news/local_news/air-quality-monitoring-program-to-leverage-citizen-scientists/article_b068309c-91dd-5b0d-8d0e-5caec44bc14b.html

Air quality monitoring program to leverage citizen scientists

By MICHAEL HALL mhall@thebrunswicknews.com

Jan 23, 2024

Holden Kemp has enjoyed living in Brunswick's Old Town neighborhood for the past several years. He likes the Spanish moss-draped live oaks, the historic architecture and the people.

There is one neighbor, however, that isn't so pleasant, and he feels like there is not much he can do about it. Kemp has too often awakened to a stench in the air that he believes comes from the nearby pulp mill.

"To me it smells like burned baby powder," Kemp said. "It has kind of a weird diaper smell to it."



He has reported the odor to the city and other agencies but said it seems like there really isn't much that can be done to stop it because when the wind blows just right, it returns.

"It's like having crappy neighbors who play loud music," Kemp said. "There's not really much you can do about it."

That may change in the future, thanks to an upcoming air quality monitoring program led by Glynn Environmental Coalition. The program will be paid for by an Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem Solving Program grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The goal is to partner with state and private universities, the Department of Public Health and other local environmental organizations to empower Brunswick residents to identify air pollutants and gather more information about the degree to which they pose health and community risks.

The sampling will help groups like Glynn Environmental Coalition to further investigate pollution impacts and note future permit and policy changes with the goal of making local air cleaner and healthier for residents, said the coalition's executive director, Rachael Thompson.

The coalition has an air quality reporting page on its website at www.glynnenvironmental.org/air-quality-reporting where people can file complaints about when and where degraded air quality is identified and its impacts.

Thompson said the coalition has heard numerous complaints through the portal over the years and that it is clear more information is needed about how local air quality issues are impacting residents, especially those in neighborhoods adjacent to local industrial operations that are often inhabited by mostly minority residents.

In one case, Thompson said a woman in the Magnolia Park neighborhood in Brunswick called 911 because she said she felt like she was suffocating when an odor from nearby industries invaded her home.

"That really hit us as a major concern and added to the urgency to do something," Thompson said.

The grant will provide \$500,000 to the coalition which will work with its partners to conduct air quality testing and at the same time create a network of what can be thought of as air ambassadors, citizen scientists who will be armed with equipment and training to test air immediately when degraded quality is detected, Thompson said. Testing immediately instead of after making a report and waiting for state or federal agencies to come days or sometimes weeks later will provide better data, she said.



The data will help to determine next steps, Thompson said. Collecting is important because as it is now, there isn't a lot of information about whether pungent air emitted by local industrial operations is actually harmful.

"Just because something smells bad doesn't necessarily make it harmful, but it does raise alarm," Thompson said. "Even if it's technically safe, it does impair quality of life. Even if it is legal, doesn't mean it should be."

Local industries are regulated by state and federal agencies and must be permitted for air emissions. But until the late 1990s and early 2000s, Thompson said the state wasn't properly issuing and enforcing those permits. The coalition took the matter to court, and eventually the state was forced to follow its permitting process properly and enforce the regulations, making local industries cleanup their emissions to meet regulatory standards.

"If you ask people about the state of air quality in Glynn County, longtime residents will say that it is better than it used to be," Thompson said.

But there is still a long way to go to improve it, she added.

Much like a recent Emory study the coalition was part of that established polluting chemicals from four local federal Superfund sites are in local people's blood, the air quality monitoring will help provide baseline information about what residents are breathing, Thompson said.

The coalition will work with many of the same partners from the Emory study, including Coastal Community Health, which will help evaluate potential health impacts from the air residents breathe. Thompson said the collaborative effort among universities, health care providers and environmental groups is new ground locally for Glynn County, and a positive step she hopes will pay dividends.

"We've never had this many entities moving in the same direction," she said.

The grant process is still working through its early stages, but Thompson hopes that by this summer the coalition and its partners can begin their own monitoring program and compile a group of 20-30 citizen scientists who will be trained to monitor the air. The community involvement is an integral piece to this program, she said.

"We felt like that was the most important piece," Thompson said.

Kemp said the often-nauseating smells he experiences are enough to pique his interest in helping in the project, even if his Old Town home isn't adjacent to the industries producing it.

“I imagine the people who live closer are getting it worse than we are,” he said. “If there’s testing, count me in.”



Michael Hall