

CSX Coal Silo Explosion - Informational Hearing - Testimony

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the recent CSX explosion. My name is Chloe Ahmann, and I'm a Professor at Cornell, where I study industry's environmental impacts. But my first teaching job was here in Baltimore, with first-graders at Curtis Bay Elementary/Middle School. Six-year-olds were the first to draw my attention to the coal dust¹ that you've heard so much: the dust that clings to cars and covers windowsills, that stains clean clothes and turns white houses gray; the dust that made it so hard for little ones to breathe that many chose to stay inside during recess. If you know a six year old, you know that that decision speaks volumes.

In 2012, I left my first-grade classroom to study Curtis Bay's environmental history. And I want to put the CSX explosion in this context. It is not the first industrial accident here, and history tells us that it will not be the last. History also tells us how *not* to behave in the aftermath of a catastrophe. The last time industrial accidents were on the rise in this part of the city, it was the late Cold War, and things were blowing up all across the Carbon Belt of Baltimore – a name given to this place as oil, coal, and petrochemical businesses concentrated here in the early 20th century.

Things got so bad that residents of two local neighborhoods – Fairfield and Wagner's Point – were moved to push for their own evacuation. One of the first things they learned was that they could not make the city care about their health. It was too ambiguous, this ever-present dust, that covers porches and turns the lungs of area crabs black. It was too hard to prove, in a manner that would satisfy folks in your position, that their asthma, cancer, and respiratory illness all had roots in local industry.

¹ Research shows that coal dust contains more than 50 different elements—among them arsenic, chromium, mercury, and lead, each one a potent toxin—and that this atmosphere is also flush with respiratory irritants like acrolein and carcinogens like formaldehyde and benzene. On coal dust, see IARC Working Group on the Evaluation of Carcinogenic Risks to Humans. Silica, Some Silicates, Coal Dust and Para-Aramid Fibrils. 1997. Accessed Apr 6, 2022. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK410075/>. On other ambient pollutants, see "Air Quality Profile of Curtis Bay, Brooklyn, and Hawkins Point, Maryland." 2012. Report prepared by the Environmental Integrity Project, 8. https://www.environmentalintegrity.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2012-06_Final_Curtis_Bay.pdf.

What did work was pointing out explosions. And there were a *lot* of explosions.² So, residents were left to pursue a campaign that left their actual sick bodies off the table and, instead, dramatized their imminent demise in the event of the next catastrophe.

When they won, after years and years of work, a spokesman for the city announced that officials were “happy the area is clear...we no longer have to be concerned with environmental risk [here].”³ That is one of the most chilling lines I have come across in over a decade of research, for three reasons.

First, it disavows the fact that every explosion is also an exposure – and that when residents moved, they carried years of embodied impacts with them. It betrays a deadly selective attention when it comes to environmental harm, one manifest in the fact that we are gathering to talk about the CSX explosion but not to talk about residents’ exposure to coal dust every day for 140 years.

Second, it shows how little accountability exists for people in the southern neighborhoods – how “happy” industry and government have historically been to call a matter closed without addressing people’s real concerns. No wonder CSX believes it can get away with ignoring residents’ requests for the most basic information.

And third, it gets us here. By making displacement the solution to environmental problems and settling on a course of action that did nothing to rein in industry’s embodied or explosive effects, the city all but lit the match.

Do not make this same mistake.

² Brenda Blom, who provided pro-bono legal services to residents in their pursuit of a buyout, writes of the dozens of spills, fires, and explosions that marked this period – escalating markedly through the 1970s, 80s, and 90s as increasingly risky businesses, staffed by ever-fewer workers, produced a volatile situation. Blom’s 2002 dissertation documents these accidents, and can be found here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WQCjPv26nMW6k-ytPHd8SQKM8LN8ITXO/view?usp=sharing>. My book-in-progress also investigates this history, and I am happy to share pre-publication chapters at the Council’s request. Finally, this timeline by local organizers is a fantastic resource: https://cdn.knightlab.com/libs/timeline3/latest/embed/index.html?source=1V3iCENBPYuSDHRvVR0A0mq2Lh6bdDcOYwBiTRf8GOZw&font=Default&lang=en&initial_zoom=2&height=650.

³ John M. Wesley, spokesman for the Baltimore Department of Housing and Community Development, quoted in <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2000-12-18-0012180217-story.html>.

I hope that, as you set the scope of this investigation and the scope of your response, you won't just pay attention to the boom but also to the everyday disasters: like the cumulative impacts of exposure to coal dust, and the impacts of coal on climate change. I hope that you will remember that big problems require big solutions. And I hope that you will institute a process that demands real transparency of CSX, and gives real leadership to residents of Curtis Bay.

I would be very happy to answer questions, and can be reached via email at the address above. Thank you for your time and consideration.