

North Minneapolis is burning

Written by Claire Bergren

Monday, 07 October 2013 14:15

Pam Peters has lived in the Harrison neighborhood in North Minneapolis for 12 years. She's a resident leader on the board of the Harrison Neighborhood Association and also identifies as a lover of the outdoors. Pam has been an active hiker for decades, from the foothills of Denver where she used to live to the Theodore Wirth Park trails right outside her door. Yet when Pam steps outside onto Glenwood Avenue, exercising becomes a difficult task. "I've hiked and walked all over the place for years, but I can take a short walk around the block and feel my lungs aching." Pam and the other 3,000+ residents of Harrison live less than a mile west of the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC) garbage incinerator, a trash burning facility next the Target Field that burns thousands of tons of waste every day from all parts of Hennepin County. This waste is turned into energy that supplies the downtown district with electricity. Depending on which way the wind blows, the steam from the facility blows directly onto North Minneapolis or on South Minneapolis' Phillips neighborhood.

The HERC incinerator has been a topic of intense scrutiny lately from leaders in North Minneapolis and the environmental justice community in the Twin Cities. Covanta Energy, a multinational corporation that operates waste incineration facilities throughout the world, has submitted a permit to allow an increase in trash burning that would allow HERC to operate at full capacity. This increase request is likely to result in a City Council vote in the coming months.

While Covanta claims that their estimates of the air pollution from HERC do not reach harmful levels, Pam and other resident leaders feel differently. "The people that know about it in my community don't trust it," Pam says. She takes extreme measures just to breathe in her own home. "If I want my windows open in the summer on the east side of my house [facing HERC], I have to put furnace filters in there because there was crud coming in and it's ridiculous. It would come onto a counter in my kitchen that you would not set an item of food on during the night that you wanted clean in the morning."

A recent report from the Minnesota Public Interest Research Group (MPIRG) found that "when aggregating the health damaging air pollutants regulated by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, HERC is Minneapolis' top polluter by pounds of emissions" and that "communities within a two-mile radius of the HERC stack have rates of asthma hospitalizations that are significantly higher than those of Minneapolis as a whole". These communities include 55405 and 55411 in North Minneapolis and have led leaders to call out the HERC facility as perpetuating environmental racism. The geographic placement of Hennepin County's garbage incinerator is surrounded by the third largest concentration of communities of color in the nation; this means that only two other facilities in the country have larger percentages of people of color in their vicinities. "I don't understand how you can burn trash when you have plastics with carcinogens in it and claim it's clean enough to go into our air and not be harmful," Pam states.

Yet Pam has a clear and hopeful vision for restoring the health of her neighborhood. "I would like to see the HERC garbage incinerator close down. I would like to see it gone.

Shutting HERC down will benefit my community by not having our air be polluted. Hopefully there would be a plan in place that would encourage people to use less, recycle more, and to buy things that aren't wasteful because I can't keep breathing in this toxic air."

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Join Congressman Keith Ellison, MN Rep. Frank Hornstein, Sierra Club's Karen Monahan and other Speakers TBD for a forum on The Proposed HERC Expansion on Monday, October 7th 6.00 – 7.30 PM at the Minneapolis Urban League 2100 Plymouth Avenue North Minneapolis, MN 55411 (At the intersection of Plymouth and Penn). Please call (612) 522-1212 with any questions about this event.



Claire Bergren is a community organizer at the Harrison Neighborhood Association and a member at Neighborhoods Organizing for Change.