

Residents of polluted Birmingham neighborhoods call for help

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(Photo: Mickey Welsh / Advertiser)

A federal bribery trial examining how political forces impeded the cleanup of polluted north Birmingham neighborhoods has ended, but residents are still wondering what will be done to save the people still living there.

“They found awful chemicals in my yard five years ago and my next door neighbor had the highest level of chemicals in the community. What is the next crucial step to help the health of the citizens in the community?” said 39-year-old Keisha Brown, who lives in the Harriman Park neighborhood within the [EPA Superfund \(https://www.epa.gov/superfund\)](https://www.epa.gov/superfund) site.

Brown was one of three north Birmingham residents who addressed the Alabama Environmental Management Commission at the commission’s meeting in Montgomery on Friday.



Keisha Brown, of Birmingham, speaks before the Alabama Environmental Management Commission in Montgomery, Ala., on Friday August 17, 2018. *(Photo: Mickey Welsh / Advertiser)*

Three neighborhoods — Collegeville, Harriman Park and Fairmont — make up the afflicted site and are wedged between railroad tracks and five industrial sites, one being the ABC Coke plant, owned by the Drummond Company.

Drummond Vice President David Roberson — along with Balch and Bingham attorney Joel Gilbert — was convicted in July of six criminal charges for bribing former state Rep. Oliver Robinson to oppose the Environmental Protection Agency's cleanup of the area.

“Justice has been done. But justice has not been served,” said Charles Powell, who has moved from the area but lived there for 42 of his 65 years and still owns houses in the area.

Cotton balls in her ear because of ear drops she takes for a sickness she attributes to living with pollution, Brown described notices sent to the neighborhood warning residents to wash their hands and wipe their feet before entering their homes, lest they carry contaminants inside.

She said the neighborhood is filled with black smoke in the morning that "smells like raw sewage."

"People are sick. Most of the elderly are sick, and that's 95 percent of the community. Our hospital closed 10 years ago. What's the next step?" Brown asked.



Betty Collins, of Birmingham, speaks during a meeting of the Alabama Environmental Management Commission in Montgomery, Ala., on Friday August 17, 2018. (Photo: Mickey Welsh / Advertiser)

Pollution in the area goes back decades. Another resident, Betty Collins, has also moved from the neighborhood but still goes to church there.

She said people she prays with continue to die of cancer, and like Brown, she wonders what will happen next.

"They had a trial but what does that mean for the people left there still suffering, still going to church there?" Collins said. "I'm concerned about every soul that's there."

The EPA has identified more than 200 contaminated sites and is in the midst of a \$20 million project to replace the soil, which tested positive for large amounts of arsenic, lead and other carcinogenic chemicals.

"I'm here to get us some help. This is us calling 9-1-1. We need help," Brown said.

After the three spoke, Environmental Defense Alliance attorney David Ludder addressed the commission. Reading from a prepared statement, Ludder called for the commission to renounce the actions of former commission member Scott Phillips, who was accused of working on behalf of Balch and Bingham and Drummond to oppose EPA cleanup efforts, Ludder said.

Ludder also accused current commission chairman Lanier Brown of having four meetings, four calls and five email exchanges with Gilbert, Roberson and Robinson. Ludder has requested those communications be disclosed and called for Brown's resignation if he failed to do so.

Lanier Brown said after the meeting that Ludder's open records request has been responded to.

"I'm not resigning at this time," Lanier Brown said.



Lanier Brown, chairman of the Alabama Environmental Management Commission, during their meeting in Montgomery, Ala., on Friday August 17, 2018. (Photo: Mickey Welsh / Advertiser)

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