

Residents cite 'urban nightmare' as regulators flee

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Residents in industrial north Birmingham say pollution has destroyed their lives.

By John Archibald, jarchibald@al.com

Members of the Alabama Environmental Management Commission looked sympathetic.

They bit their lips in Montgomery Friday, Bill Clinton-style, as residents of north Birmingham talked of living with lead, and arsenic, and too many funerals. But that was as far as they'd go.

"What can you do for the people," Betty Collins asked, in the same breath as she told of six dead church members and her 55-year-old sister who "went to sleep and laid down and died, and just died."

"Please consider helping that community," she said. "Thank you for listening."

Commissioners - this is the group that oversees the Alabama Department of Environmental Management -- thanked Collins and other speakers from north Birmingham. But they never answered the question of what they could do. They never said if they'd do anything or not, or that they even cared.

They did not talk of concerns raised in the pollution and bribery trial that cast an ugly shadow on the commission and its mission.

They just adjourned and made for the parking lot.

No answers for north Birmingham. Again.

Even after the convictions of Balch & Bingham lawyer Joel Gilbert and his client, Drummond Co. VP David Roberson. Even after the guilty plea of former Rep. Oliver Robinson, who testified that Gilbert and Roberson bribed him to thwart the cleanup, to convince people in the neighborhoods not to get their soil tested.

Even after the trial revealed that Scott Phillips, a longtime member of the Alabama Environmental Commission, worked as a consultant to the bribers while he served as a regulator.

David Ludder, a former Alabama Department of Environmental Management lawyer who now runs the Environmental Defense Alliance, also came before the commission and demanded action.

He wanted the commission, in light of the damning testimony, to withdraw its objections to listing the north Birmingham site on the EPA's National Priorities List.

Which would be reasonable.

He wanted the commission to revoke the resolution of appreciation it gave Phillips when he left the commission last year.

Which would be appropriate. And hilarious.

And he wanted commission Chairman Lanier Brown to turn over all his emails about the issue in the name of transparency, which seems like public record to me.

"Failing this act of transparency, the Environmental Defense Alliance calls for his resignation," Ludder said.

But the commissioners didn't address that, either. At least not in the chambers. They bolted as if that commission room was full of lead, or arsenic, or the kind of stuff Keisha Brown told them she lives with every day.

"I hope God touched their hearts," Brown said after the meeting. "Because where we are, it's like living an urban nightmare."

Maybe it did. I hope it did.



North Birmingham resident Keisha Brown.

I did catch up with Chairman Brown after the meeting.

He said he wouldn't resign just because Ludder told him to, and said he trusted studies that showed people in north Birmingham don't face significantly elevated health risk. He said he felt for the people, but "those are things we can't do anything about."

But he did have one regret.

"I wish I had addressed those folks," he said. "It's touching to hear them speak. Especially knowing you can't offer them anything."

But you can. You can.

You can offer an ear, and a voice, and re-evaluation of the north Birmingham area. You can commit to learn from this travesty, and to never, ever put the interests of polluters above people.

That's all they want. A fair test. A fair shake. A clean start.

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