Passaic County Environmental Justice Community Engagement Session

Where: Boys & Girls Club of Passaic, Passaic City, Passaic County  
When: Tuesday, August 9th @7:00pm-8:30pm  
Roughly 21 participants in-person, meeting also streamed online via Zoom  
In-person and virtual interpretation provided

Summary: NJDEP Commissioner Shawn LaTourette along with Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ) Director Kandyce Perry, and EPA Region 2 Administrator Lisa Garcia, led a community engagement session with residents of Passaic County with collaboration with Assemblyman Gary Schaer and Passaic City Mayor Hector Lora to discuss environmental justice in Passaic County.

Question and Answer with Community:
  1. Question about youth education: Participant was unaware of the term “environmental justice” but understood the significance. What can NJDEP and EPA bring to the Boys & Girls Club to educate the youth on environmental justice? Is there a partnership opportunity between the agencies and the Boys & Girls Club?

    Commissioner LaTourette: Each panelist would probably provide different responses. One of the ways NJDEP has engaged the youth is through the Youth Inclusion Initiative, where we partner with local non-profit and community-based organizations. We bring the participants to NJDEP and educate them on the environment, protection strategies, and future employment opportunities. NJDEP also contains the Office of Environmental Education, which engages directly with schools, students, and environmental curriculum. While these youth engagement opportunities exist, we understand this isn’t the only place to seek participation.

    EPA Region 2 Administrator Garcia: On a personal level, I provide Latin American representation through volunteering in classrooms and speaking engagements. On the EPA level, we’ve partnered with the NJDEP Youth Inclusion Initiative to bring students to the EPA lab in Edison, NJ, to provide exposure to current projects. EPA also has internships, fellowships, and the new Pathways Program which allows students or recent graduates to gain paid experience in the Federal government. These programs ultimately build the next generation of environmentalists.

    OEJ Director Perry: Relating to the awareness piece, many people don’t know the language to describe the environmental injustices that they experience, but their experiences are still nonetheless real. OEJ is developing educational and training modules for communities to build capacity to engage in problem solving. State government can help to increase capacity by increasing awareness and would like to incorporate a youth component in those resources.

  2. A lot of money is spent on open spaces in Passaic County, but what is the impact? Can DEP require funding be utilized for specific purposes? Requests DEP partnership with Passaic County and develop a small committee to coordinate funding opportunities.

    Commissioner LaTourette: Whether we’re talking about adapting Green Acres requirements or the program administration—we must determine what are the expectations we are creating and
what are the requirements upon those receiving funding so that they’re allocated appropriately. There can be reluctance with state government intervening with local government. We can approach partnership with the Outside Together initiative, which is the development of NJ’s comprehensive outdoor recreation plan that includes analysis of NJ’s challenges with respect to recreation accessibility, identify opportunities for improvement, and combat flooding. From there we can identify rules that require amendments to meet those needs. The head of the Outside Together initiative will contact you about advisory group collaboration.

3. The new state budget includes $300M for water infrastructure and $170M for lead paint remediation. How will this be used?

Commissioner LaTourette: NJDEP wants to solicit feedback from the community for the $300M allocation for water infrastructure investments. There will be a public engagement session to receive input on how to leverage funds and identify limitations/opportunities in using those funds. While it’s a lot of money, NJ has over $30B in state infrastructure challenges. $300M can be used to do a few transformative projects, a lot of little projects, or a combination of the two. NJDEP will share ideas with the public on how to best utilize those funds and will receive feedback from those ideas. More information can be found on the Water Infrastructure Plan and other engagement opportunities through the [WIIP website](#). With regards to the lead paint portion of the question -- lead paint remediation is handled through the Department of Community Affairs. More information can be found on [DCA’s website](#).

EPA Region 2 Administrator Garcia: Echo the need for public engagement on the Water Infrastructure Investment Plan, especially with municipalities.

4. Virtual attendee shared their experience with Trenton EJ session and elaborated on issues within Trenton including failing lead service lines, lead paint, public health concerns, and flooding. Urging NJDEP to act on lead ingestion.

Commissioner LaTourette: Thank you for sharing your story with everyone here today. NJDEP is working diligently with Trenton in partnership with EPA through the Lead Service Line Replacement Law, which requires all lead service lines to be replaced within 10 years. NJDEP continues to struggle with the Trenton City Council to move forward with many of the water infrastructure projects. NJDEP will continue to implore City Council to move forward, and we encourage citizens to appeal these delays.

EPA Region 2 Administrator Garcia: EPA is trying to partner with municipalities, especially with municipalities that lack sufficient resources to address water infrastructure needs. A portion of the funding within lead service line replacements will not require a match by the municipality and money for technical assistance will be provided. This partnership will help remove barriers and get projects moving.

5. Mayor Lora greatly appreciated the EJ Engagement Session in Passaic County and the opportunity to communicate the needs of Passaic. The first question he asked was how the public can effectively contact NJDEP with concerns about their municipality. The second question refers to
what projects are being prioritized and how residents can be aware of available funding for those projects. The final request is for NJDEP to utilize an additional streaming platform for EJ Engagement Sessions, specifically utilizing social media, to provide more accessible and flexible participation.

Commissioner LaTourette: Thank you again Mayor for opening the community to NJDEP and EPA. There are many ways that we can ensure the community knows of opportunities to engage and we can provide resources to sew that engagement further for those who aren’t able to attend meetings. We catalogue sessions and other engagement opportunities, and we can make that more omnipresent as an accessible toolkit to share. In terms of folks not knowing how to reach NJDEP or feeling uncertain about contacting us in general, we want to remind everyone that we work for you. Folks can contact NJDEP any time at 1-877-WARN-DEP (1-877-927-6337) or through the non-emergency WARN NJDEP app.

OEJ Director Perry: The reason why the Office of Environmental Justice exists is to connect with communities and be a liaison between those communities and state government. While we encourage folks to utilize the WARN DEP hotline, we also encourage you to contact OEJ through our email at environmentaljustice@dep.nj.gov or our website and sign up for email updates. We are here as resource to connect you to the right places and opportunities, and we hope that you refer folks in your community to OEJ and facilitate that relationship.

EPA Region 2 Administrator Garcia: Building relationships are paramount, whether with community groups or local elected officials, allows you to have important conversations about funding opportunities and needs within the community. Hold the government accountable to facilitate building those relationships.

6. Has NJDEP partnered with other agencies, such as the Department of Health, to address other aspects of environmental justice?

Commissioner LaTourette: There are several ways that NJDEP coordinates with the Department of Health (DOH), but at the same time NJDEP and EPA are also public health agencies and we set standards to protect people. Many people have a misconception that NJDEP solely protects the environment, but while we do protect those aspects, we do this with the intent of protecting the residents of NJ. One way we partner with DOH on social determinants is through Healthy Community Planning reports where users can access reports in their areas which explains environmental issues that impact health. Those metrics are also used to better protect communities from additional sources of pollution.

EPA Region 2 Administrator Garcia: Our mission is to protect the public health and the environment, and an important component to understand is the disparate health impact of past environmental decisions on communities of color, low-income communities, and indigenous communities. A lot of the work we’re doing is driven by public health, and how do we ensure we’re focusing on ensuring the public understands the connection. EPA utilizes mapping tools, Health and Human Services, and listening to environmental justice groups to understand
cumulative impacts of facility clusters. We need to reduce the burdens by focusing on legacy issues as well as focusing on proactive climate justice.

**Commissioner LaTourette:** We encourage the public to contact NJDEP or EPA to learn more.

7. Resident of Paterson raises concerns about combined sewage system and frequent flooding in the area. Flooding victims contact the WARN DEP hotline, receive a case number, and do not receive a follow-up from NJDEP. There is a communication and awareness issue between the residents that suffer these floods, especially with combined sewer overflow. Residents need to understand the hazards of combined sewer system and overflows from those systems. Requesting a better platform to communicate these issues to the public and how they can acquire funding for sewer separation.

**Commissioner LaTourette:** We’re very sorry to hear about how flooding and CSOs plague your community, and there certainly are ways that we can work with your local leadership to better communicate the risks of exposure to CSO events. In some of our oldest cities, the stormwater pipes and sewage pipes are combined and during a high rainfall event, these combined sewer systems can’t handle the inflow and thus discharge the sewage into communities and bypass the treatment systems that aren’t large enough to support the intake. As a state, NJ has one of the most prolific CSO problems in the country and unfortunately the solutions are expensive with needs that exceed the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the State budget. Communities put forward long-term control plans, but we must invest now. We can solve the problem over time, but we must better communicate the risks of CSOs.

8. As climate change as gotten worse, urban communities face a greater increase in temperature. What resources has NJDEP set aside to insulate communities in infrastructure to protect them from rising temperatures. Additionally, within the last decade, much of energy generation has gone from nuclear power to natural gas. Is there a way to reach clean energy goals without expanding nuclear power?

**Commissioner LaTourette:** With regards to the first question about climate resilience--which as we know climate change is getting worse--we do need to be more prepared for floods and the heat. One way we can build insulation is through green space by planting more trees. Those resources are available through our Urban and Community Forestry Program, which is expanding from funds through of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. With respect to energy, nuclear energy remains the largest source of green energy. We have displaced a majority of coal with natural gas, and we still have a way to go.

9. The City of Paterson has legacy toxins through dyeing industry, what changes are to be expected along the Passaic River, specifically requesting a status update on Diamond Alkali sites throughout Passaic River.

**Commissioner LaTourette:** The Passaic River is included as a superfund site with which NJDEP is partnered with EPA.
EPA Region 2 Administrator Garcia: The cleanup along the Passaic River continues and there are several responsible parties involved. EPA is coordinating with neighboring towns along the Passaic River to continue the cleanup. EPA has a factsheet available which explains the different phases of cleanup, including the sectioning of different portions of the river. The cleanup will take many years and once completed, individual municipalities will determine how to proceed with the use of each area.

Commissioner LaTourette: As a follow-up, NJDEP will coordinate with EPA for the most up-to-date information that can be distributed broadly. From the state level, we’ve been working with Mayor Sayegh, the mayor of Paterson, on brownfield remediation. While not federal superfund sites, there are state resources available to municipalities to pursue brownfield cleanups.

EPA Region 2 Administrator Garcia: To add, the superfund site is divided into four parts, and we’ll send along the fact sheet. Please do not fish or consume the fish from the Passaic River.

OEJ Director Perry: A link to the recording and the meeting notes will be shared and posted online once available.

10. Passaic resident and co-executive director of LOGRO, which is a non-profit organization that helps students achieve confidence through youth empowerment programs and community-building events. Additionally, LOGRO members learn about social, political, and environmental issues in Passaic. Will there be a written report of environmental issues in Passaic that LOGRO can share with students, as well as a response from the State on those environmental issues along with contact information?

Commissioner LaTourette: Absolutely and thank you for what you’re doing through your organization and through empowering your peers. There are several resources NJDEP can provide as discussion points and as ways for you to hold us accountable. Anna Maria Peñaherrera and Nadia Akbar of OEJ will take your contact information after the event.

11. Can there be any provisions made to offset increase of warehouses and the associated pollution? Can a public participatory cost-benefit analysis of the land be created?

Commissioner LaTourette: At the last EJ Community Engagement Session in the Highlands Region, almost the entire session was dedicated to warehouse sprawl. One of the most difficult things in government is when no one entity fully owns an issue – we would consider warehouses to be one of those issues. There is local control over land use and there is no statewide plan for warehousing. However, through the State Planning Commission, there are a set of guidance materials for local land use boards that make siting decisions. NJDEP might have a say if the warehouses are proposed in environmentally sensitive areas, but from a broad perspective, there is not one entity that manages warehouses. We encourage folks to review the guidance material for more information.

EPA Region 2 Administrator Garcia: This is an increasingly predominant issue and it’s also a local issue. We encourage folks to become involved in local planning decisions and while EPA mentions ports and reducing pollution from trucks, it takes a more local approach to holistically engage.
**OEJ Director Perry:** I would also encourage folks to reach out to their municipal government to raise the issue. With respect to facilities exacerbating stormwater runoff, every municipality is required to have a stormwater ordinance that governs the management of stormwater within that municipality. Green infrastructure is now a requirement, but your town has the capability to go above and beyond the State’s minimum stormwater requirements to require even more green infrastructure.

12. Commenter discusses energy transition, specifically in the transportation sector. There are options outside of electrification which could more quickly deviate away from traditional fuel options.

**Commissioner LaTourette:** When you’re talking about energy and emissions reduction, the diverse approach is the best approach. For example, we’re expecting cargo equipment to move to clean diesel first, and while we’ll move to eventually quit fossil fuels, we can cut emissions in the process.

13. Assemblyman Schaer thanks panelists for visiting Passaic and District 36. With impending climate change impacts, especially in Passaic which is one of the poorest municipalities in the State, how can we afford to protect and provide the quality of life the residents deserve? Additionally, many of the residents have a distrust in government because of their citizenship status, therefore having a hesitancy to report environmental injustices. Finally, how do municipal officials gain an understanding of NJDEP and EPA jurisdiction and authority? Municipal officials understand the needs the community has but isn’t sure where to turn for answers and their experience with different agencies conveying these needs aren’t always positive. Expressed gratitude toward the attention to environmental justice.

**Commissioner LaTourette:** I appreciate the gratitude, but we are doing our jobs and hopefully we can perpetuate these standards beyond our time. We understand the frustrations of those who engaged with NJDEP and received “no’s”, oftentimes the “no” is because we don’t understand each other. We hope that these “no’s” don’t discourage folks from seeing the “yes’s” that exist and all the opportunities for funding, partnership, and progress. NJDEP would like to facilitate those communications.

**EPA Region 2 Administrator Garcia:** Shares the same sentiment as Commissioner LaTourette and emphasizes the work these agencies are tasked with are combined with efforts to communicate available opportunities for states and local entities. EPA started working with federally elected officials with regards to federal funding available for New Jersey. EPA will communicate the need for state and local officials to participate in these conversations to continue the information exchange.

14. Person makes the connection between environmental hazards and public health impacts. Does NJDEP or EPA plan to partner with local leaders to provide supplies, such as water filters, to low-income communities as a short-term project?
Commissioner LaTourette: The main job of NJDEP is to ensure the short-term solutions are never necessary. Through our water team, we monitor the conditions of every water system throughout the State to ensure the standards aren’t exceeding those that we’ve set to protect public health. Where there are exceedances, we ensure they are corrected so there isn’t an exposure risk. Sometimes there are acute circumstances, for example the watermain burst in Newark, we work with the municipality to resolve the issue and communicate with their residents to provide any necessary information. We never want to get to a place where folks must take those measures and to instead focus on maintaining safe water quality. In circumstances where there are long-term acute issues, we are not shy about deploying additional resources, but we want to make sure that folks understand that they should never have to need those resources.

EPA Region 2 Administrator Garcia: If you know of constituents or concerned residents who are unsure about water quality, please reach out to NJDEP or EPA. If there’s a point where your water is contaminated, NJDEP and EPA will step in and act, but ultimately the goal is to reduce that necessity.

Commissioner LaTourette: In New Jersey we have a long history of trying to be ahead of the curve to protect public health from new contaminants. For example, with PFOAS, we’ve issued new standards to make sure we’re getting our water supplies cleaner now instead of the waiting for a future opportunity. New Jersey has some of the strongest water protections in the country and we intend to keep it that way.

15. With respect to air standards, can EPA regulations be updated to include low levels of VOCs?

EPA Region 2 Administrator Garcia: As the person mentioned, there are thousands of pollutants that haven’t gone through the assessment for identifying safe standards. On the air side, EPA is trying to determine which of the National Ambient Air Quality Standards to improve upon, and we also have the Office of Pollution Prevention that is tasked with studying emerging contaminants. At this point, we’re tackling the worst chemicals and toxicity.

Commissioner LaTourette: What’s important to recognize is regulatory agencies study one chemical at a time to determine the harmfulness with respect to human health and we identify ways to reduce emissions of those chemicals into the environment. With air in particular, you can in real time examine air quality by using the Air Quality Mapping Tool. There are 30 air monitors around the State that are continuously sampling the air. The air pollution we experience is largely from the vehicles we use daily and the more that we can take care of the environment we share, the more we can take care of one another.

Closing remarks from the panel.