



Planning for Clean Air and Environmental Justice

By Teresa Huntsinger

The way we design our communities impacts something as basic to human health as the air we breathe. The connections between community planning and air quality are many. The location of industrial sites, trucking routes, and freeways in relation to residential areas impacts air pollution and public health. Planning and public policy also determine whether sources of pollution are concentrated in certain areas or spread throughout the region. Such decisions have implications for social and environmental justice if they place the burdens of air pollution disproportionately on certain neighborhoods more than others. In addition, smart community planning can reduce traffic pollution by making it easier for people to choose less-polluting modes of transportation such as walking, biking, or taking transit whenever possible.

Air pollution in N/NE Portland

For many of us, the air we breathe is making us sick. Residents of North and Northeast Portland are exposed to the highest levels of toxic emissions in the Portland region¹. In addition, these neighborhoods are bisected by freeways and trucking routes, increasing air pollution. These parts of town tend to house communities of color and lower income residents, which means that these particular groups are being disproportionately exposed to higher levels of air pollution.

A 2001 survey of Northeast Portland residents conducted by the Environmental Justice Action Group

(EJAG) and Lewis and Clark College Professor Bruce Podobnik, found that 14% of households surveyed had at least one person suffering from asthma, which is twice the national average of 7%². National research suggests that the high concentration of freeways, truck routes, and industrial sites in Northeast Portland contributes significantly to residents' elevated asthma levels. Numerous studies show that outdoor air pollution triggers asthma attacks and may even cause childhood asthma³. Fine particulate matter and ozone (smog) are among the parts of urban outdoor air pollution most directly associated with asthma.

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Industrial pollution and traffic pollution caused by cars, trucks, buses, and especially diesel-fueled vehicles are major sources of asthma-related pollutants. Studies show that children living near high volumes of traffic are significantly more likely to have asthma.⁴

I-5 expansion may increase health risks

A current community planning decision that could dramatically affect air quality in N/NE Portland neighborhoods is the proposed expansion of I-5 between Portland and Vancouver. The Coalition for a Livable Future is supporting EJAG's efforts to ensure that this project does not increase air pollution in these already overburdened neighborhoods.

"Frankly, when you're looking at benefits to the community from widening I-5, there really aren't any," says Jeri Sundvall, Executive Director of EJAG. "The question has always been the wrong question. It shouldn't be how we get more cars across (the Columbia River), but how we get more people across."

Environmental justice and livability advocates achieved some successes in 2001 by shaping a bi-state task force's plan for improvements in the I-5 corridor between Portland and Vancouver. The plan includes the extension of light rail to Vancouver, aggressive transportation demand management strategies, a moderate freeway expansion compared to what was originally proposed, and a mitigation fund for negatively impacted communities.

Currently, the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) is conducting an environmental assessment for an initial phase of this project, the expansion of I-5 between Delta Park and Lombard. CLF and EJAG are concerned that the impact of this project

will be to take the southbound traffic bottleneck from the Delta Park/Interstate Bridge area, and move it further south into areas surrounded by residential neighborhoods. We are advocating for a comprehensive environmental assessment, air quality monitoring before and after the expansion, and community control of the mitigation fund. CLF member Jim Howell, of Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates (AORTA), developed an alternate plan for the Delta Park/Lombard project which would resolve some of the local truck traffic issues, resulting in less traffic pollution in the Kenton neighborhood and reducing the need to expand the freeway. His proposal is now one of the four alternative options being studied in the environmental assessment.

Open houses for Delta Park/Lombard project will be held in Spring and Summer 2005, and construction is not expected to begin until 2008. For more information, visit www.odot.state.or.us/region1/f_i5p_lombard/index.htm.

Proposed Clark County transit reductions raise more questions

This November, a majority of Clark County voters opposed a ballot measure that would have funded C-Tran, the Clark County Transit System. As a result, C-Tran service will be reduced. The current proposal regarding commuter routes to Portland is that buses will no longer go to downtown Portland. Instead, C-Tran will only be able to provide service to one stop each on the Interstate and Airport light rail lines. Commuters would have to transfer to Tri-Met light rail to complete their trips. A decision on C-Tran's reduction plan will be made at a December 14th hearing. If this proceeds, it is likely that there could be hundreds, if not thousands, of more auto trips each day between Vancouver and Portland, which will add significantly to traffic pollution in the N/NE Portland airshed.

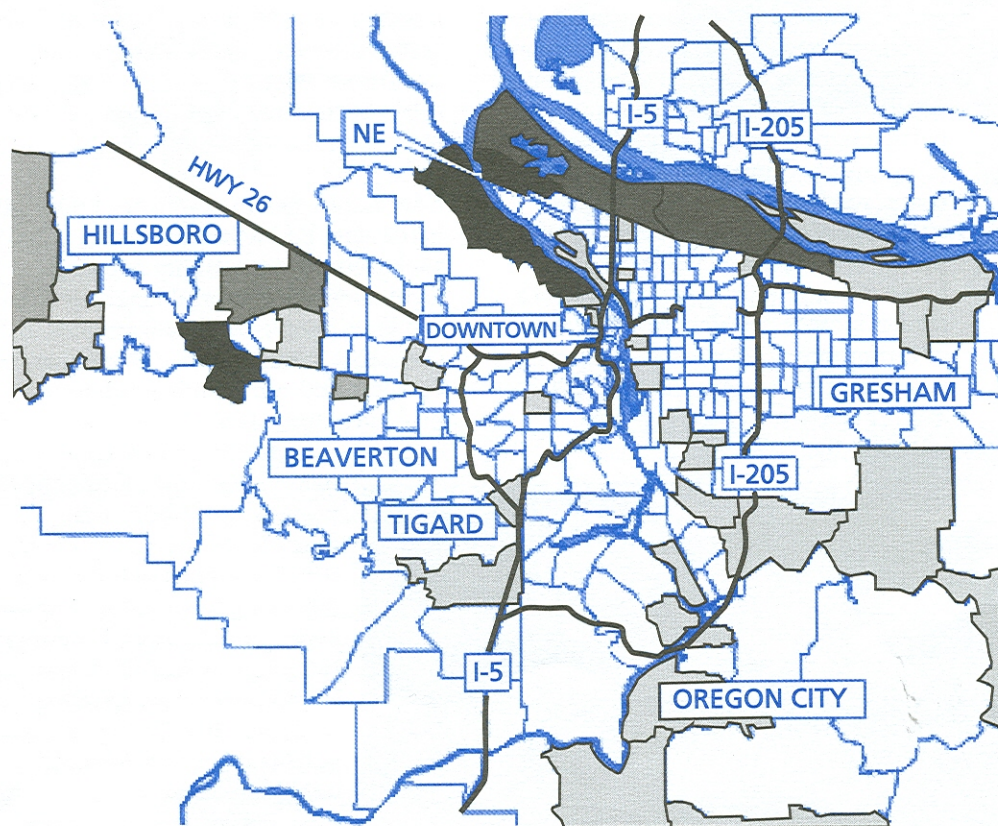
Clearly, the choices we make, both as individuals and as participants in public decisions, can impact the health of other members of our community. CLF will continue to work with our partners to track these air quality and environmental equity issues, and we encourage you to participate in planning for clean air in your neighborhood and the region as a whole.

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Environmental Justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Fair treatment means that no group of people, including a racial, ethnic, or a socioeconomic group, should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local, and tribal programs and policies.

(Official definition from the Environmental Protection Agency.)

INDUSTRIAL TOXINS EMITTED IN THE PORTLAND AREA, 2001



ONSITE EMISSIONS OF TOXINS THAT ARE KNOWN TO HARM ONE OR MORE HUMAN ORGANS, AS LEGALLY REPORTED TO US EPA

SOURCE: US EPA TOXICS RELEASE INVENTORY DATABASE

POUNDS EMITTED IN 2001

- 0 - 596
- 596 - 2,150
- 2,150 - 8,261
- 8,261 - 16,839
- 16,839 - 56,718

Compiled by Portland Pollution Research Group. Contact: Bruce Podobnik, www.lclark.edu/~podobnik/pollution.htm

¹ Bruce Podobnik, "Pollution in Portland: Toxic Emissions in the Metropolitan Area." April 2004.
² Bruce Podobnik, "Portland Neighborhood Survey Report on Findings from Zone 1: The Northeast I-5 Corridor." May 2001.
³ Curtis Moore and David Bates, M.D., "Air Pollution Causes Asthma: A Review of Recent Studies," *Health and Clean Air Newsletter*. Fall 2001.
⁴ Bart Ostro, PhD. "Traffic-related Air Pollution Near Busy Roads: The East Bay Children's Respiratory Health Study." *American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine*. September 2004.

Above: Every year, toxic chemicals are released all over the Portland metro area by companies that have legal permits to do so. N/NE Portland neighborhoods are surrounded by toxics-emitting industrial sites. They are also subject to high levels of traffic pollution from trucking routes and I-5. This may explain the area's high asthma rates.