

PHILLY THRIVE

Right to Breathe Campaign

8/25/19

An open letter to Mayor Jim Kenney, the Mayor's Refinery Advisory Group, the Community Committee of the Advisory Group, and the public:

The purpose of this letter is to (1) document instances of intimidation and disrespect experienced by residents during the public meetings this week organized by the Refinery Advisory Group, (2) share shortcomings of the August 20th Community Committee meeting structure & planning, which we believe facilitated much of the intimidation experienced by residents, and (3) share benefits of the August 20th meeting structure and requests to improve the process.

We are aware this is not a simple or easy process to facilitate and we are also aware that when the interests of different stakeholders are at odds, conflict can emerge. Neither of those things preclude the City from assuming full responsibility for the process to be welcoming to residents, where intimidation or disrespect is pre-emptively and immediately eradicated.

To reiterate: the end goal is not to eradicate conflicting interests; the goal must be to eradicate structures & behavior that result in exclusion of residents living in neighborhoods nearest the refinery (such as Grays Ferry, Point Breeze, Girard Estates, Packer Park, Elmwood, Easwick, & Kingsessing), a key stakeholder in this process. It must be said that many of these neighborhoods are majority African American, and therefore structural and interpersonal racism must be pre-emptively and immediately addressed within the process in order for inclusion to be remotely possible.

Thank you and we look forward to discussing changes that will be made,
Philly Thrive,

with solidarity from Delaware Riverkeeper Network, POWER (Philadelphians Organized to Witness, Empower, & Rebuild), Philadelphia Ready for 100 Campaign of the Sierra Club

Benefits of meeting structure on 8/20:

1. The small group format was in part a response to suggestions by residents at the first public meeting, which means the Advisory Group is being responsive to residents' suggestions.
2. Different stakeholders were able to dialogue with each other, which has rarely happened. There were instances of listening and learning across experiences.
3. The facilitation questions attempted to prompt discussions on varied possibilities at the site.

Shortcomings of meeting structure on 8/20:

1. The small group discussion format with separate storytelling room encouraged escalating conflict between stakeholders who decided to attend the Community Committee meeting. The dispersed format created opportunities for many unfacilitated or unmonitored exchanges between participants, a feeling of chaos & lack of order that invited conflict, and the acoustics and layout of the room made it very hard to hear people talk in the small groups, which led to yelling in order to hear each other, which escalated tension in conversations.
2. The Advisory Group was not equipped to lay down clear ground rules, moderate conflicts, or de-escalate. Relying on police/security to play this role is not adequate or preferred.
3. The small groups and the specific facilitation questions did not succeed in the goal of providing a platform for the Advisory Group to hear residents' experiences and stories about the impacts of living near the refinery, and what it would mean for their lives to have the refinery closed or re-opened.
4. It was unclear who the members of the Community Committee were in the room (and if they were in the room), as no one who spoke on the microphone at the beginning identified themselves as such (and it seemed like no one who spoke was part of the Committee). It was not clear if any Committee members were facilitating small groups, and it did not appear that way.
5. We were told by Managing Director Brian Abernathy that the format was planned by members of the Community Committee, but Committee member Ms. Irene Russell has said she was emailed the plan and was not part of the decision-making.
6. There was an inadequate number of residents from neighborhoods nearby the refinery present at this Community Committee meeting.
7. The meeting was over in roughly an hour, ending roughly an hour early. For residents taking time out of their schedules to attend and be heard on this topic, there should be an engaging program planned for the full meeting time.
8. Facilitation questions had bias towards continued refinery operations, as most residents have little to no information on feasible possibilities for the site other than a refinery, which slants the opinions that are able to be given.
9. Back-to-back meetings on Aug 20th and Aug 21st should have been rescheduled for accessibility. Very few working people and families can attend meetings on consecutive days.

Incidents of intimidation & disrespect experienced by Grays Ferry residents, members of Philly Thrive at Refinery Advisory Group public meetings:

1. (8/20) Several residents affirmed seeing one Caucasian meeting participant displaying a pistol on his hip, who they were sure was not part of law enforcement.
2. (8/20) A man who worked at the refinery aggressively loomed over a woman who lives near the refinery during a conversation. The woman left the meeting after the encounter.
3. (8/20) Caucasian men who worked at the refinery were crossing off names of African American residents/Philly Thrive members on the waiting list to tell their stories in the storytelling room.
4. (8/20) An African American female resident was at one point surrounded by Caucasian men, one of whom made a comment about job loss at the refinery leading to a break-in & robbery at her house, which other men cheered at, leading the female resident to interpret as a threat.
5. (8/20) Racist remarks directed at African American residents/Philly Thrive members, including comments about crime/violence in their neighborhoods as the problem residents should be focusing on (instead of pollution from the refinery).
6. (8/20) Many disrespectful remarks made towards residents who were sharing their stories of losing family members to illnesses from the refinery's pollution or otherwise expressing opinions about the harm the refinery causes. One African American female resident whose daughter is currently dying from cancer was told by a Caucasian refinery worker for the second time in these meetings that she should move if she doesn't like the refinery- a suggestion that is highly inappropriate and economically unfeasible for her and the majority of low-income residents in nearby neighborhoods. That female resident said after the meeting that if she walks into another meeting and sees dozens of refinery workers, she will need to leave the meeting.
7. (8/21) One Caucasian male USW member threw an elbow at an African American Grays Ferry resident/Philly Thrive member when he was returning to his seat after giving a comment at the microphone about the health epidemic caused by the refinery & the need to keep the facility closed.
8. (8/21) Every single speaker who communicated about harmful effects of the refinery was interrupted by the audience, including one audience member calling one speaker an asshole while she was giving her comments. One attempt was made by the Advisory Group to establish respectful behavior in the room but it was not heeded and none other were given.

Requests & Recommendations:

1. Guns should not be permitted in the meeting, and that needs to be an explicit rule that is enforced.
2. Participation in this process by residents living in nearby neighborhoods (those named in this letter) must be more comprehensive. This could take the form of another Community Committee meeting using a different format (even returning to one microphone and a list

of speakers); alternative approaches to meetings at Prep Charter, such as going to places of community in nearby neighborhoods; partnering with Philly Thrive to a greater degree is an option, as we have a track record of engaging hundreds of residents on this topic; allowing residents to hire someone who specializes in resident engagement in these types of processes.

3. Transparency around and from Community Committee members, including information about how individuals were selected, if they or their organization ever received money from or partnered with the refinery in any way, and what kind of time, experience, relationships, and ideas are they applying to this process.
4. A clear, up-front rule that anyone who interrupts a speaker will be required to leave the meeting.
5. Unless the Advisory Group presents a specific plan for facilitating interactions between stakeholders, these meetings unfortunately suggest the most effective process for gathering the necessary information is to organize stakeholders into separate meetings.
6. A clearer definition of who the “community” is could support this process, or a clearer naming of the neighborhoods and/or demographics of residents prioritized or focused on for information gathering. Again, we would suggest the top priority for information gathering in this process should be people living in the neighborhoods nearest the refinery including: Grays Ferry, Girard Estates, Point Breeze, Elmwood, Eastwick, and Kingsessing. Though these are neighborhoods most impacted by the refinery’s pollution because of their proximity, we know that pollution and safety hazards like the June 21st explosion as well as the route of oil trains to PES impact neighborhoods across the City. Therefore, we recommend a second priority of this process should be effectively engaging Philadelphia residents across the City.
7. Post videos & notes from small group meetings on August 20th on the Refinery Advisory Group website to offset the impact of not being able to hear each other.
8. We would like a description of how turnout was done for the August 20th meeting. If Committee members are expected to do that work, then we need to know what they are each committing to and see if more capacity needs to be added to the Committee. We are willing to nominate residents to join the Advisory Group to add capacity.
9. It could be beneficial to have a feedback form at the end of each meeting on how that particular meeting went. That will support the Committees and the Advisory Group as a whole to learn from the process.
10. Livestream the meetings to make the conversation accessible to people who cannot attend in person.
11. We would like statistics provided to the leadership and participants of this process regarding the percentage of the most recent workforce at PES who live in zip codes 19146 and 19145 to clear up misleading remarks and clarify the definition of the “Community” stakeholder in this process.