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Comments on the Future of the PES Refinery Site

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The recent PES fire was a shocking and serious incident, but it could easily have been an absolute disaster if toxic chemicals stored on site had caught fire. Philadelphia has had a number of very lucky near misses in the past few years involving the transport or storage of nuclear materials and highly flammable petrochemicals. Given the age and condition of much of our infrastructure, we are very fortunate that none of these incidents have turned into a full blown public health disaster - yet.

Fossil fuels represent the past, both for Philadelphia and the nation. Given the pace of the climate crisis, and the fact that every state in the Mid Atlantic region has committed to 100% renewable energy by 2050 or earlier, it is clear that clean energy is the future.

Clean up of the refinery site and testing to determine what level of environmental remediation is required is obviously the first step. The site may need to be classified as a brownfield and treated accordingly.

There could be no more powerful economic and environmental use of the old PES refinery site than a clean energy facility. Manufacturing would be preferable of course, but possibly more difficult. One much easier possibility would be community solar. In fact, as a municipal utility, the Philadelphia Gas Works may be able to develop a community solar facility even without state legislation. Authorization by the PA Public Utility Commission would be required of course, but legislation may not be. Brownfields are usually suitable sites for community solar. The fact that this site has at least 2 power feeds coming in from different distribution lines and access to transmission lines as well, means that this site could easily feed its solar power into the grid. Its proximity to low and middle income neighborhoods that have suffered from PES' SOX, NOX and other pollution is another aspect that may be of interest to PECO in meeting its obligations to serve low income customers.

The Philadelphia Solar Energy Association will fully support the City in its efforts to convert this symbol of the fossil fuel past into a powerful and visible reflection of the city's commitment to a healthy, safe and stable environment for all Philadelphians.

Liz Robinson
Executive Director