



September 23, 2019

NYC-EJA Testimony for NYC Council Oversight Hearing: Protecting Health through Improving Air Quality

My name is Dr. Michelle ‘Tok’ Oyewole, and I am testifying on behalf of the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (or NYC-EJA). Founded in 1991, NYC-EJA is a non-profit citywide membership network linking grassroots organizations from low-income neighborhoods and communities of color in their fight for environmental justice.

For decades, NYC-EJA has led efforts to improve air quality in New York City, particularly as it relates to disproportionate health burdens in low income communities and communities of color. Our 2018 Climate Justice Agenda highlights our focus on localized air quality data monitoring, an essential tool to understand health burdens on environmental justice communities. Community Air Mapping Project for Environmental Justice, or CAMP-EJ, was born out of the shared concern from our members about air pollution in their neighborhoods. Our members represent environmental justice communities who live alongside the most noxious infrastructure in our city – including diesel-truck intensive waste export facilities, highways, power plants, and other heavy industrial uses. As a result, these communities face higher rates of negative health outcomes linked to PM 2.5 pollution, including asthma, heart disease, and cancer.

As climate change progresses, heat waves are expected to be more frequent and severe, which will worsen air quality and contribute to air quality-related disease and death. Extreme heat is the deadliest climate change risk, and estimates for NYC project that the number of heat waves could triple by 2050. We continue to advocate for an ambitious set of goals for NYC’s urban forests and street trees, equitable investments in natural infrastructure, and a robust maintenance plan that creates good jobs, which can help mitigate extreme heat and improve air quality, particularly in the most heat vulnerable communities.

In transportation, we advocate for electrification of vehicles, with an emphasis on NYC’s public bus infrastructure. Fossil-fuel dependent buses emit PM 2.5, which most heavily impacts low-income communities and communities of color, who comprise most of MTA ridership and tend to live where MTA bus depots are

sited. We also advocate for the use of creative funding streams to improve air quality, such as funds from the 2016 Volkswagen settlement.

We are working to reform the solid waste system in NYC. Truck-dependent transfer stations have been clustered in low-income communities and communities of color for decades, causing higher proportions of health consequences such as asthma, heart disease, and cancer. According to the city's recent draft environmental impact statement, passage of the Commercial Waste Zones bill introduced in June (Intro 1574) would achieve up to 68% reductions in vehicle miles travelled by diesel waste trucks, along with reductions in associated aerial particulate emissions, greenhouse gas emissions, road damage, and noise, by implementing an exclusive zoned waste collection system. Additionally, we are pleased that the bill will require truck compliance with certain environmental laws such as Local Law 145; and that within the bill, DSNY would review contract applications on the basis of a carting company's disposal of waste at transfer stations geographically proximate to the zones, reducing truck burdens in environmental justice communities.

Finally, we advocate for transitions in energy siting and storage. New York City is home to 16 peaker plants, many with multiple generating units, both publicly and privately owned. These highly polluting, fossil fuel power plants known as "peakers" fire up in the South Bronx, Sunset Park, and other communities of color on the hottest days of the year, when air quality is at its worst, and sensitive populations are warned to stay indoors. Peakers then spew even more harmful emissions into neighborhoods already overburdened by pollution, and exacerbate widespread health problems.

Existing and new gas-fired peaker plants could be replaced by renewables and battery storage technologies. Renewables are already cost-competitive with and often cheaper than fossil fuels, while battery storage adds flexibility and control to transform solar and wind into reliable, dispatchable resources that can be operated much like peaker power plants. We need innovative citywide large-scale energy planning projects that center environmental justice. For example, Rikers' Island, long home to a notorious jail with terrible conditions that has held New Yorkers of color, can be a home for large-scale clean energy infrastructure. Renewable and resilient energy systems will advance energy democracy, reduce energy cost burdens, strengthen the resiliency of communities, and improve air quality.

The Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, which legislated commitments to eliminate fossil fuel emissions in NYS by 2050 – makes it imperative for New York City to transition to a renewable energy future. We thank the Committee on Environmental Protection for holding this oversight hearing, and for consideration of our comments. We look forward to working together to improve air quality in the city.