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Think Dangerously

Cleaner Air Oregon Info Session

October 11, 2017 (<http://www.corvallisadvocate.com/2017/cleaner-air-oregon-info-session/>) / Corvallis Advocate (<http://www.corvallisadvocate.com/author/corvallis-advocate/>) / News (<http://www.corvallisadvocate.com/category/news/>)



In a spectacular example of collaboration and the democratic process, representatives from multiple grassroots and governmental organizations came together to educate the public on upcoming air pollution legislation. The educational seminar held at the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library on Saturday, October 7 featured members from environmental justice, state, and federal organizations.

What it is and Why It Matters

On April 6, 2016, Governor Brown launched the Cleaner Air Oregon initiative; intended to build on the goals of the Clean Air Act, it will make Oregon cleaner and safer for its citizens.

As Robert Collin, a representative from Oregon's Environmental Justice Task Force, stated, "If I could ask Governor Brown one thing for environmental justice, it would be this [air pollution legislation]."

The new legislation was originally proposed after the completion of the Portland Moss and Air Quality Study. The study measured toxins in Portland's moss to determine the air quality of different locations, resulting in concerning conclusions.

Moss is like the canary in the coal mine; it absorbs air pollution and processes the toxins, allowing humans to better gauge air quality and know when something is going wrong. The Portland moss study demonstrated that the current Clean Air Act regulations were not enough, which spurred Governor Brown to act.

How the Initiative Could Be Improved

All parties at the event emphasized the importance of public engagement as they continue to draft these laws. So here is what you need to know about the current drafts, and how environmental justice groups suggest we alter them.

As Keith Johnson, a representative of Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality explained, previous air quality legislation was based on federal law that focused on specific toxins and specific facilities. It was designed to protect the general population, but it does not take into account high-risk groups like those living near polluting facilities or the combined effect of multiple toxins in one location. Even if a facility is following the rules, people are at risk.

The new rules are based on three goals: to protect public health, use science to determine said rules, and to be predictable for businesses and communities.

Lisa Arkin from Beyond Toxics, an environmental justice group in Oregon, explained, "The legislation is moving to health driven controls, meaning it is supposed to look at the health impact on all individuals and track cumulative pollution," instead of considering specific facilities in isolation.

Arkin, along with other environmental justice groups, applauded the mayor's decision to push this legislation forward, but they also gave some suggestions to the public and governing bodies to improve the current drafts.

Suggestions included regulating all 660 known toxics instead of the currently proposed 215, making older facilities follow new regulations instead of loosening standards for them, and reducing the acceptable cancer risk for older facilities.

The Department of Environmental Quality drafted the current, proposed rules in conjunction with the Oregon Health Authority. However, before any rules are imposed, there is a period for public comments and then the DEQ will synthesize the comments into a report for the Environmental Quality Commission, which meets in July.

Find out more about the suggested changes at www.beyondtoxics.org (<http://www.beyondtoxics.org>) and about the current proposed laws and public comment options at www.cleanerair.oregon.gov (<http://www.cleanerair.oregon.gov>). Public comments will be accepted from October 13 to December 13. Marilyn Koenitzer, local activist and founder of Corvallis Clean Air, can also be reached at ccair1@comcast.net (<mailto:ccair1@comcast.net>).

By Kristen Edge

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