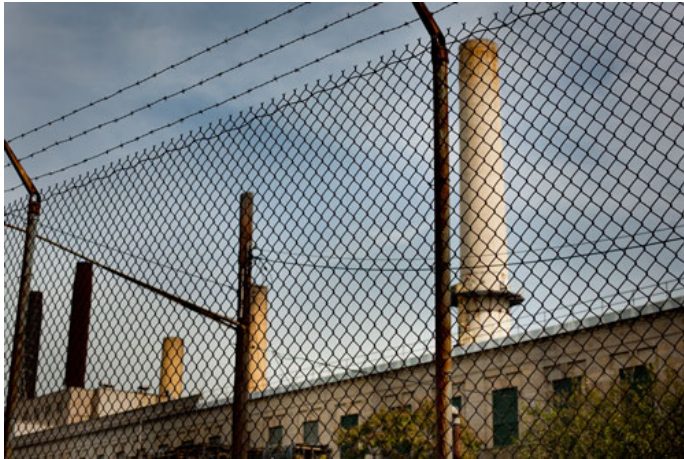


AT TASTE OF GEORGETOWN OCT 15, 12-4PM

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Superfundamentals

Posted by **Lydia DePillis** on Oct. 12, 2011 at 6:01 pm



In the entire District, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more pollution-plagued cluster of neighborhoods than those lining the Anacostia River as it heads south from the Maryland border. Kenilworth, Mayfair, Parkside, River Terrace, Eastland Gardens, and Kingman Park have been gashed by I-295, regularly deafened by a Metro overpass, and infiltrated by any number of chemicals leaching out of a landfill, trash transfer station, hydrogen fueling facility, and 77-acre Pepco plant that has been sitting on the north side of Benning Road NE for over a century.

That last piece is finally supposed to go away—or at least stop being a nuisance to the people living around it. The plant has only operated a few weeks every year for about a decade, but in 2007, Pepco Holdings announced that it would shut down the turbines and smokestacks entirely.

The harder part is figuring out who mops up the mess they left behind.

For over a year now, the District has been in a legal tug of war with the federal government over taking charge of the Pepco cleanup. Last August, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency warned that if the city didn't have enforceable agreements to clean up the site and two others by mid-December, it would address them "using appropriate federal authorities."

Translation: Unless you act, we're ready to put these sites on the National Priorities List, making them eligible for the Superfund program. It's kind of like an endangered species list for toxic waste dumps, outlining specific procedures for cleanup and establishing high standards for completion. But along with the federal leverage to make polluters pay for cleanup comes a certain infamy that makes it tough to convince people that it's safe to use the Superfund land for anything else.

So the District didn't want the Pepco plant to be forever labeled as a Superfund site, nor did city officials want to commit to a process that could take over a decade to complete. Last fall, at the urging of the District Department of the Environment, Councilmember **Mary Cheh** shepherded legislation through the D.C. council giving the city EPA-like powers to compel polluters to pay for cleanup. It's a Home Rule thing: Why shouldn't the District be able to take care of its own backyard?

Well, environmental groups—which usually support more self-determination for D.C.—think that's a terrible idea. The Anacostia Watershed Society and Anacostia Riverkeeper testified against Cheh's legislation, saying DDOE wasn't up to the task of making Pepco do the right thing; the agency is only five years old, after all. When DDOE drew up documents outlining what Pepco would need to do to take stock of the damage, the National Resources Defense Council filed a motion to intervene, saying the order was too weak.

The EPA, though, has decided to let the District handle its own affairs. And that's making the people who live around the plant very nervous.

“I don’t think D.C. can regulate any corporation the size of Pepco,” worries **Dianne Hampton**, a longtime community activist from River Terrace, who says she’s normally a supporter of Home Rule. “This is the nation’s capital. I feel as though the EPA should be able to handle it.”

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If the locals are a little cynical, it’s just because they’ve been dealing with these issues for decades now—and their greatest champion has passed away. When you bring up Pepco, everyone will refer to the days of **George Gurley**, an ex-military River Terrace resident who had fought for closure of the generators since the 1970s. Back when residents remember the paint on their cars bubbling when parked too close to the plant, and soot blackening laundry hung out to dry, Gurley organized his own health assessment that found elevated levels of asthma, bronchitis, and cancer in the surrounding neighborhoods.

That prompted the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry to do its own health assessment of the River Terrace neighborhood. The study found enough air pollution to aggravate existing health conditions, but concluded that it didn’t have enough data to blame the plant for the health conditions Gurley had found in the community. As federal bureaucracies are wont to do, it recommended further study.

That never happened. And the District’s own arrangements with Pepco don’t require more investigation. Gurley died in 2009, and there hasn’t been much discussion of the plant since then. Now, local Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner **Joanne Prue** says galvanizing people is even more difficult.

“The seniors over here, they’re not able to fight anymore,” she says. “I don’t even know if they would be willing to do another study. Because what was the outcome of the last study?”

To fill in some of the missing information, the D.C. Environmental Health Collaborative is designing its own study to determine the long-term effects on reproductive, neurological, and immune systems of residents in the surrounding neighborhoods.

“Anytime that there is a facility that people are worried about, the tendency is to say anything that happens in the neighborhood that’s bad that affects a number of people can be attributed to whatever that facility might be generating,” says Dr. **Janet Phoenix**, who’s organizing the new study. “But what hasn’t happened is a real, careful look at the evidence.”

Environmental groups have been trying to put together a group that would advise the cleanup going forward, in hopes of creating a model for future toxic sites along the Anacostia. But neighborhood residents have other pressing priorities, like saving an elementary school that the District is threatening to close, and haven’t rushed to join.

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One thing’s for sure: Nobody trusts Pepco to do a good job on its own cleanup. And they’re not sure they trust the District to watchdog a corporation that has donated over \$36,000 to D.C. electoral campaigns over the last ten years, not to mention a constant lobbying presence—after the city had documented numerous releases of toxic polychlorinated biphenyls into the environment during the ’80s and ’90s.

Even now, with the plant only operating a few weeks a year, the EPA’s enforcement database shows the facility has been in “significant noncompliance” with Clean Water Act regulations for seven out of the last 12 quarters. Records show astronomical levels of copper, zinc, and iron.

Still, at a public meeting in July—DDOE’s first attempt at public outreach beyond a press release about the agreement with the District to clean the site up—Pepco representative **Wesley McNealy** seemed to defy reality in attempting to reassure a hostile crowd that everything would be taken care of. “Compliance is number one for us,” he said. “In our view, we are in compliance.”

For its part, DDOE says it can do just as good a job as the federal government in overseeing the cleanup and forcing Pepco to pay for it. The company has already set aside \$1.1 million to assess the extent of the damage and \$13 million to fix the mess, which is similar to how the Superfund program would handle it. The key difference, officials say, is avoiding the stigma Superfund sites can carry with them.

“When a piece of property is designated as a Superfund site, that can have a substantial chilling effect in the marketplace,” says DDOE’s **Paul Connor**.

But the status doesn't seem to have been a problem with the one Superfund site in the District: the Navy Yard, which was placed on the National Priorities List in 1998. Since remediation has finished up, the surrounding area has boomed.

Even though Pepco has said it doesn't plan to sell its plant in the foreseeable future, environmentalists have alleged that the District's desire for redevelopment of the surrounding area is a "conflict of interest" that might lead to a quick but less-than-thorough fix. A faster track to development, for a community that values its greenery and affordability, isn't seen as a universal good—which means a clean bill of health is a mixed blessing.

"We know, after the cleanup is done, the developers stand ready," says River Terrace resident **Diana Onley-Campbell**, after hearing representatives of environmental groups summarize the state of play at a September meeting. "Your area, your little neighborhood has been identified as having the potential for great income generation for someone. And if you've got to go in order for them to do that, then you've got to go."

Photo by Darrow Montgomery

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