

# ILLINOIS CAN PREVENT ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICES

## ACTION NEEDED: Support



## LEGISLATION SUMMARY:

**Illinois is failing to protect communities – especially Black, Indigenous and People of Color communities – from environmental injustices.**

## OVERVIEW:

- » **Minority and low-income communities are disproportionately affected by pollution.** Sources of air, water, and land contamination are not distributed equally in Illinois, but highly concentrated in environmental justice communities - communities of color and other disadvantaged areas.
- » **Recent examples of proposed air pollution increases, during this respiratory health pandemic, demonstrate the need for greater protection.**
- » **Environmental justice advocates are calling for upgrades to the Illinois Environmental Protection Act** to address this unjust health disparity.

## BACKGROUND:

### Ongoing Environmental Justice Crises

#### Little Village, Chicago

Hilco Redevelopment Partners plans to build a one million square foot warehouse on the former site of the Crawford Coal Plant. The facility would bring a huge increase in heavy-duty diesel truck traffic, and exhaust and dust pollution, to a neighborhood already facing some of the state's highest rates of asthma and other respiratory illnesses. The Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO) and community partners spent years fighting to shut down the coal plant. They deserve a just transition of the site led by community groups. Instead, the city is replacing one dangerous polluter with another—even voting to approve a nearly \$20 million tax subsidy for Hilco. The company and the city have continued to neglect Little Village's well-being, as most clearly demonstrated by the botched demolition of the old Crawford Plant smokestacks

in April 2020—conducted without warning or proper dust mitigation—which engulfed the neighborhood in enormous amounts of dirt, asbestos, and other particulate matter.

#### Centreville

Decades of disinvestment and neglect have left this majority-Black town's water treatment systems in dangerous disrepair.<sup>1</sup> Flooding and sewage overflows spill waste into homes, streets, and parks, spreading serious diseases and making swaths of Centreville unlivable. Centreville, one of the poorest towns in America with a median household income of less than \$15,000 a year, has been ignored by its municipal and state governments. It needs major, long-term infrastructure repair and remediation before its residents suffer any longer.

#### Southeast Side, Chicago

A massive industrial metal shredder is set to open in this already overburdened, majority-Latinx neighborhood, which in recent years has had to fight for the removal of petcoke, manganese, and other hazardous materials. The proposed site

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is within blocks of residential areas, schools, parks, and the Calumet River. RMG, the facility's owner, has a track record of environmental violations at the city, state, and federal levels, including from its notorious General Iron facility, which was recently shuttered in the wealthy, majority-white Lincoln Park neighborhood. The Illinois EPA and Chicago Department of Public Health have both approved key permits for the facility despite the overwhelming opposition and fear expressed by community members during public comment periods. The IEPA has claimed that its decision could not factor in the community opposition, RMG's history as a bad actor, or the cumulative pollution burden in the Southeast Side—despite the agency classifying this as an “environmental justice” area.

### **McKinley Park, Chicago**

The MAT Asphalt plant operates next to a school and a major public park, less than 1,000 feet from the nearest homes. The plant has drawn hundreds of complaints from neighbors and multiple citations for air pollution, failure to control windborne material, and operating equipment without a permit. Owned by a politically connected city contractor, MAT Asphalt opened with no community input or warning in 2018 and has operated on an expired construction permit since 2019, while IEPA considers issuing a long-term permit. Records also show that IEPA and the Chicago Department of Public Health have neglected to conduct proper environmental justice or emissions reviews.<sup>2</sup>

## **How Illinois Can Better Protect Communities and Ensure Environmental Justice**

**T**he Illinois Environmental Protection Act, as it is currently enforced, is not providing the protection and community empowerment needed to meet Illinois' constitutional requirement to provide a healthful environment for all citizens. Recent history has demonstrated the need for these improvements:

- » **Consider cumulative impacts in all permitting decisions.** Facilities do not operate in isolation. The IEPA must consider the existing pollution burden in any neighborhood where a new facility would bring more pollution, either directly or indirectly (e.g., via increased traffic). A recent New Jersey law provides an excellent model.<sup>3</sup>
- » **Ensure that community voices are heard.** The people at greatest risk from pollution must be prioritized in any permitting and enforcement actions. State and local governments must give EJ communities the power to decide how former polluting sites are transitioned to just and sustainable use.
- » **Restore funding to environmental agencies.** IEPA and IDNR are among the public bodies that have suffered massive budget cuts in recent years. These agencies need to be robustly staffed and resourced in order to monitor EJ issues, enforce regulations, and protect environmental and public health.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/feb/11/centreville-illinois-flooding-sewage-overflow>

<sup>2</sup> <https://n4ej.org/stop-mat-asphalt/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.politico.com/states/new-jersey/story/2020/08/27/new-jersey-legislature-sends-groundbreaking-environmental-justice-bill-to-governors-desk-1313030>