

Clean up the Shenango coke works

The plant is breaking the law while endangering its neighbors

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By Thaddeus Popovich

I was surprised to read Earl Bohn's romanticized notions about Shenango coke works in his Aug. 25 op-ed, "[Industrial Attraction: How Pittsburgh Treats Shenango Can Hurt Recruiting.](#)"

Like Mr. Bohn, I also live in Ben Avon. My experience with Shenango, one shared by many of my neighbors, is of a plant that regularly violates regulations meant to safeguard the health and well-being of those of us who call this area home. A recent example is shown in the accompanying photo taken by a resident on June 11, when the plant lost power for nearly an hour, emitting raw coke gas and toxic emissions into the air.

My family has a long history with the mills in the area, and it came at a cost: One of my grandfathers died after an industrial accident. Two uncles succumbed to a malady of chronic diseases including diabetes, emphysema, tuberculosis, dementia. Many families in nearby company housing breathed in the polluted air, day-in and day-out.

But those days are over. The air is cleaner today, isn't it?

Not if you live near a plant like the Shenango coke works.

In March 2014, a 36-member coalition of small business owners, environmental organizations, unions and faith leaders called for the Allegheny County Health Department to impose tighter pollution controls on Shenango. For over a year, Shenango violated emission standards three out of every four days that the plant was operating. During that time, it was not required to shut down or curtail operations to minimize the health effects on the 70,000 people living within a 3-mile radius of the plant.

To put this in perspective, all of us who own a car in Allegheny County must have an annual emission inspection. If your car does not pass inspection, you cannot drive it. You must pay to fix it. Why don't

the same rules apply to the second-largest polluter in Allegheny County when it exceeds emission standards and breaks the law?

Perhaps nobody wants to take on the owner, Detroit-based DTE Energy, a Fortune 500 company. Fortunately, the Group Against Smog and Pollution stepped up and filed a citizens lawsuit on behalf of all of us breathing in Shenango's toxic emissions every day.

It's time to prioritize the health and safety of our communities over profit. We continue to have days when we feel it's unsafe to open our windows or let our children play outside. We find soot or fine particulates on our porch railings and even inside our homes. We wheeze and grab an inhaler or even suffer through an irregular heart rhythm.

But we're working to make our communities safer, healthier places to live. The Carnegie Mellon University CREATE lab has agreed to install Speck particulate monitors outside our homes so we can track air quality on any given day. We're having periodic meetings with the health department, and it has agreed to install a number of monitoring devices so that we can have a clear sense of what toxins are in our air, and in what amounts.

We've accomplished much of this by sharing our stories as members of Allegheny County Clean Air Now. Earlier this year, a small group of ACCAN members traveled to the Environmental Protection Agency Region 3 headquarters in Philadelphia to make clear just how much Shenango is degrading our quality of life, and what we fear it means for our children and grandchildren.

We're also holding DTE Shenango accountable. Earlier this year, several of us purchased shares of its stock so we could attend the shareholders meeting this past May. We stood up and told our story to the chairman, his staff and the board of directors. I personally invited the chairman, president and CEO, Gerry Anderson, to visit and experience what we experience almost every day.

We have a lot on the line here. Only by cleaning up our region's biggest polluters, like Shenango, can we ensure we're setting up our communities for success long into the future.

Thaddeus Popovich is a co-founder of Allegheny County Clean Air Now.