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# Environmental Justice in Detroit: Hope Rises Amid Toxic Communities

Words by Andrea Newell



JUN 10, 2013

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Outside of Michigan, a common attitude toward Detroit seems to be pity. People imagine it is a broken, dirty shell of a city whose glory Motown and Motor City days are long in the past. Pictures in the media show rundown, abandoned buildings, pollution and abject poverty.

In reality, Detroit has many organizations and businesses that are working hard to cast off the rust and turn the city toward a green future. At the same time, the city has a major emissions problem and unlucky zip code 48217, [the most polluted](#) in the state and thirdmost in the country. Even as faithful Detroiters work to turn the city around, many believe southwest Detroit is being ignored, its residents sacrificed to appease the big industries with big emissions that have steadily encroached on their neighborhoods.

However, the city might be reaching a turning point with climate and environmental justice activists fighting for change. Will the combination of a [climate action plan](#), a spotlight on the issues plaguing 48217 and

other areas of the city, and increased public awareness reduce emissions and revitalize Detroit?

## The slow decline of 48217

The southwest region of Detroit, where 48217 is located, is surrounded by heavy industry, led by [Marathon Oil Refinery](#), and including Severstal Steel, US Steel, Detroit Edison Coal Plant, U.S. Gypsum (USG), and the Detroit Wastewater Plant (the single largest sewage plant in the U.S.), all within a one mile radius of one another surrounding a community of about 25,000 people, Rhonda Anderson, National Environmental Justice & Community Partnership Program, Sierra Club Detroit, estimates. "They are within hundreds of feet of neighborhoods and schools," she says. These industries pollute a variety of effluents which impact local air and waterways. There's even [a mountain of petroleum coke](#) - a byproduct of Marathon Oil's tar sands processing - perched on the edge of the Detroit River. The mountain is a full city block long and stands three stories high. Despite outrage from local businesses and residents, the EPA says the material is not carcinogenic, although it's not clear what effect this material would have if significant amounts entered the Great Lakes.

How did this mountain and other examples of industrial pollution ever come to be acceptable? It's pretty simple. In the 1950s, heavy industry began to grow in this area and workers moved to be close to their jobs. Delores Leonard told the [Detroit Free Press](#) that when she and her husband bought their house on Bassett Street in 1955, it was one of the few places that African Americans could buy homes (the zip code is [currently](#) 85 percent African American, 10 percent Caucasian, 5 percent Latino). She also remembers that people in the neighborhood would cover their cars with tarps to protect them from the soot raining down from

nearby industries and pitting the paint. No one thought, at the time, that it could harm their health. Now, this community is rife with cancers, asthma, skin problems, and cardiovascular disease.

Anderson has been a vocal supporter of residents of 48217 and surrounding communities. She has encouraged residents to speak out and tell their stories and implored government agencies to take notice and take action. The biggest environmental justice issue facing Detroit, she says, "is getting someone to recognize it at the authority level where they can actually do something about it. In my mind, that's local, state and federal government. I would like them to do what they are mandated to do, and that's look after the health and well-being of the residents."

## **Corporations are more important people than people**

Industries with clout, power, influence and money can invest in lobbyists and drive their own agenda, Anderson said, but a community that has no resources and no voice, "What chance to they have?" When companies promise jobs, Anderson said, the impact on the environment is dismissed, because there is this hope and desire for a job, and nine times out of ten that job never comes.

Marathon announced in 2007 that it was going to begin a \$2.2 billion expansion to enable the plant to process tar sands. There was a hope for jobs, but Anderson estimates that Detroiters received fewer than five of those jobs - and those few went to residents from other areas of the city. Anderson asked that the 48217 residents be given first shot at openings, but the clamor for jobs from all parts of the city made that impossible.

At the same time, Anderson said, Marathon requested and received a more than \$1 million

tax abatement from the city of Detroit, while 48217 received no relief and watched the dust cloud thicken and their property values continue their freefall. Many have lived in that community their whole lives and are unwilling to leave. Others simply can't afford to as their home's value is not enough to allow them to move. (Listings on [Zillow](#) as of this writing had homes for sale in 48217 as low as \$2,300, \$4,900, and \$6,000.)

## Indifferent neighbors

Residents of 48217 had known for a long time that something was wrong in their neighborhood, but it took Anderson and the Sierra Club's outreach and education to help them speak out. In 2010, they were able to bring their issues to the attention of city government and Marathon Oil.

Anderson [wrote](#) about the experience.

Adrian Crawford had known for a long time that something was very wrong in her home. There was an acrid smell in her basement and she and her daughter were sick and coughing all the time. Her neighbors complained of similar problems but repeated visits to the city council resulted in no action.

On October 1, 2010, I attended a press conference called by the State Representative and held on the corner of Liebold and Pleasant. I cannot forget the unbelievable odor (hydrogen sulfur) coming up through the sewer holes; it was enough to stop you in your tracks.

Residents invited us into two homes where we were subjected to odors so strong they drove us back outside, but not before I saw furniture with a yellow green growth and walls painted gold that had turned grey. Outside I passed a home with three small children

playing outside. The mother was inside with a newborn infant in her arm. How could this be? We could not allow children to grow up with this and permit a baby, a newborn baby, to breathe this awful odor.

Anderson knew they had to take immediate action. She stood in the street and placed calls to officials and refused to take no for an answer. The water department flushed the sewers in the neighborhood, but that was just a stopgap. The residents attended meetings with the city, and then, empowered by Anderson and the Sierra Club, took their own environmental samples which showed 20 toxic gases, including ethyl benzene, a product of oil refinement.

This positive link between blatant pollution and Marathon Oil brought the company to the table, and the company subsequently agreed to buy out many homeowners that were being adversely affected by their operations. Since that time, Marathon Oil has contracted to buy out 13 homes at Liebold and Pleasant, and 480 homes in nearby Oakwood Heights (both in 48217). Anderson admits that those people were lucky to be bought out, but she knew that many of them just wanted to stay and have Marathon clean up its operations so their neighborhood could be livable again.

Anderson sees no evidence that Marathon Oil shows any interest in the community they are affecting. She is not advocating that these businesses close down and take needed jobs away, but that they acknowledge the community they are slowly obliterating, the people whose lives they are impacting and whose health they are destroying.

How could Marathon help? "I wish they would ask them [the community]," Anderson said. Something as simple as moving a school that is too close to the factory to a less impacted area so children would have a cleaner place to

learn would be a big step in the right direction.

How does Anderson keep hope alive in these circumstances? Her biggest goal is to work to reduce emissions, but also help the host communities to these industries to reimagine themselves. "What would they like to look like?" Anderson said. "Because no one wants to look like that [48217]." Anderson tells residents that they should organize themselves, speak out and someone will listen.

"These communities, as inundated as they are with industries and the negative impact and the conditions they had to survive under, these are some of the strongest and most thriving communities anywhere. People have pride in their communities, in themselves, in their property. They love their children like anyone else. They want to achieve all of the same goals as anywhere in the U.S. They want to live a full life, not one of illness. And they have victories. 48217 has victories every day."

## **Developing a Climate Action Plan for Detroit**

Kimberly Hill Knott, Senior Policy Manager at Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice (DWEJ) and Project Director of Detroit Climate Action Collaborative, first got the idea of a climate action plan for Detroit when she attended the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. There she saw a list of cities worldwide that had committed to reducing their greenhouse gas emissions and wondered why Detroit was not on it. It took two more years before DWEJ finally gathered key stakeholders and convened a meeting to launch the Detroit Climate Action Collaborative (DCAC) in 2011.

Still in its early stages, Knott explained that the plan has two main goals: to reduce greenhouse gas emissions for the sustainability and well-being of the city of Detroit, and to increase the resilience of the city's social, built and natural environment.

Why is Detroit focusing on climate change now? Knott believes that Detroit has been facing so many economic issues that this got pushed down the list.

"It's been to our disadvantage, our detriment that there has not been a broader focus on environmental issues and the impact they have on the sustainability of the entire city. You have environmental organizations that have been focusing on it, but it has not been as widely accepted as it should have been. We feel that now is the time to not only engage environmental organizations, but to talk to government, to talk to business institutions, to talk to community leaders and others - a broad array of people to resolve this issue."

The DCAC is partnering with graduate students from the University of Michigan, School of Natural Resources and the Environment to measure current GHG emissions and create a baseline from which to implement reduction strategies.

"When we look at reducing GHG emissions, we also see this as a way to reduce other levels of pollution in over-burdened communities. By focusing on climate change, we expect to help lift the environmental burden that these communities have faced for far too long."

**Cumulative impact: When several industries move in, the toxic cloud multiplies**

In places like 48217, part of the problem is the sheer number of industries packed into a small area that looms over a neighborhood. The particulates, dust and high number of toxins found in that community is due, in part, to cumulative impact, Knott says.

"A facility may be compliant with certain state and federal standards, but they do not take into consideration all of the other heavy polluting facilities in the same community." Even if each company only emitted what was allowed through regulation, something that Anderson doubts, with so many plants so close together, the combined effect of many types of emissions raining down on the neighborhood can only doom its residents.

Like Anderson, Knott believes that the government (city, state and federal) needs to step in. "I would like to see city, state and federal government (EPA) implement a stringent compliance standard to reduce the amount of pollution in overburdened communities," Knott said. "We need to put pressure on the point sources of pollution, any source of pollution where pollutants are discharged, and make them figure out a solution to ease the burden on these communities."

## **The Greening of Detroit**

Despite the grim problems facing 48217 and other areas of Detroit, many of its citizens are working hard to rebuild and move Detroit forward as a progressive, environmentally conscious city.

Organizations like:

- The [Greening of Detroit](#) - a nonprofit that works to improve parks and green spaces citywide and promote urban agriculture



- [Detroit Eastern Market](#) - large regional farmers market with more than 250 vendors
- [WARM Training Center](#) - a nonprofit that promotes the development of resource efficient, affordable, healthy homes and communities through education, training, and technical assistance.
- [Detroit Public Schools - Go Green](#) program saved the district [\\$130,000](#) during the 2012-2013 school year
- [Detroit Green Map](#) - a collaboration between the [Detroit Area Green Sector Skills Alliance\(DAGSSA\)](#) and the [US Green Building Council's Detroit Regional Chapter Emerging Professionals group \(USGBC-DRC-EP\)](#) to connect the public to local businesses and nonprofits that show a commitment to environmentally sustainable and socially equitable initiatives.

All outsiders may see are pictures of abandoned buildings and read are reports of joblessness and pollution, but there are many Detroiters that are optimistic about the city's future. Knott admitted that, as a city, "we have not been as good about telling our positive stories."

"One of the things we plan to do through DCAC is tell the story of businesses and other institutions that are adopting meaningful sustainability practices like some Detroit Public Schools. And we're going to highlight those companies in an effort to encourage other companies and other entities to do the same thing.

"Environmental efforts to remediate environmental challenges must be part of the resurgence of this city. If you ignore the environmental challenges that have plagued this city for years, you will never have the city you are trying to create. Environmental justice

cannot be ignored in terms of rebuilding Detroit," said Knott.

[\[image credits: Toban Black: Flickr cc\]](#)



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Andrea Newell has more than ten years of experience designing, developing and writing ERP e-learning materials for large corporations in several industries. She was a consultant for PricewaterhouseCoopers and a contract consultant for companies like IBM, BP, Marathon Oil, Pfizer, and Steelcase, among others. She is a writer and former editor at TriplePundit and a social media blog fellow at The Story of Stuff Project. She has contributed to In Good Company (Vault's CSR blog), Evolved Employer, The Glass Hammer, EcoLocalizer and CSRwire. She is a volunteer at the West Michigan Environmental Action Council and lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan. You can reach her at [andrea.g.newell@gmail.com](mailto:andrea.g.newell@gmail.com) and [@anewell3p](https://twitter.com/anewell3p) on Twitter.

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