

Several weeks ago, various members who represented the City of Chattanooga held a series of public meetings to update the community on the progress of the Wilcox Tunnel renovations. During those discussions, residents were informed that after six months unforeseen circumstances had resulted in the necessity for the Tunnel to remain closed. The City also provided information on a community mitigation program meant to aide and assist area businesses who had suffered financially and exponentially since the tunnel's closure. In addition, many members of the community raised important questions that helped to provide an overview on the concerns, viewpoints, and future expectations of these affected communities. This letter is meant to expand and elaborate upon the community's position on the progress of the Wilcox Tunnel renovation and the future vitality and sustainability of these communities.

Through Executive Order 12898, the Federal Government specified that, "Each Federal agency shall make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations." This prompted the Department of Transportation to develop a set of Environmental Justice principles and guidelines which includes:

- To avoid, minimize, or mitigate disproportionately high and adverse human health and environmental effects, including social and economic effects, on minority populations and low-income populations.
- To ensure the full and fair participation by all potentially affected communities in the transportation decision making process.
- To prevent the denial of, reduction in, or significant delay in the receipt of benefits by minority and low-income populations.

A second federal agency, the Environmental Protection Agency, defines 'Environmental Justice' as, "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies."

Likewise, the crisis in Flint, Michigan is a recent example which illustrates the meaning behind this terminology. Unfortunately, one of the few productive outcomes of this tragic and alarming circumstance is that cities and municipalities across the nation, particularly poor and communities of color, are reassessing and evaluating the areas where environmental justice related incidents most effects them. We pause to pray for the peace, safety and comfort of the tens of thousands of residents who are experiencing this water crisis, and as unfathomable and unconscionable as this human tragedy is, it would equally defy all belief if as a State and region we had not experienced such environmental justice related abuses before.

Dr. Robert Bullard, widely considered the "Father of Environmental Justice", widely documented the plight of a Dickson County, Tennessee family, the Holt's, who for decades had been exposed to TCE contamination in their well water because of a nearby toxic landfill. In 2008, the largest coal ash spill in history occurred in upper East Tennessee in an episode so horrific that famed environmental activist Erin Brockovich became involved. In 1967, a Nashville group known as the I-40 Steering Committee vehemently opposed the construction of a highway right through historic Jefferson Street because of the disparate impact they believed would be felt by the area's HBCU's. Namely, the diverting of traffic flow; the financial hardships businesses would experience; and the failure to include the black community in the planning process. For more than five decades, Chattanooga residents have voiced concerns over environmental justice violations, which includes the air quality and toxic brownfields found in the Southside; the blighted properties, food deserts and gentrification of the Eastside; and concerns over Chickamauga Creek, which has for years adversely impacted the African-American community due to water quality control and flooding. The lack of a positive and meaningful remedy to answer and alleviate Wilcox Tunnel concerns is but yet another sad chapter in this long history of societal neglect. Notwithstanding, the community has both short-term and long-run recommendations which may assist in eliminating many of these wrongs and lacks.

First, according to the most recent Annual Average Daily Traffic estimate we have been provided, between 15,000 and 18,000 vehicles travel through the tunnel each day. Disappointingly, despite the *Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991* which declared that the City of Chattanooga is an important link in the nation's High Priority Corridors (East-West Corridor 7), and in light of the tunnel being less than a mile from two of the State of Tennessee's most important Intermodal Corridors, the tunnel is only regarded as a "minor arterial" roadway. The community thinks this misclassification is at the root of the problem because as the city-wide bottleneck being currently experienced by travelers since the tunnel's closure clearly illustrates, the tunnel's location between Amnicola Highway and the Interstate means it should be a part of these Intermodal links and corridors, it should be classified as a major thoroughfare, and all available funds on the Federal, State and Local level should be made available for it's general maintenance and upkeep.

Secondly, the community has yet to be provided with any traffic assessments, community impact studies, or pertinent statistical data that monitors and measures the traffic flow, congestion and future road uses of these impacted communities. As part of the City's Clean Power Plan (2015), it's our view that a review of how emissions and other air quality issues impacts these communities should be included in a Toxic Release Assessment and Inventory of the area.

Third, as part of the City's community mitigation efforts, it's our view that the sum of one-thousand dollars is a minuscule figure. Area businesses need the sum of one-thousand dollars for each month the tunnel has been and will be out of commission. In addition, we call for a Pilot Program for the businesses impacted by the tunnel's closure. It's our contention that if we can provide relief for an untold number of potential developers downtown, then we can provide the same level of tax abatements, easements, and relief uptown and in the African-American community.

Finally, we cannot accept the notion that a major renovation of any type has taken place with the tunnel. The existing tunnel is still not equipped to handle emergency personnel equipment, buses or large-scale vehicles. The existing tunnel is still too narrow for moderate and mid-sized vehicles. The existing tunnel is still not safe for pedestrian traffic on any level. The existing tunnel will still be riddled with toxic fumes and emissions. The existing tunnel will still cause a disparate impact on the communities surrounding it, and the community still views the existing tunnel as an "imminent public safety hazard." In the long-run the community makes two recommendations. First, the most important thing we should do is formulate and disseminate a plan to build and construct a second tunnel adjoining the first. Secondly, we call on the local regional planning agencies to update the neighborhood plans for the areas impacted by the tunnel because after two decades of stalled progress, these plans have failed to materialize and be fully implemented.

In the final estimation, after nearly ninety-years and dozens of unfulfilled promises and assurances in between, the African-American community emphatically states that one of our best public interest measures is to build a new tunnel. After nearly ninety-years we readily say that enough is enough because we have waited, long enough, long enough. We look forward to working with community members and government officials to solve this very pressing societal challenge.

Ezra Harris

Chairman North Brainerd Community Council

Ezra Harris

ezraharristn@aol.com

423 635-0251

Ezraharristn@aol

4-04-16

P.O.Box 3085

Chattanooga, Tennessee