

Officials go on offense vs. Tonawanda Coke



State Assemblyman Sam Hoyt and Erie County Legislator Michele Iannello are calling on the state to enforce environmental regulations in light of high benzene emissions reported from Tonawanda Coke. Hoyt met with Grand Island residents such as Lovisa Anderson, pictured at right, at a press conference Saturday. (photos by Larry Austin)

Assemblymember Sam Hoyt (D-Buffalo, Grand Island), County Legislator Michele Iannello (D-Kenmore) and U.S. Rep. Louise Slaughter have joined concerned citizens of Grand Island to call for action in addressing health problems they attribute to the Tonawanda

nda Coke plant.

The local lawmakers, along with citizens and members of the Clean Air Coalition of WNY, met Saturday at the east marsh near Beaver Island State Park to call on the Attorney General's Environmental Protections Bureau to move

swiftly in reducing benzene levels released into the atmosphere.

Meanwhile Slaughter has called on the state Department of Environmental Conservation to develop a benzene reduction plan for the plant.

"Benzene is being emitted into

our atmosphere at extremely high levels," claimed Hoyt. "This issue affects not just Tonawanda, but our entire region. I am calling on the state Attorney General's Environmental Protections Bureau to act swiftly to use their powers to

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Benzene a known carcinogen

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investigate Tonawanda Coke."

Iannello blamed Tonawanda Coke for "toxins spewing" into the air, harming people in the community. Residents of Grand Island were on hand for the press conference, including Lovisa Anderson of East River Road.

The Tonawanda Coke plant was recently investigated by the state DEC, which benzene emissions are up to 75 times higher than recommended guidelines. Benzene is a known carcinogen that can negatively affect the immune system. Tonawanda Coke is the region's largest producer of benzene, according to Hoyt's office.

Hoyt said the health impact of the emissions are felt in north Buffalo, Black Rock, Kenmore, Grand Island, "and maybe beyond."

"There isn't a single person here who wants to see jobs eliminated in Western New York. There isn't a

single person here who would like to see necessarily any facility shut down," Hoyt said. "But every person here demands – demands – the environmental laws of this country, of this state, and of this community are obeyed."

Hoyt said he believed the laws on the books were satisfactory, but that proper enforcement was needed.

Hoyt said Iannello has been working on the issue for two years.

Iannello praised the efforts of the Clean Air Coalition of WNY, and said health problems have existed in the area for far too long.

"My residents are sick. They've been sick for 30 years. We need to hold this plant accountable," Iannello said.

Slaughter reported this week, that in addition to contacting DEC, she will speak to EPA Director Lisa Jackson regarding the Tonawanda Coke emissions problem.



Assemblyman Sam Hoyt speaks during a press conference regarding Tonawanda Coke Saturday.