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TRANSPORTATION

400 railroad crossings will be upgraded or eliminated under new program

As trains have gotten longer over the years, blocked roadways have drawn more scrutiny in Washington

By Luz Lazo
June 5, 2023 at 5:00 a.m. EDT

Leggett, Tex., residents say trains stop and wait for long periods, often for locomotive crew changes. This blocks road crossings and can, in some spots, leave residents with no way in or out. (Lee Powell/The Washington Post)

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Trains park at intersections daily across the country, sometimes blocking downtowns and rural neighborhoods for hours, a safety problem officials say is rooted in outdated infrastructure and struggles over limited funding.

A new Transportation Department grant program created under the infrastructure law is aiming to improve safety at the nation's rail crossings, sending $570 million this year to 32 states to upgrade more than 400 locations. The projects will construct overpasses and pay for track relocations and pedestrian and vehicular improvements where train tracks and roads intersect.

The investments come as rail safety remains a focus after the Feb. 3 derailment of a Norfolk Southern train carrying hazardous chemicals in East Palestine, Ohio. The incident, which prompted state and federal investigations, shed light on the effects trains have on communities, including extended blocking of intersections. Residents have called for changes as they report that trains are disrupting traffic, causing seniors to miss doctor's appointments and forcing children to crawl under them to get to school.

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In some cases, firetrucks and ambulances have not been able to respond to emergencies.

“This problem is real,” Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said in an interview. “This has long been an issue, but that doesn’t mean it has to stay that way forever.”

[*Miles-long trains are blocking first responders when every minute counts*]

The first round of grants under the five-year, $3 billion Railroad Crossing Elimination Grant Program (RCE) should help to “change the norm with attention to some of the areas where this issue is most acutely felt,” Buttigieg said. The program will target areas in the rail network where improvements to crossings could save lives, reduce commuting delays and improve commerce, he said.

The grants include nearly $37 million for Houston to build four underpasses and eliminate seven at-grade crossings in the city’s east end, an area that endures chronic train blockages that residents and elected leaders say affect daily life and commercial activities.

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Pelham, Ala., will use its $41.7 million grant to build a bridge over two crossings on County Road 52 in the heart of the city that officials say are frequently blocked, leaving first responders unable to access half the city. In Florida, transportation officials will tap $15.4 million to improve 21 railroad crossings in Broward County along a rail corridor with a pattern of train collisions involving vehicles.

Grants also will support studies and design work for future rail crossing improvements, including in the states of Arkansas, California, Maryland, Washington and West Virginia. Officials said 22 percent of this year's funding, $127.5 million, will support projects in rural communities or on tribal lands.

The grants also aim to prevent the two leading causes of fatalities on U.S. railroads: trespassing on railroad property and trains colliding with vehicles. Last year, about 2,200 grade-crossing incidents resulted in 276 deaths and 800 injuries, according to data from the Federal Railroad Administration.

[*Federal advisory urges railroads to review effects of long trains on communities*]

The grant money is the first substantial dedicated funding for eliminating railroad crossings. The FRA in April issued a safety advisory highlighting risks associated with blocked crossings, noting how stopped trains can impede access for emergency services. It urged railroads to work with communities and first responders "to prevent or at least mitigate" disruptions.

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As trains have gotten longer over the years, blocked roadways have drawn more scrutiny in Washington.

The Railway Safety Act, which advanced last month to the Senate floor, would require railroads to maintain a toll-free number for people to report blocked crossings. Since 2019, the FRA has operated a website where people can report obstructions caused by trains. More than 30,000 incidents were reported last year, with nearly 1 in 5 reports citing first responders blocked by trains.

Another one-fifth noted pedestrians crawling under train cars or over couplings to get to the other side.

In Houston, where residents filed more than 3,200 complaints — the most from any city — officials sought the federal grant to launch a decade-old plan to build underpasses and eliminate conflicts between rail and other modes of transportation. As many as 124 trains cross the city daily, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner (D) said recently, noting that some are at least a mile long and block crossings for upward of 20 minutes. City fire officials say that, on average, there are 90 instances a month when emergency responders are delayed by trains.

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“Blocked crossings are a real safety issue that’s happening in Houston and in thousands of other communities across the country,” Turner said at a recent news conference near one of the most frequently blocked crossings in Texas, which will see improvements with the grants.

[*States hold little power over railroads. They’re still trying to tighten rules.*]

U.S. transportation officials said that the funding for Houston will reduce commuter disruptions and delays and that decreased vehicle idling should improve air quality and “save people an estimated $12.7 million in lost fuel,” based on city estimates.

With more than 200,000 grade crossings across the United States, the grants will address only a small portion of the problem. Other communities and rail crossings will be selected in each of the next four years to receive the federal aid.

“We’re really glad we’re going to be able to see the benefits in terms of safety and in terms of convenience and goods movement that come with getting rid of these crossings,” Buttigieg said. “They can be a headache and even a risk in communities of all sizes.”

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DURHAM COUNTY

Competing visions for transportation in Durham collide on four-mile stretch of US 70

BY RICHARD STRADLING

UPDATED MAY 24, 2023 8:57 AM

The NC Department of Transportation is unveiling its latest ideas for turning U.S. 70 into a freeway from Interstate 540 in Raleigh into Durham. Here's what the changes might look like at the busy Brier Creek area.
BY NCDOT

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DURHAM

The organization that does transportation planning for Durham set new priorities last year, saying it would like to spend more money on cyclists, pedestrians and transit riders and less on building new highways and widening existing ones.

One of the projects The Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization or MPO said it could no longer support was a long-standing plan by the N.C. Department of Transportation to turn U.S. 70 into a six-lane freeway in southeast Durham.

Now some area residents say they would prefer the freeway. They've found a voice in The Leesville Road Coalition, a community group that thinks the MPO's vision of turning U.S. 70 into a boulevard, with sidewalks, bicycle paths and better intersections, won't adequately address traffic and safety problems on the road.

Many of the coalition's members live in Carolina Arbors, a 1,300-home community for people 55 and older just north of U.S. 70. Resident Leslie Abel says she and her neighbors worry about the congestion on the highway that makes it difficult to travel to places such as Duke University Medical Center.

TOP VIDEOS
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"It's very important to get there quickly for people in this community," Abel said. "And if your policy priorities are to encourage bicycles and pedestrian traffic over improving an artery that's critical to state transportation, who sets those priorities and do we have a voice in that?"

Abel was speaking to Doug Plachcinski, executive director of the DCHC MPO, at a forum the coalition organized Monday evening in the Carolina Arbors community center. Before Plachcinski could answer, Javiera Caballero, a Durham City Council member who serves on the MPO board, stood up to defend the organization's new approach. Caballero said city officials had long heard from people who want Durham to move away from large, fast freeway projects.

"That may be not what you all want in this room, and I completely understand that," she said. "But that is not the only view in Durham."

Caballero said many residents, just as loud and organized but also younger, are pushing the city in another direction.

"They want multimodal, and they are expecting it, and they are demanding it," she said. "And they want a different future for their children and their grandchildren."

Stephen Knill, a co-founder of The Leesville Road Coalition, countered that the city's transportation priorities aren't reflected in its land-use policies.

"It seems a little incongruous to me, the fact that for the last two years we've just approved almost 10,000 new homes out here in developments where people literally have to drive to get anywhere," Knill said. "Every one of these developments is set up to be car-centric in this area."

MPO WORKING ON A BOULEVARD PLAN NOW

The disagreement over what to do with U.S. 70 focuses on a four-mile stretch between Raleigh's Brier Creek and the new Interstate 885 East End Connector freeway in Durham. Much of the road still looks like a rural four-lane divided highway, though it now runs through one of the fastest-growing areas in the Triangle.

Based on its new priorities, the DCHC MPO has launched an effort to plan the future of the road as a more urban four-lane boulevard. Plachcinski said the MPO hopes to present options and get public feedback next month.

When asked if NCDOT's freeway plan would be one of the options, Plachcinski said no, and then ticked off the MPO board's policy goals.

"Reducing vehicle miles traveled. Reducing expanding roadways that are very expensive, as we've seen, to rebuild and expand continuously. To improve safety. To improve the environmental effects of our highways and the damage they do to our communities and to reduce the lack of access," he said. "Those were the kinds of performance measures we've asked our consultants to look at."

NCDOT presented its plans for a U.S. 70 freeway between Raleigh and Durham in 2018 and hoped to begin construction in 2021. Financial challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic and most recently rising costs for construction, have forced the

department to delay the project indefinitely, Brandon Jones, NCDOT's regional engineer, told those at the forum.

NCDOT owns U.S. 70 and will need to agree to build what the MPO planners come up with. Jones said the department will want to see that the road can handle traffic now and in the future.

"It has to prove to us, data-driven, that it's going to work," he said. "U.S. 70 is a regionally important corridor, not just a locally important corridor. What happens on U.S. 70 in this area impacts how I-40 functions. It impacts how transportation around the region functions. So it's important for us to get this right."

Meanwhile, NCDOT still plans to convert a section of U.S. 70 into a freeway through Brier Creek in Raleigh, between I-540 and the Durham County line. Jones said it will likely be 2026 before the department can award a contract for final designs and construction.

For more information about the DCHC's U.S. 70 East Corridor Study, go to www.dchcmpo.org/what-we-do/programs-plans/special-studies/us-70-corridor-study/.

This story was originally published May 24, 2023, 7:00 AM.

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RICHARD STRADLING

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Exposed & Overlooked

Invisible danger? Some NC communities live with higher pollution exposure risks.

BY ADAM WAGNER AND GAVIN OFF

UPDATED MAY 25, 2023 2:49 PM

This is “Tank Town.” Located four miles north of Charlotte Douglas International Airport, sit more than 100 petroleum tanks that supply the fuel to Charlotte and other cities. It complies with current state rules limiting air pollution.

Less than 1,000 feet away are homes. Many neighbors don't worry about air emissions. Others say it's time to look at how a mix of nearby pollution, including emissions from vehicles and a nearby airport, add up.

“Air doesn’t stand still,” said Sharrone Robinson, a nearby resident and CleanAire NC volunteer. “Air moves. It’s coming to your community, too.”

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Exposed and overlooked?

Some people in North Carolina live with more pollution exposures than others. Environmentalists say it's time for state regulators to work harder to protect them.

EXPAND ALL

From the west Charlotte street where Sharrone Robinson lives, it's impossible to tell that the neighborhood is flanked on three sides — four, when you consider the sky — by some of the biggest concentrations of air pollution sources in Mecklenburg County.

A mile north is "Tank Town," block after block of 100 massive white or green petroleum tanks that house the fuel that keeps Charlotte, its airport and other cities running.

Two miles east is Interstate 85, where 100,000 vehicles a day whiz along eight lanes of traffic, according to the N.C. Department of Transportation.

And three miles south lies Charlotte Douglas International Airport, which Airports Council International ranks fifth in the world in air traffic, with 1,400 incoming and outgoing flights per day as of 2021.

"These are great sources of pollution," said Robinson, a CleanAIRE NC volunteer who has an air quality monitor hanging on the side of her house. "These have cumulative impacts to human health and the environment."

Sharrone Robinson monitors the air quality of her west Charlotte neighborhood. Her community is flanked on three sides by clusters of pollution sources. JEFF SINER *jsiner@charlotteobserver.com*

But when the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality considers air, water or other permits to allow the release of limited pollution, it rarely assesses all of the other pollutants close by. Nor does it usually assess how adding a new pollution source could disproportionately burden people living in the area.

This is a common approach to environmental permitting. States like Maryland and New Jersey have recently passed rules requiring their regulators to consider the surroundings when deciding whether to grant permission to pollute, but they are in the minority.

Environmental justice advocates are pushing North Carolina regulators to consider these broader impacts, something Democratic Governor Roy Cooper's administration has, to a degree, tuned in to.

Most discussion here focuses on cumulative exposure risks in rural areas, especially on neighbors of industrial-sized pig and poultry farms. But plenty of people in urban corridors live near multiple sources of pollution too, a data analysis by The Charlotte Observer and The News & Observer revealed.

In addition to those exposures, people in and near cities are more likely to live with non-permitted exposure hazards, such as potentially harmful particles emitted by tailpipes on busy highways, jet engines landing at nearby airports or heavy machinery at construction sites.

And residents in some urban areas, Mecklenburg County included, live with higher risks than others across the nation of developing cancer from the air they breathe, EPA data shows.

“If we are prioritizing the health of our residents, then we need to be thinking about those burdens,” said Virginia Guidry, head of the state Occupational & Environmental Epidemiology Division.

A plane flies over a west Charlotte neighborhood as it leaves Charlotte Douglas International airport. The planes contribute to the area’s air pollution. JEFF SINER *jsiner@charlotteobserver.com*

REALITY OF POLLUTION CONTROL

Air and water permits are legally binding agreements. They specify required pollution control equipment at sites, the limited amounts of regulated pollution that

can be released there and how emissions will be monitored.

Some 4,000 largely urban sources of contamination, such as coal ash and Superfund sites, or industrial facilities that hold a permit to pollute, dot North Carolina, an analysis by the Charlotte Observer and The News & Observer found. In rural areas, there are another 2,500 permits for animal operations and 4,700 industrial-scale poultry farms that aren't inspected but are "deemed" permitted.

Ninety-eight of the state's 100 counties have a facility with a permit that allows it to release a limited amount of pollution into the air, data show. All 100 counties have a facility permitted to release pollutants into water. Many times, these are water or wastewater treatment plants. Mecklenburg County has the most sites holding a water permit with 43. Wake County has 29.

About 75 census tracts, areas the size of neighborhoods, have at least two polluters per square mile, the newspapers' analysis found. Combined, those tracts are home to more than 200,000 people.

These operate legally under state law. But their combined potential risks are, for the most part, invisible to regulators and people living nearby.

"To look at permits in isolation – as if this is the only facility that is going to be impacting the community – literally ignores all the impacts in that community that are already existing and the particularities of that community," Jasmine Washington, a Southern Environmental Law Center attorney, said.

FOR EXAMPLE, DRIVE ALONG I-85

Interstate 85 connects North Carolina's two most populated urban centers — the Charlotte area and the Triangle. Along the highway are industrial neighborhoods packed with sites permitted to release contaminants into the air and water.

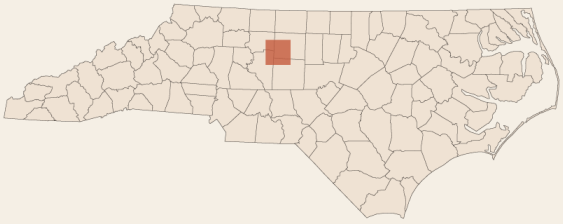
Here are a few examples, traveling south to north.

- A neighborhood around Robinson's home, between Brookshire Boulevard and Freedom Drive, has seven facilities permitted to pollute the air and four that pollute the water. Other permit holders sit just outside her community.
- North on I-85, a High Point neighborhood hosts 13 facilities permitted to pollute the air, with seven allowed to release limited amounts of toxic chemicals, according to the EPA's Toxic Release Inventory.
- In Granville County, near the Virginia border, one neighborhood hosts three facilities permitted to pollute the air, one that pollutes the water, two Superfund sites and four sites that release toxic chemicals, the newspapers found.

Although the known health risks in these areas fall within the EPA's acceptable levels, residents of each area have a higher risk than most of the U.S. of breathing toxic air, inhaling particulate matter and living near hazardous waste, EPA data shows.

And each is home to a higher percentage of Black residents and people with lower median household income than the state average, according to the census. That's too often the case, say people working to address the disproportionate exposure to hazards by these populations in the U.S.

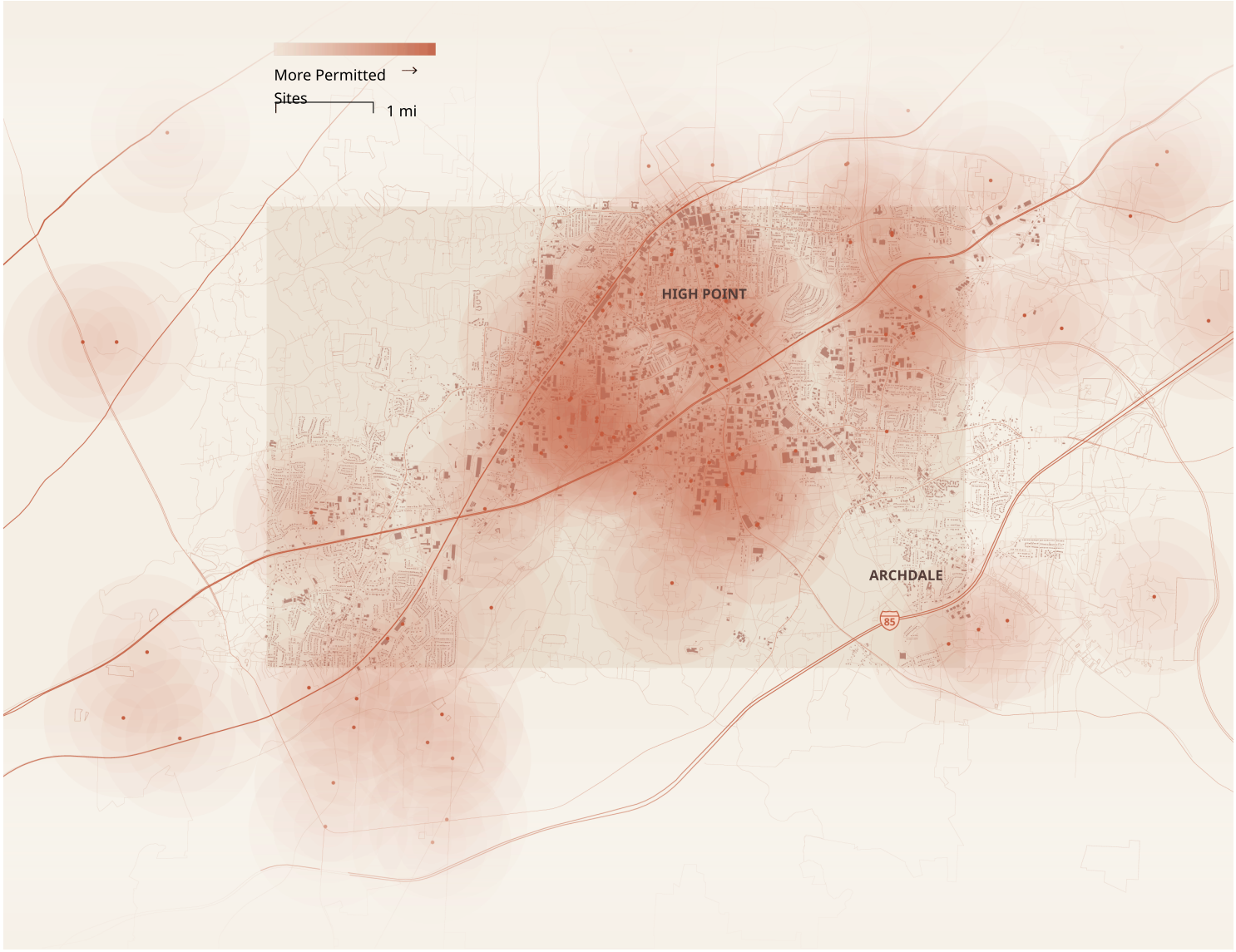
"Nobody wants to have their family being disproportionately burdened with so much pollution and having to suffer the health consequences of industry choosing the path of least resistance," Amanda Strawderman, environmental justice manager for CleanAIRE NC, a nonprofit based in Mecklenburg County, said.



TROUBLE SPOT IN HIGH POINT?

Southwest High Point has more toxic release permits than any other neighborhood in the state. This is a place where Thomas Built has manufactured buses for more than a hundred years, where AkzoNobel makes wood coatings and where Kao Specialties Americas manufactures several chemicals including a concrete additive and toner binder.

These maps show some of the most dense concentrations of air and water pollution permits granted by environmental regulators in North Carolina. Heavier shading shows closer proximity to more sources of pollution.



Denise and Johnny Horne's entire lives have unfurled around the Southside Recreation Center in High Point near that industrial cluster.

The meeting place and gymnasium sit next to the creek where Johnny swam as a boy, knowing enough to stay out when oil slicks floated downstream. Recent water testing by an N.C. State University professor found the presence of human waste in that same creek.

Where the Hornes first met more than five decades ago is now the yard of the recreation center. Some 900 feet to the south sits the community garden the Hornes have tended for about 20 years. It's one of the only sources of fresh vegetables in the Southside neighborhood, which the U.S. Department of Agriculture officially designates a food desert.

Johnny and Denise Horne walk along a greenway where a sharp burning plastic smell fills the air around an Innospec chemical factory in High Point. Travis Long *tlong@newsobserver.com*

But walk north on an adjacent greenway about 850 feet and expect to get walloped by a sharp odor that smells like burning plastic. Take a few more steps and the source becomes clear: Innospec, a chemical manufacturer tucked behind a nearby fence. This odor clings, which is why Denise Horne doesn't dry her laundry outside anymore.

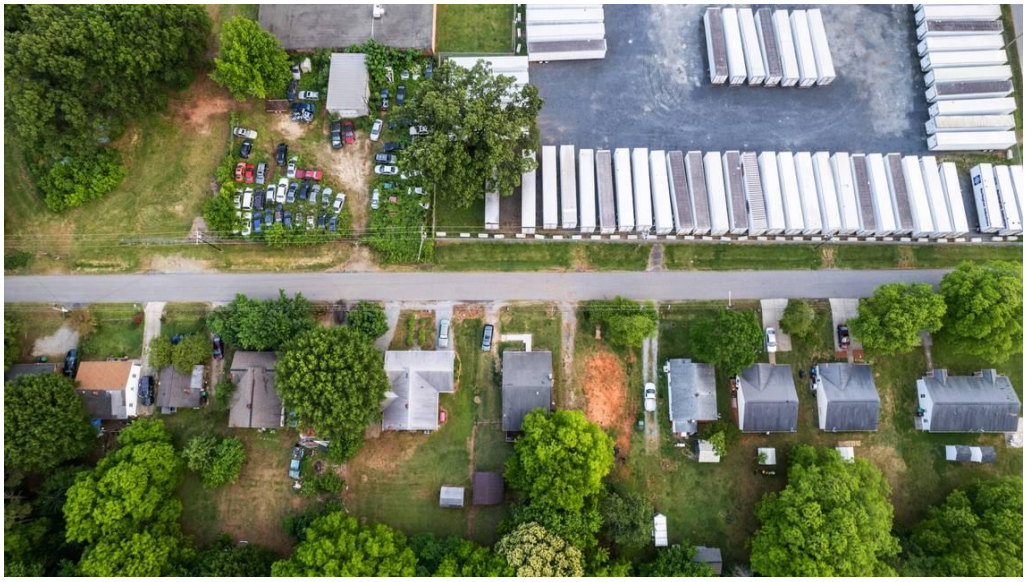
"It's like a real stale smell," Johnny Horne said.

The Hornes' house was among 70 on the south side where UNC-Greensboro researchers sampled the drinking water in 2017. It's one of 29 homes where tests detected chromium levels exceeding the EPA's drinking water standards.

Researchers also found elevated levels of mercury in five homes and lead in two houses.

Denise Horne has never trusted her drinking water. She's always preferred bottled water to what comes out of the tap, which she sometimes boils before cooking with it.

"Sometimes you can turn the faucet on and smell a smell coming from the water," she said.



Residential homes sit yards away from chemical factories and industrial plants in High Point. Southwest High Point has more toxic release permits than any other neighborhood in the state. Travis Long *tlong@newsobserver.com*

All of what the Hornes live with, the lack of a local grocery store and the existing pollution, is important to consider when assessing cumulative impacts, experts say. That's because they can shape whether an area's residents are more likely to suffer health effects from any added environmental pollution.

Tony Collins, the former president of the Southside Neighborhood Association, doesn't oppose having job-supplying factories nearby. But he also wants to know if they have any negative impacts.

Ideally, he said, researchers would be able to access more funding to figure out if anything is in the air residents are breathing and the water they are drinking. Anything those researchers find would need to be shared with the community, added Collins, who also co-chairs the board of the non-profit Southwest Renewal Foundation.

"It persists," Collins said of pollution. "There are a lot of questions."

Tony Collins, the former president of the Southside Neighborhood Association in High Point, doesn't oppose having job-supplying factories nearby. But he also wants to know if they have any negative impacts on the surrounding residential areas. Travis Long *tlong@newsobserver.com*

A PUSH FOR CHANGE NATIONALLY, IN NC

The federal government has long been aware of cumulative risks from pollution and is paying increased attention to the threat under EPA Administrator Michael Regan, who was North Carolina's chief environmental regulator from 2017 to early 2021.

The agency defines cumulative impacts as the total exposure to either chemical or nonchemical “stressors” that could impact health, quality of life or well-being in a late 2022 research planning document. Those stressors can include exposures to air and water pollution, but also things like proximity to a highway or limited access to healthcare.

The agency has pledged to spend more on measuring cumulative impacts between 2022 and 2026. It has also released updated guidance about how it and states that grant permits could consider the multiple exposures to pollution.

An aerial view of an Akko Nobel, foreground, and Kao Specialties Americas factory, background, in High Point, NC. Southwest High Point has more toxic release permits than any other neighborhood in the state. Travis Long *tlong@newsobserver.com*

In 2022, Cooper signed Executive Order 246 requiring state agencies to appoint a point person for environmental justice efforts, to provide more information to the public about ways they have contributed to disproportionate impacts and how they could reduce them.

Cooper pledged to “identify and prioritize” additional concerns about the uneven impacts of pollution, including cumulative impacts.

There’s one problem, experts say.

Without the cooperation of a Republican-controlled General Assembly, Cooper administration officials argue, the governor cannot mandate that DEQ weigh the risk of cumulative impacts when making permitting decisions.

Regulators are required to grant permits that meet certain criteria, even if they add to existing burdens, said Peter Ledford, Cooper's clean energy director.

"DEQ's hands are bound by the laws that are adopted by the General Assembly. Many of these laws provide DEQ with very little latitude. DEQ must issue permits under most circumstances, and that is keeping DEQ from being able to evaluate the cumulative impacts," Ledford said.

Some environmental attorneys in North Carolina disagree with DEQ's interpretation of permitting laws, arguing they give the agency much more power than it's willing to exercise to consider the full scope of cumulative impacts.

Since gaining control of the General Assembly more than a decade ago, Republicans have cut positions at DEQ and sought to decrease regulatory burdens.

A pair of bills introduced by Democratic lawmakers in the House this session that would explicitly require DEQ to consider cumulative impacts have languished in that chamber. Those bills are unlikely to become law this session, said Rep. Frank Iler, a Brunswick County Republican who co-chairs the House Environment Committee.

It is "worrying" that the bills seemed to echo the Democratic Party's environment justice stance and that their passage could make it too easy for agencies like DEQ to deny permits, he said of the proposed legislation. "It's already difficult to get permitted in some cases — which is not a bad thing, which can be good — but this would add more layers of bureaucracy and difficulty on the lines of trying to develop different areas," Iler said. Sen.

Brent Jackson, who co-chairs the Senate Agriculture, Energy and Natural Resources Committee, declined this week to comment on the push for the state to consider cumulative impacts. Jackson, a Sampson County Republican, said a reporter's question was the first he'd heard of the concept.

MORE PROTECTIONS ELSEWHERE

New Jersey and New York have both passed laws within the past year requiring environmental officials to consider how communities are already bearing the burden of pollution when evaluating whether to approve new permits.

The New Jersey rule requires environmental regulators to deny a permit if it would worsen already disproportionate impacts from pollution when compared to the rest of the state. Facilities must decrease those burdens or risk not receiving permits.

By comparison, North Carolina regulators can consider limited types of nearby pollution in only some cases.

DEQ's water discharge permits, for example, must weigh whether a new discharge will cause pollution levels downstream to rise above state limits set to protect drinking water.

And facilities that want to emit at least 10 tons of a single chemical or 25 total tons of chemicals the EPA says are hazardous annually trigger an analysis of how they will impact nearby air quality only. That's done to make sure what's proposed won't increase pollution above national air quality standards, what the EPA calls "a limited form of a cumulative impacts analysis."

The kind of analysis environmental groups are seeking would account for more sources while also accounting for the disproportionate exposures to pollution, said Blakely Hildebrand, a Southern Environmental Law Center senior attorney.

The only time North Carolina regulators have explicit power to deny permits based on such a cumulative impact assessment is for solid waste facilities like landfills, a requirement of a 2007 state law.

The DEQ declined several requests to interview Elizabeth Biser, the agency's secretary, on this topic. The agency complies with civil rights laws despite the department's stance that it is unable to deny most permits on the basis of cumulative impact analyses, DEQ spokeswoman Sharon Martin wrote in an email response to questions.

Pallets and liquid containers are piled high at Innospec, a chemical specialty company factory, adjacent to in High Point's Southside neighborhood. Travis Long *tlong@newsobserver.com*

STATE HEALTH OFFICIALS SPOTLIGHT RISKS

State health officials don't grant environmental permits. But they do track data that measures some health effects associated with pollution across North Carolina.

Responding to requests by community groups, the state's Occupational & Environmental Epidemiology Division is creating a website to share how exposure to multiple pollutants is impacting health, Guidry said.

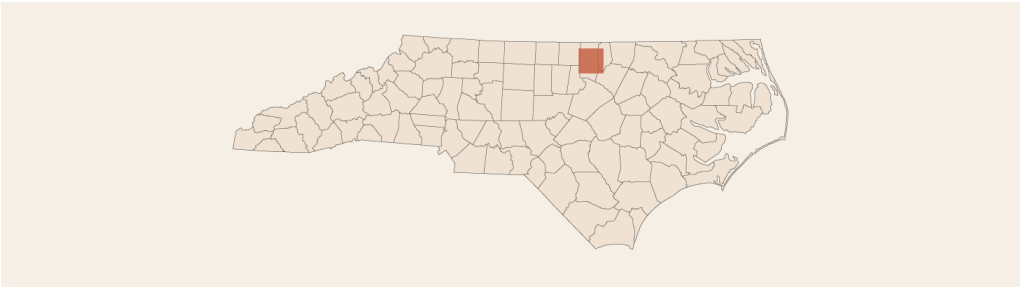
DHHS officials hope users will be able to zoom in on their address and see what sources of pollution are nearby. Another dashboard the agency is developing allows people to see county-level information about health conditions like rates of asthma and cancer and environmental data like toxic releases or days with high ozone levels.

> There is more and more research all the time showing the health impacts from the cumulative burdens on communities in North Carolina and elsewhere.
>
> Virginia Guidry, Head of the State Occupational & Environmental Epidemiology Division

The goal, Guidry said, is to merge environmental health concern data with demographic information to identify communities suffering from cumulative impacts. The new tools could help local residents and governments shape permitting and zoning decisions.

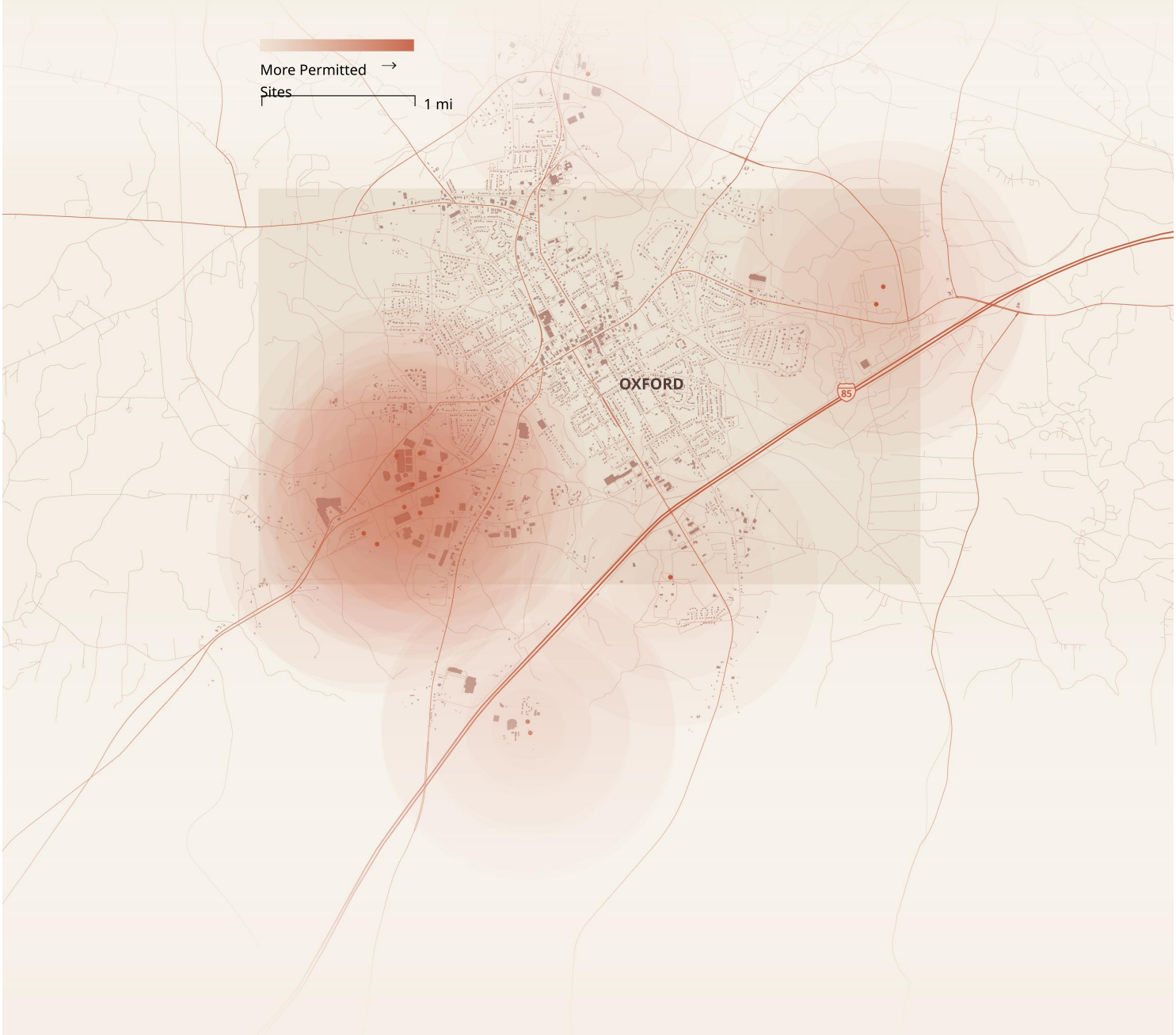
The department, along with the NC Environmental Justice Network and the NC Conservation Network, is working with as many as 10 counties to include a chapter on cumulative impacts in their community health assessments — reports created every four years that investigate effects on residents' health.

"It will provide more of a lens on issues of inequity within specific communities that may have been underserved up to this point," said Joe Bowman, an emergency preparedness and environmental health nurse consultant.



EMBRACING INDUSTRY, JOBS

Even on the fringes of urban areas, families live near multiple sites granted permission to emit regulated pollutants into the air and water.



On the southwestern corner of Oxford, Industry Drive offers close proximity to Interstate 85 for a cluster of low-slung factories. Zippers are made at one, tread rubber for tires at another and roof shingles at yet another.

State regulators have issued more toxic release permits in this census tract than any other in the Triangle region. The surrounding area also hosts two Superfund sites, a lingering reminder of how manufacturing can have long-standing repercussions.

Superfund sites are places that the EPA finds to have been contaminated with hazardous waste. The pair of Superfund sites on Oxford's Industry Drive include Cristex Drum, a former textile mill where chemicals used to dye nylon yarns contaminated groundwater and soil, as well as a former antenna manufacturer where sludge that was used to treat metal was dumped into an on-site lagoon causing groundwater and soil contamination.

JFD Electronics, a manufacturer of antennas and amplifiers once operated at this now empty site at 620 West Industry Drive in Oxford. Robert Willett *rwillett@newsobserver.com*

A quiet neighborhood sits less than half a mile away from Industry Drive, a collection of ranch and split-level homes are set back on large lots. Most every yard was well trimmed and children rode their bikes freely from house to house on a spring afternoon.

Larry Ramsey moved to the Oxford neighborhood about 50 years ago. He spent decades working at different plants up and down Industry Drive.

Like many of his neighbors, Ramsey has never given the factories' proximity to home a second thought.

"If they've had problems with pollution or anything like that, I haven't heard it," Ramsey said.

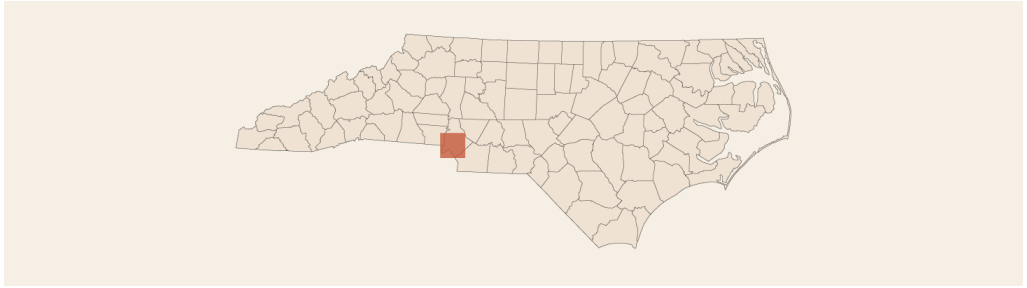
An array of locks secures the fencing around the former JFD Electronics site, a manufacturer of antennas and amplifiers, at 620 West Industry Drive in Oxford. Robert Willett *rwillett@newsobserver.com*

But at least one neighbor is wary of how close they live to an industrial area. Chekesha Jones has lived on East Dale Drive for about 16 years.

Even though her drinking water comes from the city, Jones worries about what is in it.

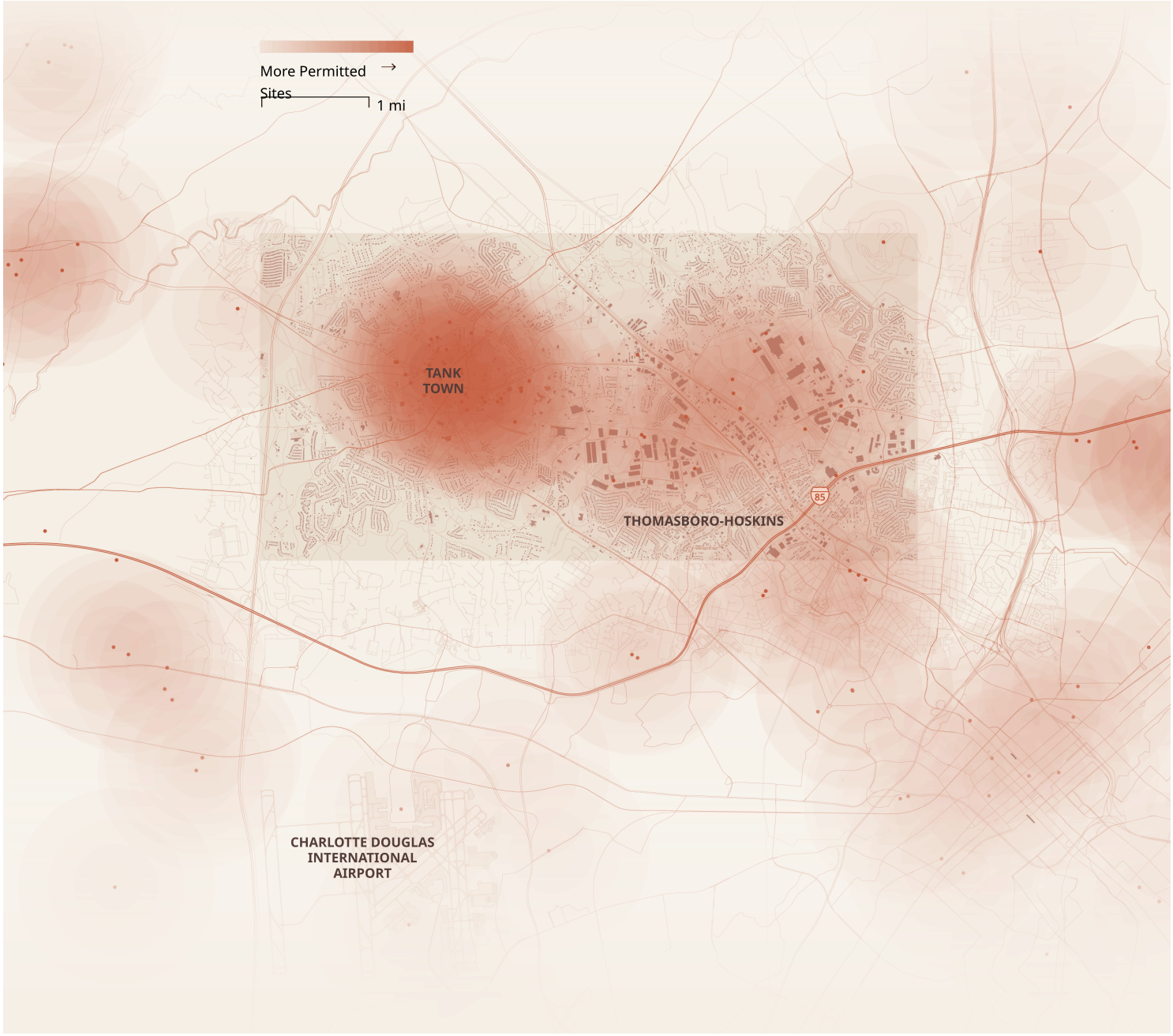
In that entire time, she has not touched the water that comes out of her taps. She reluctantly uses it to brush her teeth.

Asked why, Jones said: “All the factories.”



A LEGACY BUILT OVER YEARS

Clusters of permitted facilities emerge over years. “Tank Town” and the Charlotte airport have been there longer than some residents living around them can remember.



As the years went on, the tank farm grew and other industries, such as a wood manufacturer and concrete supplier, got permits of their own. Many of the air permits active there have histories that date back decades.

The tanks hold ethanol and petroleum and sit near hangers that pump fuel into trucks. These and other operations are permitted to release limited amounts of regulated pollutants that most people are unfamiliar with, including benzene and xylene.

A tanker truck leaves the tank farm near Mount Holly Road in Charlotte. The farm is home to a number of air permits. JEFF SINER *jsiner@charlotteobserver.com*

Robinson, the CleanAIRE NC volunteer, lives among some of the densest clusters of potential air and water contamination in Mecklenburg County, according to the Charlotte Observer and News & Observer analysis.

In the few miles between the airport and “Tank Town,” are more than 20 sites with a permit to discharge pollutants into the air or water or sites that the federal government has labeled as contaminated.

The EPA’s environmental justice screening tool shows residents in the west Charlotte area live with higher risks than others across the nation of developing cancer from the air they breathe, though that risk falls within levels the EPA deems acceptable.

“Why should we continue to overburden communities that already have the pollution and poor health outcomes,” asked Kirsten Minor, health manager at CleanAire NC.

Charlotte resident Sharrone Robinson volunteered to monitor the area's air quality.

One permit holder in "Tank Town" is Colonial Pipeline. In an email response to questions about the push for considering all nearby exposures before granting permits, a spokesperson stressed that Colonial complies with all regulatory requirements, including cumulative impact reviews in some states.

"Any changes in permitting policy should be aimed at maintaining a fair and consistent approach that ensures we can continue safely and reliably serving the nation's energy needs while meeting or exceeding all regulatory requirements," the statement read.

The air around "Tank Town," and all of Mecklenburg County, for that matter, meet EPA standards, stressed Megan Green, the county's air quality program manager.

In fact, the county's air quality has improved dramatically in recent decades, Green said, thanks in part to tougher standards on vehicle and smokestack emissions and the county's grant program to replace old diesel engines.

> Why should we continue to overburden communities that already have the pollution and poor health outcomes?
>
> Kirsten Minor, Health Manager at CleanAire NC

The number of "good" air quality days jumped from 111 in 2007 to 270 in 2022, county records show. Good days, affected by the weather and amount of pollution, mean no negative health impacts are expected from the quality of the air.

Perhaps that's why most of the people who live near "Tank Town" or under the rumbling engines of the airplanes who agreed to speak with a reporter said they don't mind the industries.

"These people operate in a way that is reasonable for the environment and does not create issues and hazards for the people who live out here," said Chad Derrick, 52, who lives less than a mile from the petroleum tanks.

But every now and then, residents get reminded that this place is different.

A half mile from a dozen tanks is Thrift Baptist Church, where Gene Lathan has been the pastor for more than two decades. For years, he stored his RV nearby off Wilkinson Boulevard, under a common flight path for planes going in and out of Charlotte.

Lathan never questioned the air quality there, he said. But on a trip to Myrtle Beach in 2019, a worker was cleaning the roof of Lathan's RV when he asked the pastor if he lived near an airport.

Lathan wondered: How did he know that?

The man said any time he's seen an RV with so much soot caked onto its roof, the owner kept the vehicle near an airport.

"Something turned my roof black," Lathan said. "If it can do that to your roof, certainly there's a concern about breathing it."

SOURCES

Data: The Charlotte Observer and The News & Observer analysis; EPA; NC DEQ; Mecklenburg, Forsyth and Bumcombe counties | Maps: OpenStreetMap; Google Earth

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Adam Wagner covers climate change and other environmental issues in North Carolina. His work is produced with financial support from 1Earth Fund, in partnership with Journalism Funding Partners, as

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Gavin Off has been the Charlotte Observer's data reporter since 2011. Previously, he worked as a data reporter at the Tulsa World and at Scripps Howard News Service in Washington, D.C.

part of an independent journalism fellowship program. Wagner's previous work at The News & Observer included coverage of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout and North Carolina's recovery from recent hurricanes. He previously worked at the Wilmington StarNews.

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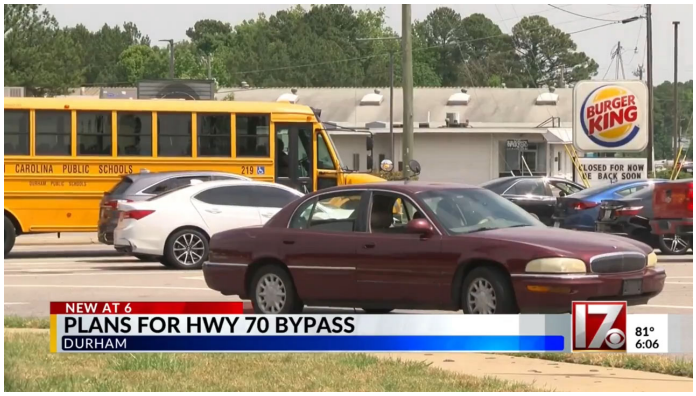

DURHAM COUNTY NEWS

'A traffic jam': State and local leaders mull over plan to convert miles of U.S. 70 in Durham County to freeway

by: Ben Bokun
Posted: May 23, 2023 / 04:36 AM EDT
Updated: May 23, 2023 / 01:10 PM EDT

SHARE

DURHAM, N.C. (WNCN) — About four miles of U.S. 70 in Durham County could be converted into a limited-access freeway.

Herman Sperling lives near the thoroughfare and is no stranger to traffic congestion issues.

"When I take my granddaughter home into downtown Durham, I'm stuck in a traffic jam that's backed up for miles," said Sperling, a Leesville Road Coalition co-founder.

ADVERTISING

With the project in the works for several years, a community meeting on Monday night with the NCDOT and Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrborro Metropolitan Planning Organization aimed to clarify the plan's status. The event was hosted by the Leesville Road Coalition.

"When I see a traffic jam coming to Durham, it is likely that I'm going to go to do my shopping at restaurants and what not in Raleigh," Sperling said.

Preliminary plans from the NCDOT indicate the portion of U.S. 70 from west of Lynn Road to east of Page Road Extension could be converted to six lanes. An interchange would sit at South Miami Boulevard.

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DCHC MPO Executive Director Doug Plachcinski told CBS 17 studies prove there could be better alternatives to a freeway, such as a boulevard, that include more walkable and bikeable options. Plachcinski said the ultimate goal is to alleviate traffic, provide safety and reduce vehicle

In collaboration on the project, the NCDOT and DCHC MPO are set to hold additional outreach meetings with the public. The next input session takes place in June.

Sperling hopes the traffic is indeed alleviated.

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"[Living nearby] started us off with looking for appropriate infrastructure to support all the people that want to move into our area who we welcome," he said.

NCDOT Division Engineer Brandon Jones tells CBS 17 the plans are in the preliminary stages and there is no set timeline. But the freeway project is currently being reprioritized and funding is not yet confirmed.

The DCHC MPO will give a presentation regarding its final plan in the fall.

City council members Javiera Caballero, Leonardo Williams, Monique Holsey-Hyman and Mark-Anthony Middleton made an appearance at Monday night's meeting in Carolina Arbors, along with Senator Mike Woodard (D-Durham), and Representative Zack Hawkins (D-Durham).

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Community members at the meeting brought up concerns about coordinating more public transportation options. Some said there's no need to make U.S. 70 bike friendly.

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