

January 15, 2025

Dear Mayor Parker and City Council:

Philadelphia's Sanitation Department is currently considering new contracts for where our city's trash will go for the next seven years. We write to urge you to instruct the Sanitation Department NOT to award any contracts for burning our trash.

Burning trash and landfilling toxic ash is the most expensive and polluting way to manage waste or to make energy. It's dirtier than coal power plants and is more polluting than landfilling our waste directly without burning it first. For every 100 tons burned, 30 tons end up as toxic ash that still is dumped in landfills, making landfills smaller, but more toxic. The other 70 tons come out of incinerator smokestacks, contributing to air pollution and related health problems.

Since 2019, under our current contracts with Covanta and Waste Management, 39% of the city's trash has been sent to incinerators; the rest to landfills. In 2024, it was just under 37%. All three Pennsylvania incinerators we use – in Delaware, Montgomery, and Bucks Counties – are among the top five industrial air polluters in the five-county Philadelphia area. The top air polluter is the one in Chester, which accepts the lion's share of the trash our city burns.

We are concerned about this incineration contract for several reasons:

Health: the three incinerators surrounding Philadelphia are among the region's four largest emitters of nitrogen oxide (NOx) pollution which triggers asthma attacks. Asthma is a leading cause of missed school and work days, and is a serious problem for our city. Philadelphia is the 4th worst place in the nation for asthma sufferers, according to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America.

Pollution: these incinerators are the leading air pollution sources of toxic mercury, hydrochloric acid, and many other toxic pollutants that contribute to cancers, birth defects, immune system problems, and much more. A comprehensive life cycle assessment conducted for Delaware County showed that burning trash at the incinerator in Chester is 69% worse than landfilling for the climate, and 23 times more harmful for human health and other environmental impacts.

Civil Rights: the largest recipient of our trash has been the incinerator in the City of Chester in Delaware County. It's the nation's largest trash incinerator, in a city known as one of the nation's worst cases of environmental racism. It's a violation of the Civil Rights Act for our city, as a recipient of federal funds, to take actions that have a discriminatory effect on protected classes.

Chester's situation is particularly dire, as it is the #1 air polluter in the region. Chester has a childhood asthma hospitalization rate three times the state average. In Philadelphia, we're downwind, and this pollution affects our children as well.

As the mayor whose mission is to make Philadelphia the "cleanest, greenest big city in the

nation,” we urge you to instruct your Sanitation Department to commit to incinerator-free waste contracts.

It’s important to recognize, as the city strives for Zero Waste, that Zero Waste is defined internationally to mean zero incineration, and to strive for at least a 90% reduction of waste going to landfills. As other cities and counties have moved away from incineration, we hope you’ll guide Philadelphia in the same direction, for the health and benefit of us all.

Sincerely,

Mike Ewall, Esq.  
Executive Director, Energy Justice Network

B. Preston Lyles, Sr., M.S. Higher Ed. Leadership, M.Div.  
Organizer, Delco Environmental Justice

215 People's Alliance  
API PA  
Asian Americans United  
Beyond Plastics  
Circular Philadelphia  
Clean Air Council  
ECHO Systems  
Every Mother is a Working Mother Network  
Fridays For Future Philadelphia  
Global Women's Strike – US  
Havertown-Area Community Action Network (H-CAN)  
Make the Road Pennsylvania  
McKean County Green Party  
Move Past Plastic  
One Pennsylvania  
Payday Men's Network - US  
Peace, Justice, Sustainability, NOW!  
Pennsylvania Audubon Council  
Philly Neighborhood Networks  
Philly Thrive  
Physicians for Social Responsibility PA  
POWER Interfaith  
Reclaim Philadelphia  
Save our Susquehanna  
Sierra Club Southeastern PA Group  
Sustainable Business Network of Greater Philadelphia  
Toxic Prisons Campaign of the Human Rights Coalition  
Women of Color in Global Women’s Strike  
Zero Waste Strategies LLC  
Zero Waste USA