

From Struggle to Solutions: The People's Call for Environmental Justice in Pennsylvania

A synthesis of central themes and action items from the People's Hearing in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, prepared by the Tishman Environment and Design Center at The New School.

Introduction

Communities across Pennsylvania (PA) have faced decades of environmental injustice driven by industrial development and extractive industries. Throughout the twentieth century, steel production and coal mining dominated much of the state, followed by the rapid expansion of oil and natural gas fracking in the early 2000s. As a result, legacy pollution and continued exposure to harmful contaminants have put residents' health and safety at risk, with Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and low-wealth communities (particularly rural communities in western PA) bearing a disproportionate share of pollution and environmental health burdens.

To give voice to these injustices and build a more equitable vision of the future, the third convening of the Speak Easy, Speak Free People's Hearing was held on November 21-22, 2025, in Pittsburgh, PA. Organized by the People's Environmental Justice Advisory Council (PEJAC), 412 Justice, Black Appalachian Coalition, Mountain Watershed Association, Center for Coalfield Justice, RiverWise, and New Sun Rising, the event brought together 170 environmental justice (EJ) organizers, social justice activists, frontline residents, and members of Tribal nations to share testimony, document ongoing environmental injustices, and uplift community-led solutions. Over the course of two days, 49 attendees provided public testimony, while Pennsylvania-based environmental justice organizations staffed tables outside the main room to connect, share educational materials, highlight ongoing advocacy efforts, and coordinate state-based climate action. Three public testimony sessions were interspersed with artistic and cultural performances, as well as remarks from elected officials. With local, state, and federal representatives seated among EJ leaders and frontline residents, the hearing laid the groundwork for policy solutions that center the health, dignity, and resilience of local communities. Throughout the event, graphic notetaker Yen Azzaro translated the testimony into vivid visual summaries that distilled the main issues, themes, and solutions; her illustrations appear at the end of this synthesis.

Community Testimonies

As with previous hearings, the testimonies of residents spanned an array of topics and priority issue areas, such as the effects of cumulative industrial burdens, air and water quality, public health and safety, housing and economic justice, as well as community preparedness and emergency response. However, across the three public testimony sessions, residents repeatedly pointed to fracking as a major source of community health concerns, land destabilization, chronic noise pollution, and environmental contamination. Janet and Randy Denman from the Center for Coalfield Justice described the changes they experienced after 14 gas wells and pumping stations were stationed around their home. They recounted, "We lie in bed at night, and we can hear them fracking...We have things falling off our walls...our house has a continuous humming noise...We've had people come to our house, and they could stand in our living room, and you can feel your feet moving." Other testifiers emphasized the need for transparency around the chemicals used in fracking fluid and warned about the dangers of exposure to radioactive waste generated by the fracking process, noting that the waste is sometimes used as a road de-icer or discharged into local waterways.

Many residents also described rare cancers and other severe health effects, including headaches, nausea, nosebleeds, skin rashes, and declines in mental health, either experienced by themselves, their family members, or people in their community when living near well pads, attributing these health effects to exposure to polluted water and air from fracking activities. Sarah Sweeney from the Center for Coalfield



Justice emphasized the prevalence of rare cancers in her community. She explained, “I hear again and again and again and again about cancer. And I’m talking almost every week. Someone new. Supposedly rare cancers. Affected not only the elderly, but the most precious among us, our children. And I have to wonder every day, is my child going to be the next one?”

In addition to fracking, several testifiers asserted that the legacy pollution left by the steel and coal industries still impacts communities today, even though coal mining and steel production have declined in recent decades. Active facilities continue to pollute the air and water, affecting the public health and safety of nearby communities. Pamela Lee from 412 Justice shared that she “was born and raised as a child in the North Braddock area, [and] returned as a young adult to raise [her] children there because it was home.” She recalled, “Seeing the dirty ash and the dirty dust on top of my car in the morning was more than a warning sign of pollution [from the Edgar Thomas Works steel mill].” She also described how her son was “diagnosed with asthma, ADHD, PPD, perspective pervasive development, and autism, all due to the pollution I was inhaling while pregnant,” illustrating the health impacts families continue to face from industrial pollution.

Some attendees also highlighted critical connections between housing and environmental and climate justice, and how access to affordable housing can provide protection from climate disasters, while building community resilience. Brittany Smalls from Black Voters Matter explained, “A family that is constantly moving, couch surfing, or being pushed from one temporary situation to another cannot prepare for or recover from climate impacts. Stable housing is climate resilience. It is community resilience, and it is essential for any just transitions we hope to build.” However, she also noted the steep barriers to accessing affordable housing, such as discriminatory screening processes and credit scoring systems that routinely shut people out. Echoing these concerns, Angel Gober from 412 Justice suggested, “We need mandatory inclusionary housing zoning so greedy developers can stop hijacking our communities and telling us we aren’t white or rich enough to live among them.” Other testifiers raised concerns around the resilience of older housing, citing mold growth after flooding events that cause breathing problems and skin conditions, old lead service lines that increase the risk of lead exposure in drinking water, and poor indoor air quality caused by drafty homes in areas with high outdoor air pollution. To address these concerns, attendees called for increased investment in affordable housing and indoor air filtration systems, as well as stronger tenant and homeowner rights.

Several testimonies called attention to vulnerable populations to environmental injustice and climate disasters, such as those who are incarcerated or people with disabilities. They stressed the need to include them in policy decisions around climate mitigation, adaptation, and planning. Em Hough from the Mountain Watershed Association explained that “people with disabilities are two to four times more likely to die in climate emergencies,” emphasizing the importance of planning for environmental and climate disasters with accessibility in mind, from accounting for pollution sensitivities to designing emergency warnings, responses, and complex medical care during disasters. Sharron Boddy-Adedipe from Mothers of Incarcerated Sons highlighted similar concerns regarding the disproportionate vulnerabilities that incarcerated individuals face when it comes to climate and environmental injustices. She noted that many of those incarcerated are disproportionately exposed to air and water pollution, dangerous chemicals involved with prison industry labor, and extreme weather events. Once released, many people return to environmentally-burdened communities, compounding their health risks. Together, these testimonies underscore that environmental and climate justice efforts must be inclusive and fully address the needs of those most vulnerable.

Policy Demands and Pathways Forward

In addition to members of the PEJAC, PA elected officials, including Pittsburgh Mayor Ed Gainey, District 8 County Council Representative Michelle Naccarati-Chapkis, Philadelphia City Council member Kendra Brooks, and U.S. Congresswoman Summer Lee, attended the hearing to listen directly to residents’ testimonies. In his



opening remarks, Mayor Gainey underscored the importance of the People's Hearing and the power of community-driven solutions, reminding attendees that "Everything that's ever changed in America... started at the bottom. One brick at a time." He affirmed, "Together, we can lay the groundwork for people to lead [the way] to cleaner air, to lead to healthier neighborhoods, and to lead to more vibrant and equitable communities. We have to do that. No one knows better than Black and Brown neighborhoods the impact of environmental justice... [and] they're not going to know until we get in here and start teaching."

In the testimonies that followed, participants offered clear, actionable policy solutions speaking directly to the local, state, and federal officials. Residents called for stronger ratepayer and homeowner protections for the extractive and resource-intensive infrastructure, such as fracking pads and data centers, that have moved into their communities, driving up utility costs and lowering property values. They emphasized the need for greater industry accountability, including setback requirements, such as a 2,500-foot setback requirement that was recently adopted by a local town. They also called for community benefit agreements, cumulative impacts permitting policies, and stricter enforcement of pollution monitoring and transparency requirements. Additionally, some speakers called for increased investment in rural communities, particularly through renewable energy industries that create local jobs without polluting surrounding neighborhoods.

Members of Tribal nations reminded the elected officials that Pennsylvania has yet to formally recognize Indigenous peoples across the state. They urged the government to honor Tribal sovereignty, respect treaty rights, and uphold the principle of free, prior, and informed consent before approving industrial activity or data centers on Tribal lands. Non-Native testifiers also spoke to the need for increased public participation in decision-making, recommending the creation of EJ advisory boards to help shape local siting decisions. Across nearly every issue raised during the hearings, testifiers put forward concrete, actionable solutions, collectively outlining a clear roadmap for legislators to improve environmental, economic, and health outcomes in their communities.

Conclusion

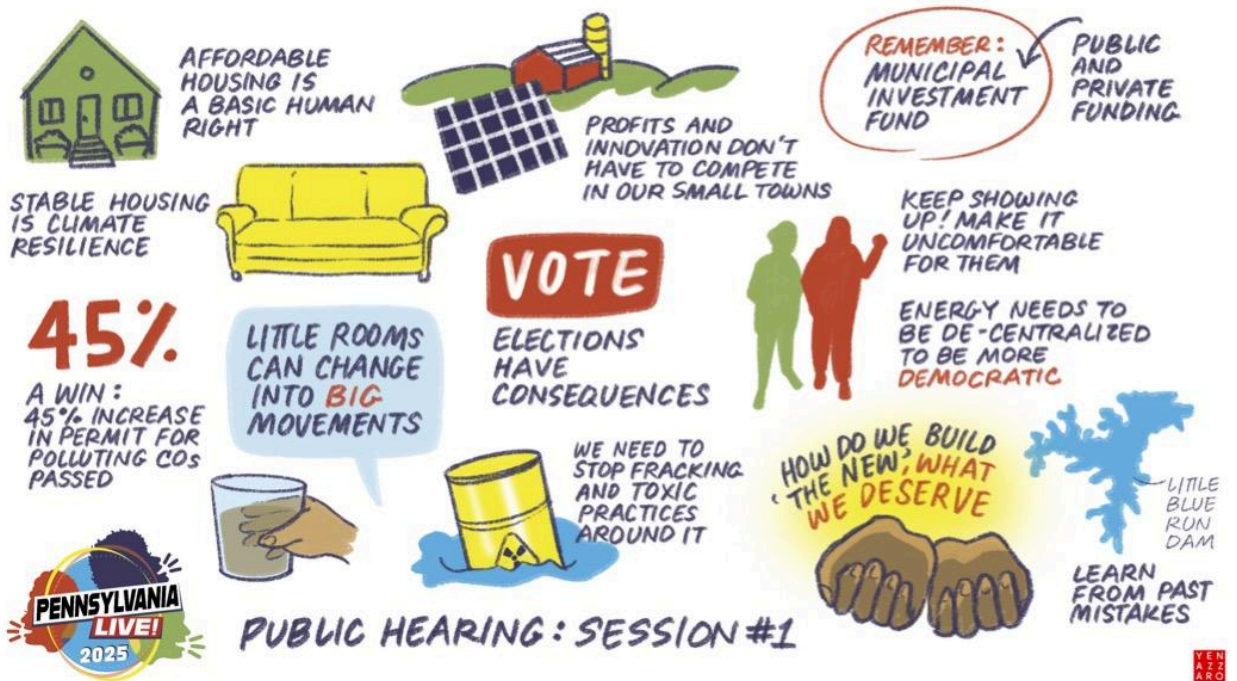
The People's Hearing in Pittsburgh was the third stop in an ongoing effort by members of the PEJAC, former members of the White House Environmental Justice Council (WHEJAC), to meet with frontline communities across the United States (U.S.), bear witness to the environmental injustices they face, and uplift community-led solutions. Following the People's Hearings in Greensboro, North Carolina, and Tucson, Arizona, members of the PEJAC reflected on the interconnected injustices they heard across regions. Anita Cunningham, a former WHEJAC member from North Carolina, observed, "the things that you guys are going through are some of the things that we heard that folks in Arizona [and North Carolina] are going through... And I'm encouraged that when we talk about [how] we want clean air, we want to be able to breathe, we want clean water, and we want our communities to be safe from all of these polluters... [I] have been in conversations where we're talking about regional collaborations because we're going through it where we are, as others are going through it, and we know that the power is with the people."

As the People's Hearings continue to amplify frontline voices and uplift community-driven solutions, these gatherings create opportunities to influence local policy while aligning EJ advocacy and calls to action across the country. With elected officials from local, state, and federal offices in attendance, communities are able to testify directly to their legislators, calling for concrete policy solutions that will address the environmental injustices they face. U.S. Congresswoman Summer Lee reflected on the impact of the hearings, noting, "Whether you're in Braddock, PA, or if you're in Louisiana, or if you're in West Baltimore, or if you're in Arizona, our stories, our lives are interconnected. They are linked. And too often, what industry, what government wants us to think is that what we're experiencing is something that is unique, that we're experiencing things in a bubble, in a silo. And real power is the reclamation of the understanding that we are all one body, that our power is in our collective."

Appendix: Graphic Note-Taking During the People's Hearing



Source: Yen Azzaro



Source: Yen Azzaro



Source: Yen Azzaro



Source: Yen Azzaro

OUR WORKING CLASS IS UNDER ATTACK. WE NEED:

- MORE PUBLIC SCHOOL FUNDING
- AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE
- SAFE, CLEAN WATER AND AIR

RECOGNIZE AND FIGHT FOR THE BLACK AND BROWN CHILDREN THAT LIVE WITH HIGHER LEAD LEVELS THAN WHITE CHILDREN

WE ARE *not* ALONE

WE ARE *not* ISOLATED

WHEN A CHILD HAS TO BE MORE CONCERNED ABOUT HER ENVIRONMENT THAN HER EDUCATION - THAT'S NOT RIGHT

FRAC-OUT: AN UNINTENTIONAL RETURN OF DRILLING FLUID TO THE SURFACE

LET'S BE ANGRY AND TEAR IT ALL DOWN

WHEN WILL WE BE GIVEN A CHOICE?

HOW OFTEN ARE WE BEING ASKED ABOUT OUR LIVING ENVIRONMENT AND BEING OFFERED PRE-EMPTIVE RESOURCES?

THESE ARE ILLEGAL KIDNAPPINGS

ILLNESS, CANCER, SYMPTOMS

4% HIGHER RATE

PENNSYLVANIA LIVE! 2025

PUBLIC HEARING: SESSION #3

Source: Yen Azzaro

WHEN CAN SAFE HOUSING BE AFFORDABLE?

1 IN 10 ATTICS DO NOT HAVE INSULATION

COLLABORATION WILL BE OUR MEDICINE

PUSHING THE GOV'T MUST BE DONE EVERYDAY

OUR POLLINATORS ARE DISAPPEARING

PENNSYLVANIA HAS NEVER RECOGNIZED INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

IMPROVEMENTS TO HOMES KEEPS COSTS LOW, POLLUTION OUT

DON'T FORGET ABOUT THE INDOOR POLLUTANTS

THE CONTINUED FIGHT FOR RENEWABLE ENERGY

WE MUST KEEP MOVING FORWARD...

RECOGNIZE THAT OUR LOCAL DECISIONS AFFECT GLOBAL CONSEQUENCES

SILENCE THE PLANES TO HEAR THE BIRDS

PENNSYLVANIA LIVE! 2025

PUBLIC HEARING: SESSION #3

Source: Yen Azzaro



Source: Yen Azzaro