

Free Your Voice: Protecting the Community of Curtis Bay against Air Pollution

Schoolchildren laugh as they run around the playground, climbing up ladders and sliding back down to the ground. It's a sunny day and the sky is blue, but in the distance, dark mountains rise up on the horizon casting a shadow over the playground. In fact, the mountains of Appalachia had been gutted and reconstituted in South Baltimore. What the kids did not notice is that these mountains were actually massive mounds of coal.

These mountains of coal are the focus of a growing movement called Free Your Voice, led by South Baltimore teenagers—young people of color who are spearheading a call for climate justice. Their opponent: the massive freight transportation company CSX, who recently transported over 8 million tons of coal from Appalachia through South Baltimore.

In 2021, the coal export terminal in the neighborhood of Curtis Bay in South Baltimore exploded, shattering windows, and causing damage throughout the community. Residents learned the explosion was caused by a buildup of methane in the coal piles, but no one came out to tell the community what was going on.

Recently, a [2023 report](#) confirmed that coal dust from the terminal had been polluting the community for decades. A month ago, in October 2024, CSX operations caused a dust storm that earned the terminal a notice of violation from the Maryland Department of the Environment.

“The dust blows from the massive coal piles and from the open cars of screeching trains and it settles on everything: plastering windows, coating water in children’s inflatable pools, and slipping into homes when doors swing open,” writes Melody Schreiber in a [2024 article](#) about health in Curtis Bay for the *Hopkins Bloomberg Public Health* magazine.

In the [2023 investigation](#) by the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE), it was shown that coal dust is present throughout Curtis Bay, and the community is overburdened by air pollution. However, CSX denies the black substance is coal. Instead, they argue that it’s diesel residue or other pollutants, going as far as to claim that it might even be soil or pollen. In response to the MDE investigation, CSX hired experts from environmental and scientific consultant groups such as RJ Lee Group, Trinity Consultants, and Gutteridge Haskins and Davey (GHD), who [concluded the findings](#) in the investigation were incomplete and misleading. The CSX review of the MDE investigation found no evidence to support the conclusion that coal particles from the terminal have a substantial impact on air quality in the Curtis Bay community, stating that they are “deeply committed to safe and environmentally sound operations at the Curtis Bay Piers facility.”

“It’s [coal dust] sucked into lungs, sending breathless children to the hospital,” continues Schreiber. “Residents have high rates of asthma, lung cancer, heart disease, and chronic lower respiratory disease, and their life expectancy is almost four years less than Baltimore’s average.” [According to the Baltimore City Health Department](#), the life expectancy in Curtis Bay is 69 years old, compared to 73 years for the rest of Baltimore. In addition, there is a 25% increased mortality rate in Curtis Bay compared to the rest of Baltimore.

The MDE has asked CSX to monitor pollution along the perimeter of the coal terminal, to which CSX shared a statement saying that the company is monitoring particulate matter, or tiny soot, around its property and will continue to invest resources into the facility to operate it in an environmentally friendly manner. However, the students of Free Your Voice are going beyond what the multibillion-dollar corporation is doing to monitor air pollution. They have spent their summers using sticky paper to gather dust samples from all over the neighborhood of Curtis Bay to prove that the soot is from coal, and to pinpoint which parts of the neighborhood are most affected.

These students are not on their own though, as scientists from Johns Hopkins University and Towson University are helping them do the work. The dust samples are also being sent to a scientist in California, who is using an electron microscope to compare the dust in Curtis Bay to samples from the coal piles at the terminal in South Baltimore to see if they match.

The goal of all of this is to get state regulators to deny the permit CSX needs to operate, or at least require the company to enclose all the coal or put water onto all of it so there is less dust blowing around the community. No matter what, the students of Free Your Voice want CSX to pay the community of Curtis Bay for the damage the corporation has caused.

However, this is not Free Your Voice's first time protecting Curtis Bay, as it is a youth-led movement that has been going on for over a decade. The first movement started at Benjamin Franklin High School in Curtis Bay by Shashawnda Campbell, a high school student at the time. She co-founded Free Your Voice in 2011. Their first fight was the proposal of the nation's largest waste incinerator less than a mile from Benjamin Franklin. Incinerators generate electricity by burning trash, but in the process, they release hundreds of pounds of mercury and lead each year, along with soot that infiltrates people's lungs and causes long-term health issues. In addition, the proposed incinerator would have added to traffic and exhaust fumes from the tailpipes of trucks carrying in the waste and carrying out the burned ash.

In 2013, the students of Free Your Voice, with the help of other local activists, got their hands on the contract that showed the Baltimore City school system was planning to purchase electricity from the incinerator. In protest, the students organized and took their opposition to the school board in the form of poetry and music:

*If the incinerator takes away a breath;
How many do we need until there is nothing that's left?
Until the smoke clogs up and we can't feel our chest.*

The students received a standing ovation from the board. They had convinced the school system to pull out of their contract. Other agencies that had planned to purchase energy from the project also pulled out, and the incinerator was never built. After the win, Free Your Voice grew, pulling in a new generation of South Baltimore teenagers.

However, the fight today is much harder than the fight against the waste incinerator. The fight is against a bigger, more entrenched opponent. Their fight is against CSX, an operation that is well established and holds a huge amount of political power in the U.S.

Baltimore City is in an unprecedented situation where there is Black leadership across the board, and they all acknowledge that what's happening in South Baltimore is "unjust and unfair," as Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott stated in a [2023 NPR article](#) about the Free Your Voice movement. According to the same article, Campbell does not know how to feel about Black politicians who know the problem but have not taken the steps needed to better protect the community's health.

"You are pathetic. You are worse than the people that haven't experienced it," Campbell said in an interview with NPR referring to Black politicians in Baltimore. "Because they can say, 'I've never seen that. I don't know what that's like,' But you know what it's like, you know what it's like. So, we shouldn't have to convince you. We shouldn't!"

Even if Free Your Voice is still having to fight against pollution, they are making it harder for the rest of Baltimore to ignore what's happening in Curtis Bay. They are winning over their neighbors, raising awareness about the dangers of coal dust, and slowly gaining political power. According to the NPR article, the constant stream of young people with new ideas is a big part of why Free Your Voice is still operating over a decade later. The baton keeps getting passed down generations, but taking on the baton also means taking on a burden.

National polls show that the people who are most concerned about climate change are people just like these kids, who live in neighborhoods that bear disproportionate pollution from the burning and transportation of fossil fuels, as opposed to middle-class white kids who so often end up being the face of youth environmental movements.

As for their fight against CSX, the students of Free Your Voice met with the MDE in September 2023 to share their findings about the coal dust. In the 2023 NPR article, Serena C. McIlwain, Maryland Secretary of the Environment, said the state's regulators and attorney general were exploring the ways to reduce coal pollution in South Baltimore. Eventually, CSX will likely get its new operating permit. But this time, it could include new protections or money for the people of South Baltimore.