



City of Berkeley ZERO WASTE COMMISSION Regular Meeting

Thursday, July 17, 2025 at 5:30 p.m.
City of Berkeley Corporation Yard (Ratcliff Building, Willow Room)
1326 Allston Way, Berkeley, CA, 94702

MEETING AGENDA

PRELIMINARY MATTERS:

- 5:30 pm 1. Call to Order by Chair and Roll Call by Secretary
- **Steven Sherman**, appointed by CM Rashi Kesarwani, District 1
 - **Christienne de Tournay (Chair)**, appointed by CM Shoshana O'Keefe, District 5
 - **VACANT**, appointed by Mayor Adena Ishii
 - **Layla Dargahi (Vice Chair)**, appointed by CM Terry Taplin, District 2
 - **Dennis Uyat**, appointed by CM Ben Bartlett, District 3
 - **Philip Monrad**, appointed by CM Igor Tregub, District 4
 - **Sandra Curtis**, appointed by CM Brent Blackaby, District 6
 - **Swasti Johri**, appointed by CM Cecilia Lunaparra, District 7
 - **Barun Singh**, appointed by CM Mark Humbert, District 8
- 5:35 pm 2. Approve Meeting Agenda and Order of Agenda Items
- 5:40 pm 3. Approve Draft Action Minutes:
- June 19, 2025 Regular Meeting*
- 5:45 pm 4. Public Comment on Items Not on the Agenda
Speakers are allotted up to two minutes. Speakers may be allotted less time at the discretion of the Chair.
- 5:55 pm 5. Commissioner Announcements
Commissioners may make general announcements; no action will be taken.
- 6:00 pm 6. Staff Updates

DISCUSSION AND ACTION ITEMS:

Members of the public may provide comments at the end of each discussion item and prior to the vote of the Commission on any action items. Speakers are allotted up to 2 minutes.

- 6:15 pm 1. Presentation: Reusable Alameda Coalition Review and Race to ZW Best Practices for Events
- 6:45 pm 2. Change Space Allocation to Discussion
- 7:00 pm 3. Change Lease Subcommittee to Lease Portal Subcommittee

- 7:15 4. Report outs from the Special Events Subcommittee and Green Building Subcommittee
- 7:25 pm 5. Discuss Future Agenda Items
- 7:30 pm 6. Adjournment

INFORMATION ITEMS:

Information items may be moved to discussion but no action will be taken

COMMUNICATIONS:

Communications from the public are included as links or attachments in the agenda packet.

PowerPoint from Susan Collins, Container Recycling Institute presentation at the April 2025 meeting

***Indicates material included in the agenda packet**

**** Indicates material to be available at the meeting**



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Commission Secretary:

Julia A. Heath, Recycling Program Manager,
Zero Waste Division, 1201 Second St. Berkeley, CA 94710
510-981-6357
jheath@berkeleyca.gov

MINUTES

The meeting was convened at 5:30p.m. with presiding Layla Dargahi as Vice Chair.

ROLL CALL

Present: Steven Sherman, Dennis Uyat, Philip Monrad, Barun Singh, Sandra Curtis, Chrise de Tournay, Swasti Johri

LOA:

Absent:

STAFF PRESENT: Julia Heath

MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC PRESENT:

PUBLIC COMMENTS (on non-agenda items):

ACTION MINUTES:

- **Approval of the June 19, 2025 Regular Meeting Agenda**
Action Taken: M/S/C (Phillip/Barun) to approve the June 19, 2025 meeting agenda.
Ayes: Unanimous; Abstain: None; Absent: Layla Dargahi
- **Approval of the May 15, 2025 Regular Meeting Minutes**
Action Taken: M/S/C (Phillip/Barun) to approve the May 15, 2025 meeting minutes.
Ayes: Unanimous; Abstain: Chrise de Tournay; Absent: Layla Dargahi
- **Public Comment**
1 public comment. No Action Taken.
- **Commissioner Announcements**
Discussion only. No Action Taken.
- **Staff Updates**
Discussion only. No Action Taken.
Public Comment: 2
- **Informational Zero Waste Insert in City of Berkeley Residential Leases**
Discussion only. No Action Taken.
Public Comment: 0
- **Video: Petaluma Reusable Cup Program Review**
Discussion only. No Action Taken.
Public Comment: 0
- **Review Green Building Ordinance**
Action Taken: M/S/C (Chrise/Barun) to approve the Green Building Ordinance.

Ayes: Unanimous; Abstain: None; Absent: Layla Dargahi

- **Report out from the Special Events Subcommittee and Green Building Subcommittee**

Discussion only. No Action Taken.

Public Comment: 0

- **Discuss Future Agenda Items**

Public Comment: 0

- Vote on space allocation
- Vote to create lease sub-committee
- Vote to extend meeting

- **Adjournment at 7:34 p.m.**

M/S/C (Barun/Phillip) to adjourn the meeting.

Ayes: Unanimous; Abstain: None; Absent: Layla Dargahi

The next regular meeting of the Zero Waste Commission will be held on Thursday, July 24, 2025 at 5:30 p.m. in person at City of Berkeley Corporation Yard (Ratcliff Building, Willow Room) 1326 Allston Way, Berkeley.

Respectfully Submitted

Julia A. Heath, Secretary

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07.04.25 - 10:30AM

Berkeley's Path to Zero Waste

▶ LISTEN

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Berkeley is home to a number of innovative recycling and zero-waste programs that aim to divert waste from landfills. The city's Recycling Team works with residents, restaurants, schools, hospitals and more, to provide education and support businesses to comply with local, state, and national mandates.

Host and producer **Fiona McLeod** speaks with two members of Berkeley's recycling team on this episode of Terra Verde. Julia Heath and Bella Bertaud join the show to discuss how the city is working with local businesses and residents to implement its Zero Waste Strategic Plan, and the role we can play as individuals in reducing landfill waste and living more sustainably.

ADDRESS

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KPFA Delegates Assembly

Saturday, July 19, 2025

11:00 AM PT

Zoom link for meeting is posted on the agenda page for this meeting on KPFTX.org

POSTED THURSDAY, JULY 10, 2025

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[Neighborhoods](#) by [Fern Shen](#) 2:31 pm Nov 17, 2024 / 3

Good News: South Baltimore Community Land Trust cuts the ribbon on its first affordable home

Better known for their battles against polluters, Curtis Bay residents are also fighting for a safer, cleaner, more resilient community using a unique housing model that Baltimore leaders now say they endorse

Above: Meleny Thomas, development without displacement director of the South Baltimore Community Land Trust, celebrates at an event outside homes the group acquired in Curtis Bay. (Fern Shen)

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Curtis Bay, in far south Baltimore, is well-known for what it has been fighting against – a CSX [coal transfer facility](#) that exploded, a polluting [medical waste](#) incinerator and another incinerator that, had it been built, would have been [less than a mile](#) from a school.

But at the same time, people there have also been quietly working *for* something – an affordable mixed-income neighborhood free from blight and real estate speculators.

Last weekend they threw a party to celebrate a milestone in their struggle.

They held a ribbon-cutting to mark the near completion of 1630 Hazel Street, the community's first permanently affordable home, one of four rowhouses acquired and rehabbed by the South Baltimore Community Land Trust (SBCLT) on a block severely damaged by a fire.

That 2017 fire was a turning point for Curtis Bay's activists and youth leaders, who had just [won a David vs. Goliath victory](#), defeating the trash incinerator project proposed by an Albany, N.Y., company.

“We rallied together in this very field to demand something different for our community. Not just for survival, but for a chance to thrive,” said Meleny Thomas, SBCLT’s development without displacement director.

“Our neighborhoods have long been cast as sacrifice zones. Places where the systems in place favored profits over people and used displacement as a tool, as a guise for betterment,” she continued.

“Now we have transformed entire blocks and lifted up our community, showing that real change is possible.”

She was standing in the middle of the once flame-scarred block, looking out past the crowd of well-wishers toward the grassy rec center space where activists and children have long gathered.

Reporters were often brought to the same spot to take photos of the immense CSX coal pile looming beyond the swings and slides.

On this day, though, visitors were asked to behold rowhouses with gleaming new hardwood floors and a fresh coat of hipster-gray paint.



Meleny Thomas and Raychel Gadson cut the ribbon at the November 9 celebration of South Baltimore Community Land Trust’s first affordable home in Curtis Bay. **BELO**



New Housing Model

City government has been hesitant about community land trusts in the past, but the presence of Housing Commissioner Alice Kennedy, State Comptroller Brooke Lierman, Senate President Bill Ferguson and other dignitaries signaled the willingness of political leaders to embrace it.

“We’ve already allocated over \$18 million in [Affordable Housing] Trust Fund dollars towards community land trusts in the city of Baltimore,” Kennedy pointed out, referring to the taxpayer-subsidized fund that is the major source for SBCLT’s Curtis Bay home purchases.

After years of failed development strategies, such as at southwest’s [Poppleton neighborhood](#) that drove hundreds of longtime residents out, Kennedy’s department is now crafting an “anti-displacement strategy.”

She told the crowd that land trusts will be “a critical piece of it.”

Under this model, nonprofits acquire and redevelop housing using subsidized grant dollars. Properties are then sold to income-qualified persons – in this case, families earning 50% or less of the area median income (AMI).

The organizations retain some stake in the homes they sell, with agreements that may split any price appreciation between the trust and the buyer or cap any resale price.

The idea is to keep the homes affordable for the next buyer.

“Say you’re in the home for a number of years, and you decide to relocate away from Curtis Bay. Then the home will remain affordable for the next homeowner,” the Land Trust’s Greg Sawtell explained.

“That is achieved through the shared equity resale formula, so when you sell, you retain a portion of the equity that’s been accrued in the home. And the remainder of that is kept tied to the property,” he continued.

“The Land Trust is essentially the landlord that doesn’t go away. It’s there whether you need help finding direct financial support or reputable contractors” – Greg Sawtell.

One benefit for the purchaser, in addition to the affordable price, is the support SBCLT promises to provide even before the sale is completed.

Homeownership readiness sessions will assist with credit counseling or financial repair. And should the new home owners require it, SBCLT promises to help with challenges ranging from a sudden need for roof repair to difficulty paying the mortgage.

“The Land Trust is essentially the landlord that doesn’t go away,” Sawtell said. “It’s there whether you need help finding direct financial support or reputable contractors.”

The owner will be required to pay a small fee toward SBCLT’s stewardship fund, the purpose being not to generate revenue, Sawtell said, but to provide “an early warning sign where, if a homeowner is missing payments, it could be an indication more support is needed or something has changed financially.”

Homeowners will be able to participate in the governing structure of the land trust, reporting issues and suggesting priorities. “It’s an opportunity to make the community a stronger, better place,” he said.



How the houses on Hazel Street looked in 2022 before the Land Trust acquired them. (J.M. Giordano)

A Resident's Realization

That vision of a safe, pleasant, affordable Curtis Bay is what drew resident Mary Petitti to get involved in the Land Trust.

Not that she has a lot of spare time for volunteer activities. She has a full-time job as a restaurant manager and a part-time job, and also picks up freelance catering gigs when she can to make ends meet.

That was the kind of work ethic that helped her and her husband buy a home in Curtis Bay after enduring years in dilapidated, crime-plagued apartments in nearby Brooklyn.

Addressing the crowd, Petitti explained how, when she met Sawtell in the Brooklyn Library and first heard about the Land Trust, she'd been focused on her kids' education, trying to get them into better schools.

Thinking about those challenges, she came to realize that they couldn't be addressed if she could barely afford housing.

"If you don't feel safe, if you don't have secure housing, if you don't know if you're going to be able to pay rent month to month, then you're just working and working. You're not able to go to your PTA meetings. You're not able to go out and meet your neighbor, watch each other's back, sweep the street," she said.

"We need fair affordable housing and the Community Land Trust is making it happen with the support of our community leaders," she said, adding "We just need more."

Speaking later with *The Brew*, Petitti said she's looking forward to the day when a critical mass of homeowners rejuvenate the city's far southside.

Petitti lives up the hill on Inner Circle, where [community leaders](#) turned an empty lot into a public space and nurtured a cozy sense of community.

But as she looked out across Hazel Street, past the food trucks selling burgers and funnel cakes and the loudspeakers playing "We are Family," she pointed out that the rec center playground often still doesn't feel safe.

"I think in all these years I've taken my kids there, like, three times," she said.



Curtis Bay's Mary Petitti explains why she volunteers with the Land Trust. (Fern Shen)

“Not for the faint of heart”

At the celebration, Land Trust leaders were feeling hopeful for the future, though still a bit tender about the delays and disappointments they’ve encountered along the way.

After the 2017 fire, Sawtell told *The Brew*, the city didn’t follow through on a commitment to acquire the properties through code enforcement and receivership and get them to the Land Trust. That paved the way for speculators to snap them up at a low price and sit on them.

“Eventually the city came around and did code enforcement and we got them. But at that point the auction price went up, so we essentially lost several years and thousands of dollars,” he observed. “Thankfully now, things are changing.”

Thomas had to wipe away tears when 10th District Councilwoman Phylicia Porter praised her tenacity over six years, describing the Land Trust’s work as “not for the faint of heart.”

“They have been on the side where people would not listen to them, where people would not take meetings with them” – Councilwoman Phylicia Porter.

“They have been on the side where people would not listen to them, where people would not take meetings with them, where people would not simply hear them and hear their pride,” Porter told the audience.

Health equity researcher Lawrence Brown, author of “The Black Butterfly: The Harmful Politics of Race and Space in America,” said he was amazed by what he found in 2018 when someone told him about the activism in Curtis Bay.

“I said, ‘South Baltimore, what’s that?’ I’d never been. I’d been working in East Baltimore, West Baltimore,” recalled Brown, emcee for the event.

He lauded the group (“I realized this community is on the move!”) and Thomas, noting her personal accomplishment of picking up a PhD in public policy and administration along the way.

“That’s when I met now-Doctor Meleny Thomas!” he exclaimed, drawing cheers.



Melvin Stone, Meleny Thomas and Lenora Knowles after the Hazel Street ribbon-cutting. **BELOW:** South Baltimore Community Land Trust sign detailing plans and partne

Coming Soon



Hazel Street

1622, 1624, and 1626 are also under construction and will be finished early next year!

Monroe Circle

Our first passive duplex on Monroe Circle is almost finished, and we hope to begin construction on eight more units soon!

Future Projects

We've acquired property on Pennington Avenue and Locust Street to construct thirteen more homes.

SBCLT is a cross neighborhood Community Land Trust building power to create development without displacement.

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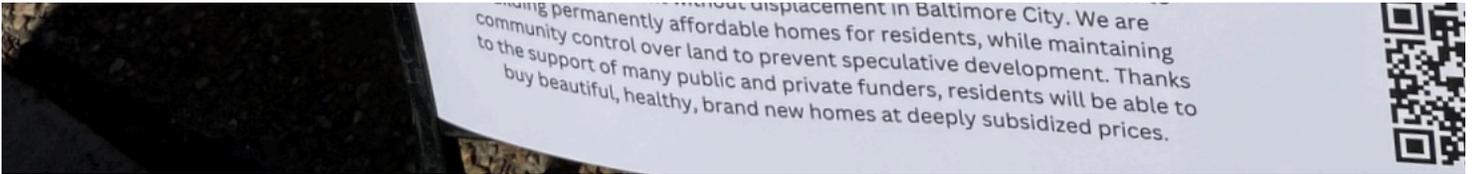
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More Homes Coming

Lots more projects are in the offing.

Plans are underway to build 10 affordable passive solar homes designed to be highly energy efficient. One of these, a duplex on Monroe Circle, is nearing completion.

Additional Land Trust homes are slated for Pennington Avenue and Locust Street.

Another project underway is the two-story building the group acquired, an old corner bar, which they plan to turn into the South Baltimore Environmental Justice Center.

Planning and pre-development costs are being covered by SBCLT's \$100,000 share of the [legal settlement](#) the state won from CSX last year in the wake of the explosion at the railroad company's coal facility.



The Land Trust's first passive solar home in Curtis Bay under construction on Monroe Circle. **BELOW:** Greg Sawtell and Toby Harris on Pennington Avenue at the future s



A reporter's walk to that building from Hazel Street meant bypassing some broken glass and a large dead rat before realizing that the property sits next to a boarded-up, graffiti-tagged vacant.

The two Land Trust members leading the mini-tour were more focused on how the building will look and function some day in the future.

"It's going to be a kind of community hub for science programs. A place for folks to gather, conduct research and advocate for solutions to all the environmental and social challenges they face," Sawtell said.

With a broad grin, SBCLT member Toby Harris added, "Yes, it's a work in progress."

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[Environment](#) by [Fern Shen](#) 11:10 am Apr 8, 2025

A long-sought victory for community groups: Lawmakers end Maryland’s subsidy for incinerators

Until it got a powerful new ally in Annapolis, a decade-long effort to end state support for trash-burning facilities, like South Baltimore’s BRESKO plant, always flamed out

Above: Now known as the WIN Waste Baltimore trash incinerator, the former BRESKO plant in south Baltimore has been state-subsidized for years as a “renewable” energy source. (Mark Reutter)

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Back in 2011 when Maryland classified trash incineration as “renewable energy” – elevating it to the same status as solar and wind and subsidizing it to the tune of millions of dollars per year – two new waste-to-energy facilities were being proposed for the state.

Eventually, these incinerator projects, including one [proposed less than a mile](#) from a South Baltimore school, [fell through](#) in the face of community opposition and, perhaps, inadequate financing.

But the incineration subsidy remained, benefiting existing facilities like Baltimore’s BRESKO plant and surviving more than a decade of opposition by environmental advocates and neighborhood groups.

It stood until yesterday, the last day of the legislative session, when the General Assembly voted to eliminate trash incineration from the Renewable Energy Portfolio, effectively ending the subsidy.

“Me and my fellow community members in South Baltimore can breathe just a little easier knowing we will no longer pay trash incinerators to pollute our air,” said Carlos Sanchez, Youth Outreach Specialist with the South Baltimore Community Land Trust.

Sanchez recalled the persistence of his group and others, as bills they lobbied year after year in Annapolis died.

“We made our voices heard for over a decade explaining that burning limited natural resources is not clean energy and we have been heard,” he said.

During last year’s failed effort, the groups [pointed to](#) the scope of the subsidy baked into state law.

Maryland utilities, required by the state to help fund renewable energy, spent approximately \$100 million subsidizing trash incinerators between 2012 and 2022, a recent study [showed](#). These costs are basically passed along to residents through their utility bills.

New Hampshire-based WIN Waste Innovations, which operates the the BRESKO incinerator in South Baltimore, [received](#) \$4.2 million through the program in 2022, Sanchez’ group noted.

Eliminating that subsidy is “fiscally smart,” advocates said today while celebrating their win.

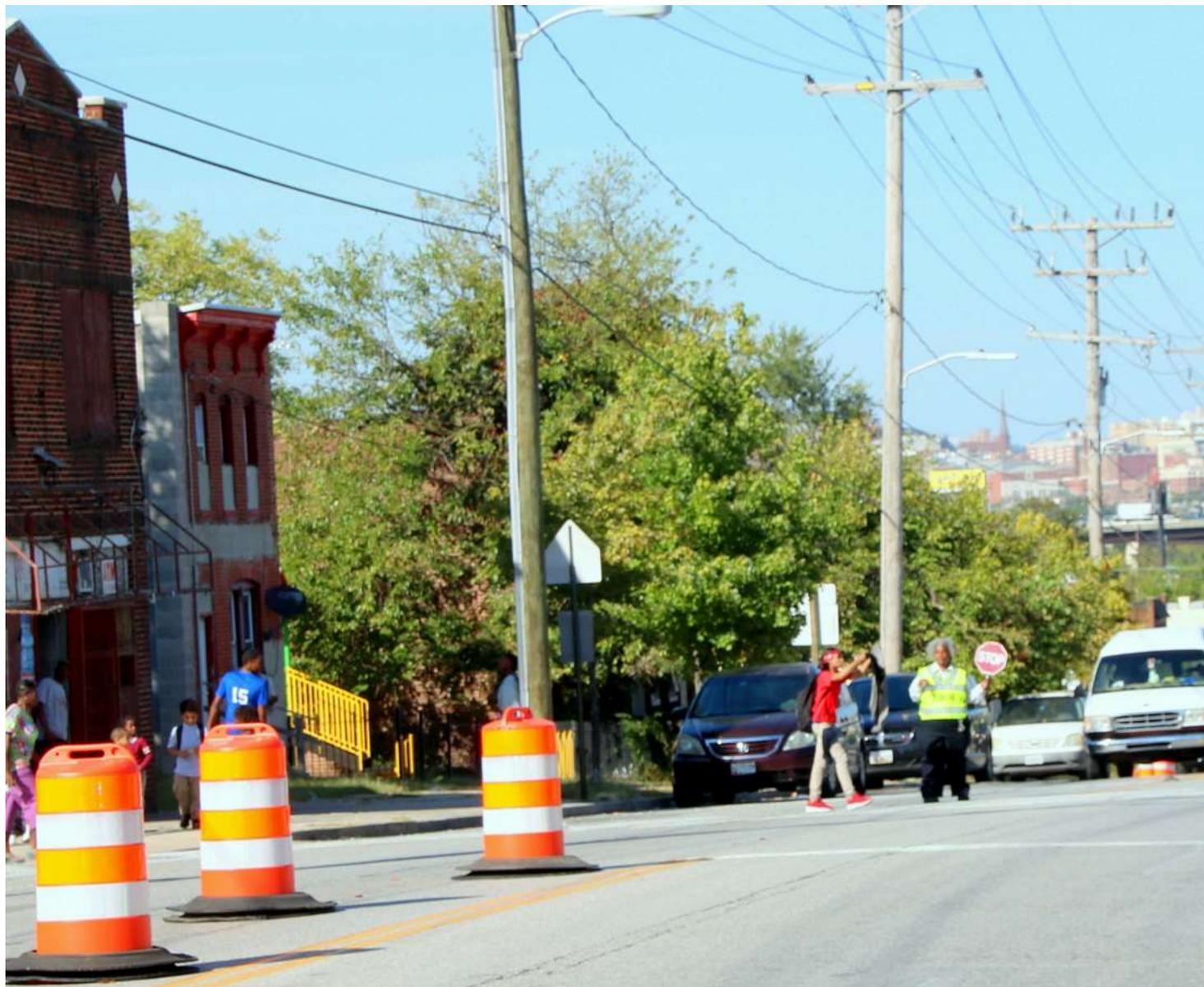
“This correction of state policy will stop Maryland electricity ratepayers wasting millions of dollars a year on something that just doesn’t deliver what the Renewable Portfolio Standard was meant to provide: clean, renewable energy,” said Jennifer Kunze, Maryland Program Director with Clean Water Action.

“It will also help to support the development of Zero Waste infrastructure by making it easier for composting, reuse and recycling, and other healthier solid waste management practices to compete without fighting uphill against state subsidies supporting the worst solid waste option,” Kunze said in a prepared statement.

She pointed to a study that found incinerators emit more greenhouse gas emissions per unit of electricity they put on the grid than any other power source, even coal plants.

The BRESKO plant – its towering emissions stack a Baltimore landmark along I-95 for 40 years – is the city’s largest source of industrial air pollution and a major emitter of nitrogen oxides (NOx).

Incinerators are also major sources of health-harming air emissions including dioxins, lead, mercury, nitrogen and sulfur oxides and particulate matter.



The BRESKO trash incinerator emissions stack looms as children cross the street in Baltimore’s Westport neighborhood. (Fern Shen)

Powerful Ally

Last fall, advocates had reason to believe their long-sought victory was in sight.

That’s when Senate President Bill Ferguson, who represents the Westport area where the incinerator is located, [announced](#) plans to introduce legislation to remove waste incineration from Maryland’s renewable portfolio standard, which determines what energy sources the state can count to meet certain clean energy mandates.

“Since being elected senator for the 46th Legislative District, I’ve become increasingly concerned about emissions from the BRESKO incinerator as a public health and environmental justice issue for surrounding neighborhoods,” Ferguson said at the time.

Earlier in the year, when Ferguson became general counsel of the renewable energy company CI Renewables, he was asked about potential conflicts of interest.

In his position with the Baltimore-based company, he [told Maryland Matters](#), he’ll be mostly focused on “transactional work” rather than lobbying or making policy decisions.

Despite Ferguson’s support, backers for a time feared that the 2025 bill to demote incineration might again be doomed when it stalled in committee. WIN Waste and other industry representatives were, as always, lobbying hard against it.

The company in recent years has touted millions of dollars in upgrades meant to reduce air pollution. Company officials have argued that the state credits support a Maryland business and dozens of jobs and that burning waste could be better for the climate than transporting it longer distances to a landfill.

But in the end, the bill to end the subsidy was [salvaged](#) by tucking it into the larger Next Generation Energy Act, part of a [package of energy related bills](#) passed in Annapolis this year.

Political Windshift

If the machinations of Maryland politics are what ended the incineration subsidy, it's fitting since the same process created it.

In 2011, then-Governor Martin O'Malley signed the bill to make trash incineration a Tier 1 renewable energy like wind, solar and geothermal.

Pushing for the change was the Albany-based company Energy Answers International, which sought to locate a trash-burning facility in the industrial Fairfield area near Curtis Bay.

Under the permit that Energy Answers was granted by the state, it would be allowed to burn garbage, chopped-up tires and car parts – 4,000 tons of waste a day – and emit toxic particulates, including 240 pounds of mercury a year.



A 2013 [student protest](#) at the former chemical plant near Curtis Bay in South Baltimore where an Albany company wanted to build a trash-burning power plant. (Fern Shen)

Fighting the plan doggedly was a coalition of environmental groups, community members and students from Ben Franklin High School, some of whom were at [one point arrested](#) for taking part in a sit-in action at the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) headquarters.

On the other side of the issue were elected officials who sang the project's praises – and reaped rewards in the form of generous campaign contributions.

• [Poised to battle climate change in Paris, mayor sidesteps incinerator in Baltimore](#) (1/2/15)

On the same day that O'Malley indicated his support for the trash-incineration subsidy, for example, the company contributed \$100,000 to the O'Malley-led Democratic Governors Association. His own campaign account also received \$9,000 from the company, *The Brew's* review of 2010-2011 online state records showed.



Gov. Martin O'Malley at the October 18, 2010 "Fairfield Renewable Energy Project" kickoff event. At far left, Baltimore's then Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. (energyanswers.com)

Stephanie Rawlings-Blake's campaign committee picked up \$1,500 as she was heading into the 2010 mayoral election.

"This is truly a great day in Baltimore," Rawlings-Blake declared at a 2010 kick-off event the company organized.

"This project is a national model for green renewable energy, and I'm proud, really proud, to have this project in Baltimore City," she added, standing next to Energy Answers official. U.S. Congressman C.A. (Dutch) Ruppersberger and O'Malley.

This year it was a different story.

Mayor Brandon Scott's office testified on behalf of the legislation to strip away the incineration subsidy.

And the City Council chimed in with a resolution declaring that the change would "ensure that Marylanders are not subsidizing energy plants that harm the environment and public health."

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[Environment](#) Jun 19, 2025

[New survey asks: Dear Baltimore residents, what do you think about deer?](#)

[They're popping up increasingly in city parks and yards, prompting the creation of a new Rec and Parks Deer Program that promises to, somehow, deal with them.](#)
Environment Jun 9, 2025

[South Baltimore activists call absence of zero waste funding in city's FY26 budget "a betrayal"](#)

[Advocates as well as City Council members worry that, with five years left on the BRESKO contract, the Scott administration is moving too slowly to end trash incineration in Baltimore.](#)

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Labeling modern Waste-to-Energy (WTE) plants as mere incinerators is misleading — it's like reducing human beings to just their excretory functions. The real question is: what happens to waste if it's not converted into energy? It ends up in landfills, where it pollutes the land, air, and water over time. Land filling is a crime. The sustainable solution is to reduce and recycle... or put a tax on packaging. Next remaining way is to invest in WTE facilities equipped with advanced pollution control systems that minimize environmental impact while recovering energy from waste.

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ENVIRONMENT

HEALTH

COMMENTARY

Why Maryland is poised for a new policy approach to environmental justice

MARSHA WILLS-KARP

CARLOS SANCHEZ

JANUARY 17, 2025 9:03 PM



📷 The smokestack of the Wheelabrator incinerator, a Baltimore waste-recycling facility that converts trash into energy. (Photo by Joe Ryan/Capital News Service)

Throughout our lives, we are exposed to pollutants from a vast array of sources – some visible, others invisible – that affect our health in ways we don't often see. From the chemicals in the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the soil we touch, to the social stressors that

shape our neighborhoods and our opportunities, these environmental risks result in a myriad of negative health outcomes.

This cumulative impact of environmental and social stressors is a critical factor in public health, especially for communities already burdened by systemic inequality.

That's why new approaches, like the work being done by the Johns Hopkins CHARMED (Community Health Addressing Regional Maryland Environmental Determinants of Disease) Center, are so important.

In September, the center hosted a groundbreaking meeting in Baltimore of 26 centers around the country funded by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences to discuss the pressing need to address cumulative environmental impacts. Community members shared their experiences of being exposed to harmful pollutants, including particulate matter (PM_{2.5}), and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) from nearby industry and vehicle traffic. These pollutants contribute to long-term health problems, economic costs and years of diminished quality of life.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) communities of color are exposed to higher-than-average levels of toxic air pollution. This includes emissions from industries, vehicle traffic and other environmental hazards, all of which combine in ways that are often invisible but incredibly damaging.

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The result? Higher rates of asthma, respiratory diseases, and other chronic health conditions that place an enormous burden on both individuals and the health care system.

Take Baltimore, for example. In 2021, the Maryland Department of Health found that asthma rates in Baltimore City are not only higher than the national average, but disproportionately affect children, African Americans and low-income residents.

A staggering 18.6% of children in Baltimore suffer from asthma, compared to just 5-8% nationally. Adults in the city also suffer at higher rates, with 13.7% of the population living with asthma – well above both state and national averages. More troubling still, emergency room visits for asthma-related conditions in Baltimore are the highest in the state, with African Americans experiencing asthma-related hospitalizations and mortality rates far higher than their white counterparts.

These statistics reflect more than just health disparities – they reveal an urgent environmental health crisis.

The air pollution driving these rates of asthma and respiratory illness is not a random occurrence, but a systemic problem tied to the industrial history of the city, zoning practices and the concentration of polluting industries in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. The science behind cumulative impacts shows that the health effects of these pollutants don't simply add up – they interact in complex ways, worsening outcomes over time.

That's why Maryland must pass the CHERISH Act, developed by directly impacted community members and championed by Sen. Clarence Lam (D-Howard and Anne Arundel) and Del. Jazz Lewis (D-Prince George's) to fix this very problem. This legislation builds on recent progress in New York and New Jersey. In New York, for example, state law now requires an assessment of the cumulative impacts of new or reissued permits for industrial operations in disadvantaged communities.

This proactive approach is a model for how we can address the environmental injustices that perpetuate disparities in public health. Maryland must become the next state to bring cumulative impacts reform to our environmental policy.

Addressing the cumulative impacts of pollution is not just a matter of science – it’s a matter of economic justice. The costs of unchecked pollution are staggering. In Baltimore, asthma alone results in thousands of emergency room visits every year, with the burden falling disproportionately on the public health care system.

In 2019, an estimated \$23 million in emergency room costs were associated with asthma treatment, with nearly 71% of those costs covered by public funds. And this figure represents only a fraction of the broader economic impact of environmental pollution on health care, lost productivity and education.

As we move forward, it is crucial that we adopt policies that recognize the full complexity of environmental harm. To truly address the health disparities exacerbated by pollution, we must assess how multiple environmental stressors – both chemical and non-chemical – affect communities. This requires not only better science but a commitment to environmental justice that includes the voices of impacted communities in decision-making.

Only by taking a comprehensive approach to understanding and mitigating cumulative impacts can we protect public health, reduce health inequities, and ensure a healthier future for all.



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