

Gov. Brown tours polluted L.A. neighborhoods to see firsthand where progress lags

Tony Barboza and [Chris Megerian](#)

MAY 23, 2017

Gov. Jerry Brown slipped quietly into southeast Los Angeles County on Tuesday to tour some of California's most polluted neighborhoods and meet with activists who have criticized his administration for doing too little to protect the health of the people living there.

Assemblywoman Cristina Garcia (D-Bell Gardens) took Brown on a tour of her district, stopping by mobile homes that abut industrial sites and a park where children play next to a freeway choked by trucks.

California has touted its environmental policies as a model for the world, but Garcia told Brown many areas haven't felt the benefits.

"You don't see solar panels on rooftops," she said in an interview after the governor's visit. "Whether it's electrification or hybrid cars or cleaner air, you don't see it. None of those things have been felt here."

When the tour ended, Garcia hosted a roundtable discussion at a Bell Gardens community center with Brown and 10 leaders from groups fighting environmental policies that disproportionately harm poor people of color.

The visit is the latest indication of the growing influence of California Latinos and low-income populations, whose concerns about health-

damaging pollution have driven debate over who benefits from the state's climate policies.

We can be the leaders for the global community, but we're going to be failing if we're not leading with the environmental issues in our backyard.

— Assemblywoman Cristina Garcia, (D-Bell Gardens)

Brown's trip comes as he is seeking a deal to extend California's cap-and-trade program, a cornerstone of the state's efforts to reduce emissions. Garcia is pushing legislation (Assembly Bill 378) that would modify the program so it would help improve air quality, rather than only targeting greenhouse gas emissions.

Although Brown is known for his advocacy on climate change — he [attended the United Nations summit](#) in Paris in 2015, and he's [traveling to China next month](#) — he's facing pressure to take stronger action in the state's polluted neighborhoods.

The governor “hasn't championed environmental justice issues in the way that is needed, said Amy Vanderwarker, co-director of the California Environmental Justice Alliance, a coalition of local groups.

Brown has talked about helping disadvantaged communities with revenue from the cap-and-trade program, which requires companies to buy permits to release greenhouse gases.

“I don't think we should turn our backs on the low-income communities of California,” he said during a recent news conference.

But Tuesday's visit was spurred by anger among environmental activists over legislation earlier this year in which Brown agreed, during negotiations over raising gas taxes to pay for road repairs, to give the trucking industry a break from some pollution rules.

Diesel exhaust contributes to asthma, heart disease, cancer and a catalog of other health problems, particularly for people living near ports, rail yards and warehouse clusters in southeast L.A., the harbor area and the Inland Empire.

Garcia hopes that a firsthand look at the magnitude of pollution problems in her district will persuade Brown to place a higher priority on solving local pollution ills.

“We can be the leaders for the global community, but we’re going to be failing if we’re not leading with the environmental issues in our backyard,” Garcia said.

Brown’s office labeled the event “no press.” In the days leading up to his visit, participants were told to keep the meeting confidential, and Garcia’s office told reporters that details such as the time, date and itinerary were “under wraps.”

Those who attended later reported that the governor took notes and asked questions as those gathered ate tortas prepared by Garcia’s mother.

Mark Lopez, who heads East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice, said he got the impression during the meeting that Brown got most of his information on the area’s pollution issues from government officials, agencies and industries and “doesn’t spend enough time talking to front-line communities.”

Though Brown made no specific commitments, Lopez and other advocates said they saw reason for optimism.

When they suggested using the state’s authority to adopt “indirect source” rules to control toxic diesel pollution from ports, warehouses and other freight hubs, Brown expressed surprise that regulators had

not already acted to adopt such measures and asked the activists to submit proposed language.

Brown said “we’re the climate champions and yet we’re not doing anything about this,” according to Michele Hasson, policy director at the Riverside County-based Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice.

Among other topics discussed, participants said, were the state’s cap-and-trade program, the 710 Freeway expansion, toxic emissions from the ports and industrial polluters, and what local environmentalists say has been a lackadaisical government response to environmental threats in poor communities of color.

Community leaders said they also pressed Brown on Tuesday about the state’s management of the massive cleanup of a 10,000-home area of lead-contaminated neighborhoods near the now-shuttered Exide Technologies battery recycling plant. State regulators allowed the plant to operate for more than three decades on a temporary permit despite a long history of air pollution and hazardous waste violations.

Garcia said it was too soon to proclaim Brown’s visit a success.

“It went well,” she said, “if we get something in the budget or we get some bills signed.”