

## We're ill-served by state pollution regulators: Guest commentary



Aerocraft Heat Treating Co. one of two metal manufacturing companies in the city of Paramount ordered by Los Angeles County health officials to stop emitting toxins, is shown in a Dec. 1, 2016 photo. (Photo by Brittany Murray/Southern California News Group)

*By Lisa Lappin*

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In the city of Paramount, just southeast of Los Angeles, it is hard for many people to breathe.

Paramount has some of the worst air in Los Angeles. It is also home to 55,000 mostly low-income Latino residents, and more than a hundred metal companies, including heat treating facilities, metal grinders, chrome platers, and five metal forges that service the aerospace, defense and related industries. While these companies serve an important role in producing products that protect our country, many are less than 100 feet away from homes and schools, spewing toxic fumes and metal dust that can cause cancer and respiratory diseases.

A few months ago, we learned that our air contained 350 times normal levels of the known carcinogen hexavalent chromium.

As a teacher in Paramount, I have witnessed first-hand the agony of a student losing her battle to cancer. Each year, teachers learn of more children in Paramount suffering from this disease, with as many as five students diagnosed at one school. Hundreds of residents of all ages, including young mothers, are dead or dying from cancer.

An entire community cannot be considered collateral damage, no matter how lofty the purpose or how profitable the business.

Cities and state regulatory agencies play a powerful role in protecting our health, especially for overburdened communities that bear a disproportionate share of polluting industries. In Paramount, both have failed us.

In 2015, I joined the People's Senate, a group of community leaders from across the state advocating reform of how the state protects its residents from toxic substances such as hexavalent chromium, arsenic and lead.

One agency, in particular, has drawn repeated criticism for failing to safeguard Californians from exposure to dangerous toxic chemicals — the Department of Toxic Substances Control. It was DTSC, after all, that to date has failed to test any parks in Paramount despite repeated requests

from the community. DTSC argued that the city of Paramount refused them access, but it did nothing to override the arbitrary decision.

This year, the California Environmental Justice Alliance released its first Environmental Justice Agency Assessment. It is the only report in the nation to assess how well state agencies develop, implement and monitor policies that protect vulnerable and overburdened communities like Paramount. This first Agency Assessment shines a spotlight on DTSC and the results are dismal: DTSC failed to consistently comply with fundamental principles designed to protect Californians most susceptible to pollution, such as proactively partnering with residents and providing opportunities for communities to be engaged early, often and meaningfully.

Considering how DTSC repeatedly ignored our concerns about toxic chemicals in Paramount, I was not surprised to learn how poorly the agency fared on almost every principle.

We need more than ever for state, regional and city regulators to closely monitor air, water and soil quality for the presence of dangerous toxics such as hexavalent chromium to prevent communities from suffering the same fate as Paramount.

Most important, we need our elected city representatives and state agencies to listen to and trust the voices of residents who are directly affected. Cities such as Paramount that have irresponsibly zoned polluting industries adjacent to schools, parks and homes, must now take responsibility for their poor judgment and make sure stringent pollution controls are in place and that polluters are licensed and permitted.

State regulators such as DTSC that have long turned a blind eye to these issues must also take responsibility and become responsive to the people they serve. The health and safety of future generations depend on it.

*Lisa Lappin is a teacher in Paramount and member of The People's Senate.*