

TOXIC OVERBURDEN

100 Years of Environmental Injustice and Resistance

For over 100 years, Curtis Bay has been shaped by industrial pollution, displacement, and environmental injustice. Home to the one of the largest open-air coal piers in the U.S., a medical waste incinerator, and numerous toxic facilities, this South Baltimore community has endured the cumulative impacts of air, water, and soil contamination. Coal dust settles on homes, industrial waste fills the air, and decades of policy decisions have prioritized corporate interests over community well-being.

Yet, Curtis Bay is also home to generations of residents who refuse to be defined by environmental harm. Through the Summer Youth Environmental Justice Scholars Program, young people have taken ownership of their community's story, using research, art, and advocacy to demand change. This exhibit, designed and led by students from Benjamin Franklin High School, visualizes a century of environmental burden through maps, photography, interviews, historical timelines, and interactive displays. Visitors will witness the struggles and victories of Curtis Bay residents—from fighting the expansion of incinerators to advocating for stronger policies that protect public health.

This is more than a historical account—it is a call to action. Curtis Bay's youth are proving that research is not just about documenting harm but about reclaiming power. This exhibit invites you to learn, engage, and join in the fight for environmental justice.

Thank you to our partners, youth leaders, and volunteers!

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|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| • Jose Alvarenga | • Carlos Gonzalez | • Greg Sawtell | • Lee Tomolonis |
| • Matty Aubourg | • Vilma Gutierrez | • Corianne Setzer | • Noel Webster |
| • Julia DiMauro | • Deepa Iyer | • April Smith | • Tamu Wright |
| • Nicole Fabricant | • Albina Joy | • Meleny Thomas | |
| • Maynor Flores | • Ryan Johnson | • Taysia Thomspson | |
| • Swathi Gangadha | • Julio Ramirez | • Teriq Thompson | |

Partners

- South Baltimore Community Land Trust
- Benjamin Franklin High School
- Morgan State State University
- Towson University
- CHARMED Center
- Neighborhood Design Center



YOUR ROLE IN

SOCIAL CHANGE

What is community organizing, participatory action research, and environmental justice?

Community Organizing: Community organizing is when people come together to solve problems, build power, and create change in their community. It helps groups work together to influence decisions, improve conditions, and make their voices heard.

Participatory Action Research: Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a research method where community members and researchers work together to study a problem and create solutions. It focuses on action, collaboration, and making positive changes based on the research findings.

Environmental Justice: Environmental justice means fair treatment and equal access to a clean and healthy environment for all people, regardless of race, income, or background. It focuses on preventing pollution and environmental harm from affecting certain communities more than others.

How do I fit in?

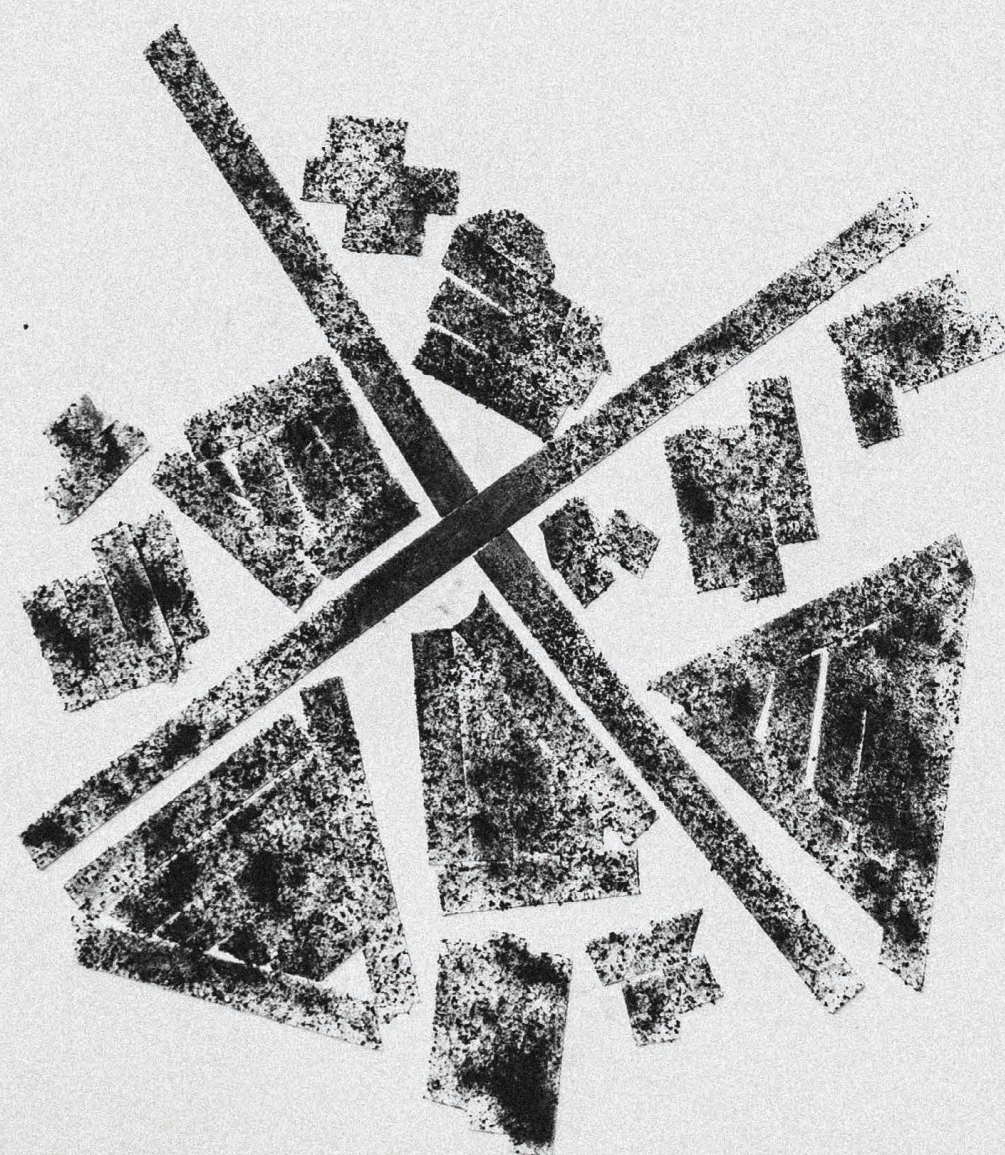
Everyone has a talent that they can contribute to social change!

The “**Social Change Ecosystem Map**,” shown on the table below, is a framework created by activist and writer, **Deepa Iyer**, to support individuals, networks, and organizations understand their unique roles in creating effective and sustainable community change.

Social change movements require a diverse range of skills and strategies, and this map highlights their interconnectedness. The map serves as a guide to making activism more intentional, inclusive, and effective. It encourages people to engage in social change in ways that align with their skills, passions, and capacity while fostering collective action.

For more information about the social change ecosystem map, please visit www.socialchangemap.com.

CLEAN AIR
IS A
RIGHT!





‘Sacrifice Zone’

South Baltimore’s Curtis Bay rowhouse neighborhood has been dubbed a ‘sacrifice zone’ because of the coal export terminals operating in the background. Harmful dust from the open coal pits routinely rains down on homes and open spaces, causing alarming rates of asthma and other respiratory illnesses.

Aman Azhar, "On a 'Toxic Tour' of Curtis Bay in South Baltimore, Visiting Academics and Activists See a Hidden Part of the City," Inside Climate News, August 6, 2023

DISPLACEMENT



Abandoned building in the Fairview neighborhood
CREDIT: University of Maryland Baltimore County, UMBC Department of American Studies

The Fairfield and Wagner’s Point neighborhoods were displaced following a chain of toxic events in the 1980s and 1990s. Wagner’s Point was originally a company town; the neighborhood’s 100 homes were built in the early 1900s for workers at the Wagner Company’s fruit and oyster packing plant. But the close-knit neighborhood slowly found itself surrounded by an industrial landscape of smokestacks, gas tanks, dumping sites, and brownfields.

Ultimately, the residents of Wagner’s Point and Fairfield became pollution refugees and were forced to accept relocation buyouts from the city, which had given up on its remediation promises. In 2011, Baltimore City demolished the last house in Fairfield.

“I was born in Fairfield - a community that was eliminated to make room for more places to burn trash and dump waste. In 2025, I couldn’t be more proud to ...work[] alongside a young generation of South Baltimore youth who have a vision for environmental justice. At the same time, it’s impossible not to feel a deep sadness and frustration.”

— Michael Middleton, former Fairfield Resident

STATE INCENTIVES FOR TRASH INCINERATION

Since 2011, trash incineration has been designated as a “tier one” renewable energy source in Maryland. Electricity providers in the state must include a certain percentage of tier one energy sources, which in 2020 resulted in 35% of “clean” energy in Maryland coming from trash incineration.

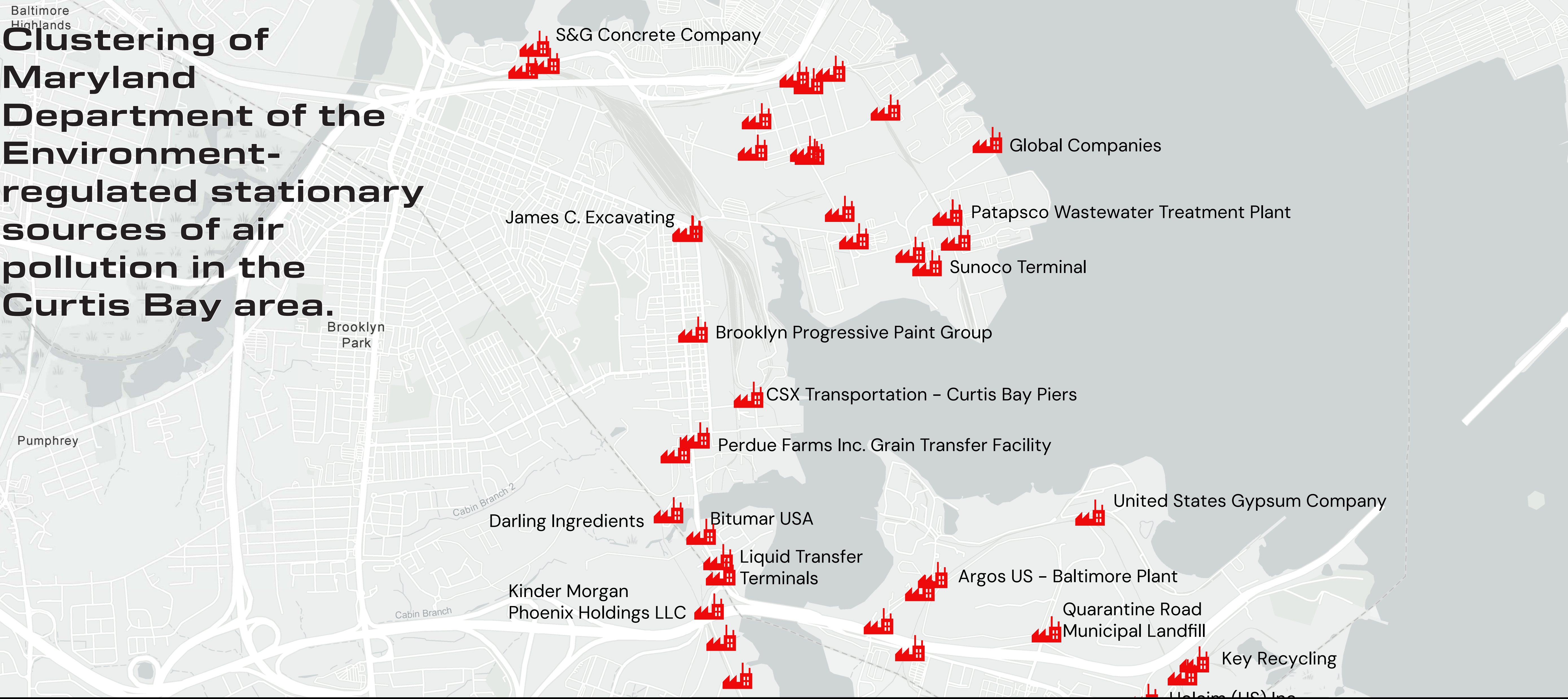
Under Maryland law, trash incineration companies can sell renewable energy credits (REC) to electricity providers for a profit, while the electricity providers can pass the cost of the credits onto consumers in their energy bills.

Even Maryland residents who do not receive their electricity from a company that purchases RECs from an incinerator are paying for it indirectly as taxpayers. In 2022, trash incinerators received \$24.7 million in Maryland state subsidies.

“We were spending, on average, \$17 million a year to incentivize dirty energy. That money could be better spent elsewhere [and increase] job growth in clean energy industries.”

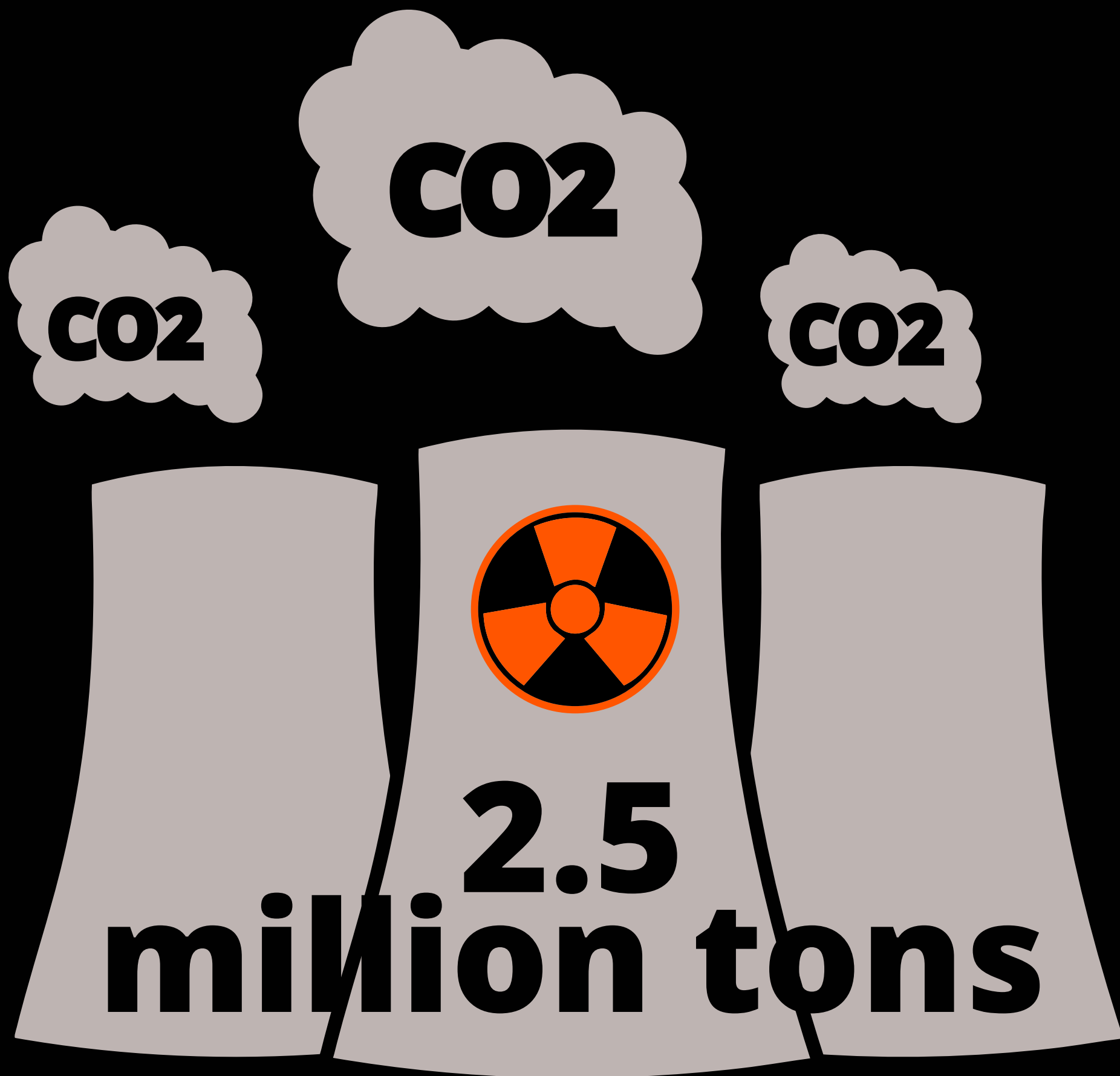
— Karen Lewis Young, Maryland State Senator

Clustering of Maryland Department of the Environment-regulated stationary sources of air pollution in the Curtis Bay area.



EPA’s Emissions Inventory indicates that in 2020, the **three incinerarotors** profiting from Maryland’s RPS **emitted 2.5 million tons of CO2 into the atmosphere** - while the wind, solar, and geothermal power that could have been supported by those dollars instead would have emitted zero.

SOURCE: Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, “Maryland’s Energy Subsidies Are Going Up In Flames”





Community residents and organizers march to the CSX terminal in June 2024
Photo by Ryan Johnson

COMMUNITY OWNED AND LED RESEARCH

It is important that a community owns its land and related data so it can create development in a way that regenerates the community and the planet. Community concerns need to be the basis for research questions, the methodology used and the data collected—whether qualitative (like interviews) or quantitative (such as air quality monitoring).

“Youth action and courage is at the root of fighting back against environmental injustice in the community.

Young leaders continue to advance research and transformational action today through community-driven research. Student investigations into the impacts of coal dust, for one example, have lead to co-authoring peer-reviewed publications, providing public comment to improve permitting standards, and raising broader awareness about environmental harms and restorative action in South Baltimore. This work is led and owned by the community and we’re seeing how it is leading to meaningful change.”

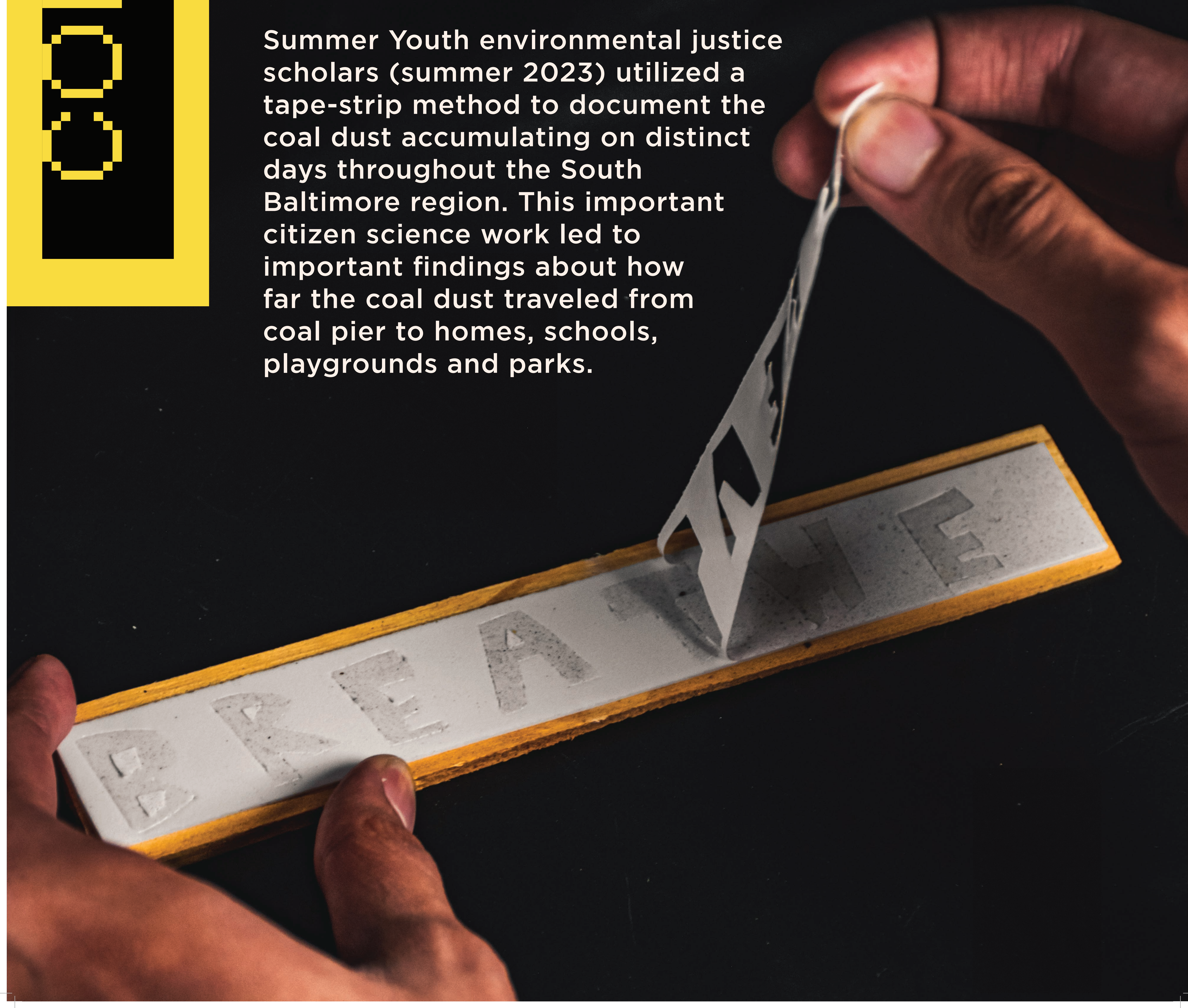
— **Matthew Aubourg**, Academic Partner

Summer Youth environmental justice scholars (summer 2023) utilized a tape-strip method to document the coal dust accumulating on distinct days throughout the South Baltimore region. This important citizen science work led to important findings about how far the coal dust traveled from coal pier to homes, schools, playgrounds and parks.

CHERISH OUR COMMUNITIES ACT

Decades of zoning decisions at the local, state, and federal levels have allowed heavily polluting industrial facilities to exist near homes, schools, and parks in many Maryland communities. Residents who are directly impacted joined with environmental justice advocates to collaborate with legislators on the Cherish our Communities Act: From Cumulative Harms to Environmental Restoration for Improving Shared Health. As of Winter 2025, the proposed law is making its way through the Maryland General Assembly and seeks to reduce the negative impacts of industrial activity within overburdened Maryland communities while sharing the benefits.

If it becomes law, the Cherish Our Communities Act will require the state government to take environmental justice data into account when making permit decisions. The law would also mandate additional community engagement and public notice for permits seeking to build heavily polluting facilities in overburdened communities. Lastly, the law would impose stricter permit conditions or community benefits agreements on polluting facilities in overburdened communities.



“If not for [the five students] who started Free Your Voice, we would have the nation’s largest trash incinerator next to our school on top of the coal terminal. We all benefit from what [the students] did out of love for their communities.

— Carlos Sanchez, Youth Leader



Carlos Sanchez, 18, a member of the group of teenage climate activists, gives a presentation on the coal at the local rec center.
SOURCE: NPR. "Student activists are pushing back against big polluters — and winning". September 26, 2024.

FREE YOUR VOICE

Free Your Voice is a group founded and led by South Baltimore students from Benjamin Franklin High School. Since 2011, the group has advocated for environmental justice in their community, which is already home to two waste incinerators, an open-air coal facility, and about 100 other polluting companies. Free Your Voice organized youth and other community members to successfully prevent the construction of a trash incinerator less than a mile from the high school.

“We may not have a lot of money like the companies cutting our lives short but we are building an awareness and a willingness to take action that can add up to something powerful.”

- Carlos Sanchez

YOUTH LED ORGANIZING AND RESEARCH

In 2014, Free Your Voice, alongside environmental science teacher Ms. Albina Joy, Dr. Nicole Fabricant, and SBCLT created a curriculum inspired by the work of youth environmental justice activists. The projects have focused on vacant homes, safety concerns, air pollution and cumulative impacts of environmental injustice and pollution. The students’ research is always rooted in the lived experiences and insight of South Baltimore youth and other community members.

“I’m in high school in Curtis Bay and because of the work of people like Carlos and Shashawnda, I can study the history of my community. [I can] learn from people like Ms. Doris McGuigan, who stood up for our right to live free from all these toxic pollution sources. [The number of] people [who] have committed their lives to [environmental justice] shows you how big the issue of being used as a sacrifice zone is...and it shows you how much it means to others to make sure things stay the way they are.”

— Vilma Guitierrez, Youth Leader



South Baltimore youth environmental justice leaders and academic partners collecting settled dust in Curtis Bay to analyze for the presence of coal dust

SOUTH BALTIMORE COMMUNITY LAND TRUST

The South Baltimore Community Land Trust (SBCLT) is a non-profit organization that owns land and leases it to meet shared community needs. SBCLT was formed by Baltimore organizers to uplift the communities of South Baltimore. Their mission is to transform Baltimore City’s racist and inequitable waste and housing systems into ones that are just and regenerative. SBCLT works to change neighborhoods from dumping grounds surrounded by polluting industries into healthy, zero-waste communities. They also aim to narrow the racial wealth gap and prevent gentrification by reclaiming abandoned properties and creating affordable homeownership opportunities for low-income and working-class community members.

"We are fighting against a lot of people who do have a lot of money, who do have a lot of connections," says Vilma Guitierrez, 17. We are still always trying to fight back."

SOURCE: Hopkins Bloomberg Public Health
"Community vs. Coal: Reclaiming Health in Curtis Bay"
Melody Schreiber. Photos by Mollie Miller
September 26, 2024



“In the summertime, the kids sweat off black stuff from the coal terminal. We have to spray the house off because the dust is terrible and to be breathing this stuff in all these years can't be good.”

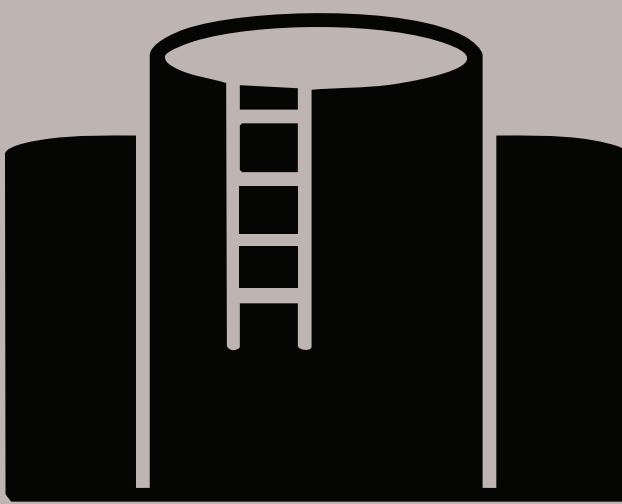
- Holly Loyd, Curtis Bay resident

PARTIAL LIST OF INDUSTRIAL POLLUTION SOURCES IN SOUTH BALTIMORE



INCINERATION AND WASTE

- Curtis Bay Energy medical waste incinerator
- BRESCO municipal solid waste incinerator
- Quarantine Road Landfill
- Hawkins Points Hazardous Waste Landfill
- Patapsco Wastewater Treatment Plant



OIL AND GAS TERMINALS

- CSX Coal Export Terminal
- Citgo Petroleum Corporation
- Hess Corporation Terminal
- BP North America Inc.



CHEMICAL PLANTS

- Solvay USA Inc.
- FMC Corporation Site
- Grace Davison Chemical

COAL

The CSX coal facility has operated in the Curtis Bay community for over a century, exporting up to 14 million tons of coal each year which is about 1/3 of coal exports in the U.S.. It is the second-largest open-air coal pier on the East Coast. (An open-air coal pier is an uncovered structure, usually located along a waterway, that is used to store, load and unload coal for transfer to other areas.)

For decades, community members have voiced concerns about the impact of coal dust. It covers their homes, settles in gutters, and, most disturbingly, ends up in their lungs. In addition to these long-standing effects, a massive explosion at the facility in 2021 shook nearby homes. The explosion also blew out the windows of nearby buildings as a methane fire shot out of a service entrance.

INCINERATION

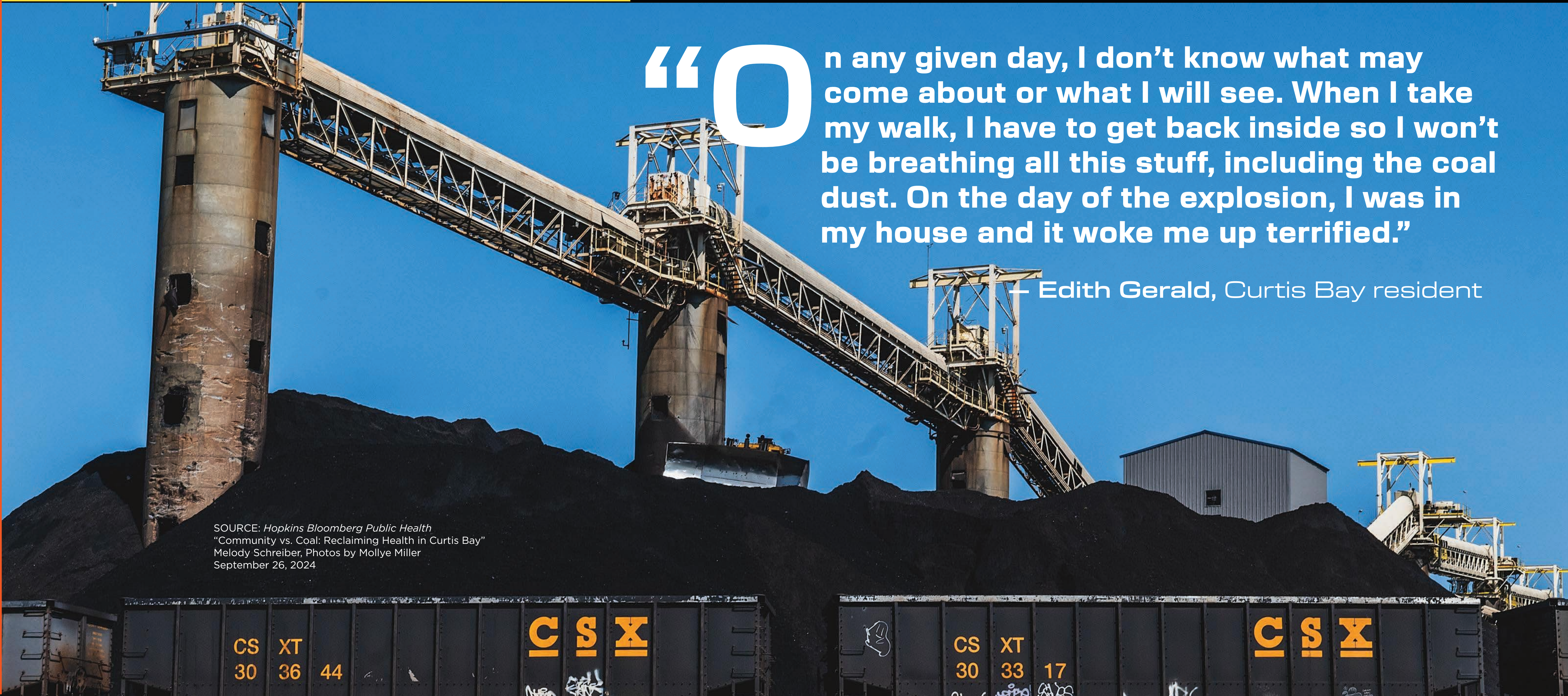


Evidence of insufficiently incinerated special medical waste. SOURCE: State of Maryland v. Curtis Bay Energy LP plea agreement (2023)

In 1991, the largest medical waste incinerator in the nation began operating in Curtis Bay, accepting waste from 19 states, Washington D.C., and Canada. A 2019 investigation found that the facility, which is owned by Curtis Bay Energy, LP, violated its waste disposal permit more than 40 times by improperly and unsafely handling special medical waste, which includes human or animal tissues, body fluids, and needles.

“We were asking [Curtis Bay residents] about the plan to build the nation’s largest incinerator [in the community]. An older man told me, ‘What do you expect? We’re used as a dumping ground and you’re not going to change it.’ I didn’t understand it at the time, but he had lived through the displacement of three entire South Baltimore communities. He wasn’t cynical; he was educated by history and the actions of local governments working closely with powerful corporations.”

— Shashawnda Campbell, South Baltimore Community Land Trust



“On any given day, I don’t know what may come about or what I will see. When I take my walk, I have to get back inside so I won’t be breathing all this stuff, including the coal dust. On the day of the explosion, I was in my house and it woke me up terrified.”

— Edith Gerald, Curtis Bay resident

SOURCE: Hopkins Bloomberg Public Health “Community vs. Coal: Reclaiming Health in Curtis Bay” Melody Schreibas, Photos by Hollye Miller September 26, 2024

Curtis Bay is in the 99th percentile nationwide for proximity to hazardous facilities requiring “Risk Managment Plans”

