By late afternoon last Election Day, Dorian Breuer was cold. He and fellow Pilsen Greens activist Jerry Mead had been handing out palm cards since 7 that morning, urging voters on their way into the polls at Manuel Perez School, 1214 W. 19th St., to support the referendum they'd put on the ballot.

At that point, he was also confident. Voters in the 2nd Precinct of the 25th Ward were being asked whether their elected officials, "especially Alderman Daniel Solis," should "insist" that the city and state environmental agencies investigate pollution from the nearby H. Kramer and Co. foundry, and to make sure their findings were kept on file at the local library.

Most of the people Breuer spoke with, like 21-year-old Yolanda Salinas, a lifelong Pilsen resident, thought it was about time someone did something about that factory on West 21st Street. "It smells really bad," Salinas said.

It turned out Breuer was right about the result. Of the 442 people who weighed in on the referendum question, 420 voted "Yes." That's more than 95 percent. "We asked a question that was kind of hard to say 'No' to," Breuer said.

As he well knows, though, in getting this question answered, the Greens only raised a bunch more.

For one, why would anyone—anyone at all—vote against a study? It's not exactly a request for pollution reparations. It's not even a demand that the state attorney general revoke H. Kramer's corporate charter for "environmental abuse"— a demand the Greens were thinking about including in the referendum question.

The 22 people who voted "No" may not have been interested in clean air. Some big fans of Solis, the 25th Ward alderman, may not have liked the way he was called out. Or perhaps some of these folks were opposed to the idea of turning over a report on the plant to a bunch of reference librarians.

More likely, however, they were concerned that a supporting vote could lead to job losses. The H. Kramer plant employs about 100 people, according to a foundry industry Web site.

Mead, who describes himself as a 

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labor activist, said this is a concern of his as well. "We don't want to close the place down," he said. "We want the jobs to stay here."

He simply thinks the plant can do its work more cleanly—through new technology that he has seen in other countries. They do know that if they decide to go to products they don't want to negotiate seriously with companies officials, they'll go out of business.

Company officials aren't likely to help them. According to federal records, the plant recycles scrap metal and turns it into usable brass and bronze ingots—molds or pieces of metal that can be shaped into other products down the line. But last week, Randall Well, H. Kramer's executive vice president, politely told me several times that he wasn't going to tell me squat—about the company, its work, its bottom line, or its reaction to the referendum. "I'd love to sit down and have a lengthy conversation about all of this, but at this point I'm not at liberty to say anything," he said.

Breuer said he's spoken with Well before, and Well assured him the company is one of the cleanest foundries in the country. "He's very personable, very likable," Breuer said. "He told me they weren't releasing anything harmful. He said it was all inert."

Government records suggest that's not true. The company has been fined by the U.S. and Illinois environmental protection agencies at least twice over the last 10 years, including for air pollution and the illegal disposal of bricks containing hazardous metallic waste.

Analyzing U.S. Environmental Protection Agency data, the pro-environmental Web site Scorecard.org gave H. Kramer a "cancer risk score" that ranks among the nation's highest—mainly because the plant releases thousands of pounds of airborne lead each year.

I'm sure all of us—even the 12 "No" voters—can agree this isn't cool. Lead is dirty and stinky. It's also a known carcinogen that can cause brain damage in children.

Still, even the Greens acknowledge that they don't know how much this level of pollution affects people's health. That's why they're pushing for a study.

"Sounds like a plan to me. I'm just not sure the nonbinding referendum will win any political support," the Greens are hopeful. They say Solis reached out after they won support in previous elections for proposals to clean up area coal plants and publicly debate zoning changes. In fact, Breuer said, Solis now claims he came up with the idea for a City Council resolution on the coal plants. "I mean, he turned around 180 degrees," Breuer said, sounding thrilled.

Neither Solis nor his chief of staff, Juan Saldana, returned phone calls seeking their version of events. So here's mine: The City Council resolution on coal plants has gone nowhere, though Solis is the council's floor leader. And, while he's expressed interest in clean air issues in the last couple of years, he's also received $3,300 in political contributions from Well since 2002, state campaign records show. It's not much of his total pot, considering he received $2,224,960 in donations between July and October of this year alone, but it took both.

On the other hand, Solis is a smart guy who respects displays of political strength—like successful ballot initiatives. If he figures he can't afford to look "inert" on airborne lead, he'll call for a study—even if it involves passing off a corporate contributor for a bit.

Either way, the Greens realize they have some serious work to do now, though they haven't decided what specifically it is. Should they push Solis to act? Pressure the city and state environmental authorities? File a lawsuit against the company? Collect more data themselves?

They think they'll get some answers through discussion at a meeting this Thursday, Dec. 2, at the Decima Museum, 1901 S. Throop, at 7 p.m. Of course, they don't know how many people will show up.

That's why, for Breuer, nothing is more important than getting more local residents involved. As aggressive as the Greens have been in these last three elections, much of the work has been done by a handful of left-of-center white guys who've lived in the mostly Mexican community only a few years. In other words, until they recruit more longtime neighborhood folks, they won't be able to deliver much else.

"Our real goal is to try to recover what was used in our city—a sense of community," Breuer said. "It's really been destroyed by corruption and self-interest."

The message appeals to Maria Chavez, a 35-year-old mother of two energized by the thought of forcing H. Kramer to clean up. Chavez grew up in Pilsen and lived for about 15 years on 19th and Loomis, about two blocks from the foundry. Driving past in her car, she said, "I would see that it was foggy all the time. Then I would look in my rearview mirror and see that it was clear."

Chavez said she called the city's 311 number several times with complaints, but nothing ever happened. A few weeks before the election, she saw a flyer on the referendum. Though she recently moved to Bridgeport, she eagerly called the number on it. "I never knew there were Pilsen Greens," Chavez said. She quizzes them about who they were and what their real motives were, and they give her the right answers. "They seem committed to me.

Breuer said the same thing about Chavez. She's already become a regular presence at the group's meetings, and she's spent the last couple of weeks calling a list of other community organizations to see if they'll get involved, starting by attending Thursday's meeting.

"Right now, I'm trying the best I can," Chavez said. "And hopefully we'll be able to do something."


If it isn't done soon, the voters in the 3rd Precinct will deserve to ask why. And it won't just be the Greens who need to answer.