

Clearing The Air in Pilsen

B Y J A C K B E S S

The curious thing about the smoke coming from the H. Kramer and Co. plant, Maria Chavez thought, was how it seemed to linger in the residential streets around the company.

"I would take the kids to have my mother baby-sit when I went to work and I would pass right here," Chavez says, outside the plant on Chicago's South Side. "There was a cloud of smoke over here (in the street next to Kramer) but not way over there. I wondered what was going on."

Chavez and other residents of the Pilsen neighborhood, which is Chicago's largest Latino community, banded together in 2004 to — literally and figuratively — clear the air.

The residents' campaign resulted in government action and some commitments from Kramer to be a better neighbor, and it illustrates what happens when a community mobilizes over pollution and potential health risks.

To begin with, residents wind up taking a crash course on the complexities of industrial chemicals and environmental regulations. They also have to learn how to document their case. And be ready to work hard in order to be heard.

But now, with their newly heightened awareness of the issues, the residents and others like them across the country have a new worry: a proposed rule change regarding the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Toxics Release Inventory (TRI). Environmental activists warn the proposed changes would increase the amount of allowable pollution, while decreasing the amount of public notification, making it harder to access the type of data on industrial emissions in cases similar to the one in Pilsen.

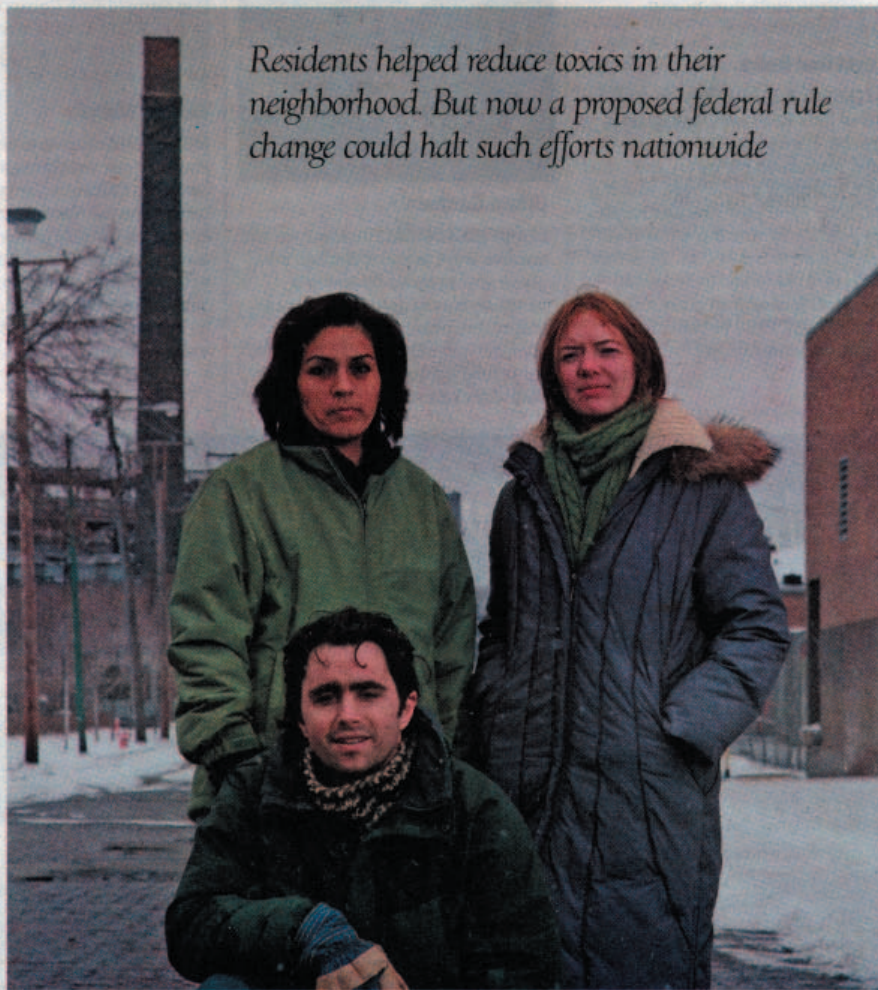
Residents Take Action

With a nearly 90 percent Latino population, Pilsen is a port-of-entry for Mexican immigrants as well as a vibrant center of artistic and political activity. It's also home to a large industrial corridor with around 200 companies that provide more than 10,000 jobs, according to City of Chicago statistics.

A couple years ago, Chavez began calling the city about the foul-smelling smoke coming from Kramer, 1345 W. 21st St., a company founded in the 1920s that recycles scrap metal into brass and bronze ingots. She said it was hard to raise much interest and when she did, city officials told her she had to document the problem.

"They told me I'm supposed to chart it down, with the days, the color of the smoke, the smell of the smoke, the location of the smoke — not just once but for a long time — and then call them," Chavez said. "Then you have to take a picture of it or videotape it. But then nothing ever happened when I did do that."

Chavez wasn't alone in wondering about local industrial emissions. Karen Sheets, a graphic designer at the American Library Association, moved to Pilsen in 2003 and was stunned to learn of a nearby coal power plant: Midwest Generation's Fisk Station,



Residents helped reduce toxics in their neighborhood. But now a proposed federal rule change could halt such efforts nationwide

Maria Chavez (top left), Karen Sheets and Dorian Breuer, in front of the Kramer facility in Pilsen.

1111 W. Cermak Road.

"I've never experienced a place where you can't seem to keep your house clean, like here," Sheets said. "It's just constant. You can wash your windows and the next day they're sooty."

When members of the Pilsen Green Party checked data in the Toxics Release Inventory, which charts emissions that industries are required to report to the EPA, they found that Kramer reported releasing 3,400 pounds of lead into the air in 2003. (Subsequent TRI data showed the company released 1,200 pounds of lead in 2004.) These emissions are within the law, but with residential buildings and a public elementary school so close to the Kramer plant, fears grew about the health impact of lead emissions. According to the EPA, lead exposure causes learning disabilities and other health problems in young children. At higher levels, lead can damage a child's kidneys and central nervous system.

Deciding to target their efforts on Kramer, some

residents formed the Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization (PERRO), meeting occasionally at the Jumping Bean Cafe and holding public forums at the local public-library branch. Sheets created PERRO's bilingual website (pilsenperro.org), which has video of factory smoke and links to EPA tables on emissions. PERRO members organized a petition drive and put an advisory referendum on the November 2004 ballot calling for a city and state investigation of Kramer emissions. The measure passed by 95 percent.

As the city and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency launched their investigations, PERRO decided to do its own soil-sampling tests. Working with a Chicago lab, Stat Analysis Corp., Chavez and a small group of residents began their crash course in taking soil samples.

"The lab gave us a lot of instruction on how to do it," Chavez said. "The lab guy gave us a cooler, like the ones you have your lunch in, to hold the samples.

Everybody who did the tests was an average person — no experts. This is so technical. Most of us don't have that kind of background. I'm a housewife and my background is in social work.

"Our group was so small and really had no money to work with. Big companies with a lot of money, they would just not take us seriously. ... We are up against people with master's degrees in this field. They learn it for years. We had to learn it in a week."

Using some stainless-steel tools loaned by Chavez' father-in-law, the group took 12 soil samples. The sampling was documented in photos (at right) taken by Chavez' 13-year-old daughter Alejandra. "This was for recording what they were doing, so they could determine what samples go with what areas," Alejandra said.

Chavez added: "We wanted to make sure we had backups to whatever we were doing because a lot of times, things happen and if you don't have a record of it, it never happened."

The results of FERRO's independent tests released in June 2005 showed lead levels "2 to 92 times the allowable limit," according to the group.

This set the stage for a community meeting in September where IEPA officials revealed the results of their own tests of soil from the Kramer facility, four off-site locations and six residential properties. Soil from the Kramer property showed lead levels ranging from 1,250 to 65,000 parts per million. At off-site properties, lead levels ranged from 120 to 2,500 parts per million. The EPA considers lead-contaminated soil to be a potential health risk if levels are above 400 parts per million in bare soil in children's play areas or 1,200 parts per million for bare soil in other parts of a yard.

Kramer's Response

Kramer & Co., a fifth-generation, family-owned business with around 100 employees, has been unfairly targeted in the FERRO campaign, says Todd Wiener, an attorney representing the company.

Kramer has its own take on the emissions issue, having hired two consulting firms whose subsequent reports show that lead found in Pilsen soil didn't come from Kramer, Wiener said.

The reports' data does not show an airborne dispersal pattern of lead from Kramer, he said. If they did, the highest levels of lead in the soil would be found close to Kramer and decreasing as you get further away from the plant. "But that's just not the case," Wiener said. "What you have instead is this absolutely

random pattern of high lead levels right next to low levels. The highest levels of lead we found offsite were both upwind and the furthest away from Kramer."

The second key point is that chemical emissions captured in Kramer's baghouse (a device that traps particles by filtering emissions through large cloth or fiberglass bags) show a "chemical fingerprint that us extremely different from what was found



PHOTOS: ALEJANDRA RODRIGUEZ

in the (Pilsen) soil," Wiener said.

"What we did was look at the ratio of lead to copper to zinc in the Pilsen soil and in the Kramer emissions," Wiener said. "In the Pilsen soil, lead makes up about 30 percent of the lead-copper-zinc, and in the Kramer emissions, (lead) is 3 or 4 percent. The Kramer emissions are over 90 percent zinc."

Wiener noted that the IEPA has said the mix of metals in Pilsen's soil is no different from that found in the soil of other Chicago neighborhoods. IEPA officials say lead has wound up in soil in many urban areas over the decades from a variety of sources, including leaded gasoline and the residue of lead-based paint.

After the IEPA released the results of its soil tests around Kramer, the company agreed to remediate two areas: land on an old railroad spur that goes into the facility and a small, city-owned parcel adjacent to Kramer's property line, Wiener said.

In addition, Kramer agreed to beautify its property, acting on a recommendation by city officials. "The city said it would be a good, neighborly thing to do, and we want to be a good neighbor," he said.

EPA Rule Proposal

But now FERRO activists fear that information about chemical emissions will be harder, if not impossible, to obtain if the EPA, approves a Bush administration proposal to make changes in the rules by which indus-

tries report their emissions.

A report by the Illinois Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) says the changes would weaken industry reporting procedures in the TRI program. For Illinois, that would mean that data on chemical releases would be unobtainable for industries in 27 Illinois ZIP codes (including 60608 in Pilsen) and limit available information in 268 other ZIP codes, Illinois PIRG charges.

being blamed for all of the area's pollution and not account of the cumulative impact of many small facilities.

The cumulative impact of pollution from all of Pilsen's industries — as well as the exhaust from the nearby highways and the local truck traffic — must ultimately be addressed, according to Kenneth Corrigan, a bookseller and FERRO member. A second issue is changing the regulations that allow industries to emit chemicals in the heart of an urban resi-

dential neighborhood.

"Kramer is within the law in their emissions and the way they're operating their plant," Corrigan said. "But in Pilsen, you have to take all these multiple sources of many sorts of pollution and add it up. There are others that are creating pollution but everyone is within the statutory regulation."

"We talk about the issue of aggregate polluters and regulation and how the regulation isn't strict enough adjacent to residential areas. They're such huge issue but I do think we're going to see solutions coming out of this gathering of concerned citizens." **CC**

Jack Bess is a Chicago-based writer.

Visit: www.epa.gov/fedrgrstr/EPA-TRI/2003/July/Day-01/tri16584.htm or www.epa.gov/epahome/dockets.htm

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