

Montgomery health officer to weigh in on gas stations, coal tar

Officer will confer with state Department of Health and Mental Hygiene on public health impacts

by Kate S. Alexander, Staff Writer, *The Gazette*. Published June 19, 2012.

The Montgomery County Council wants an assessment of the public health issues surrounding mega gas stations and coal tar before its committees discuss proposed legislation to restrict each within the county.

During a Tuesday briefing by Health Officer Dr. Ulder J. Tillman, the council asked Tillman to weigh in on the public health debate surrounding a zoning text amendment to limit large fuel stations and a new bill introduced Tuesday that would prohibit the use of coal tar as a sealant on pavement.

“This gas station issue is frustrating,” Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park said. He said he expected to hear competing claims about the health impacts of large gas stations like the one proposed by Costco at its future site in Wheaton during a public hearing Tuesday night.

Costco’s station, proposed for the parking lot of its warehouse store, would have an annual volume of 12 million gallons per year within 1,000 feet of the Kenmont Swim & Tennis Club at 2900 Faulkner Place.

Members of the club and residents from the nearby Kensington Heights Civic Association argue that a gas station of its size poses an environmental risk, citing studies conducted in Greece and Spain, which concluded that if the gas station is built, the community would be exposed to an excess amount of benzene, a carcinogen that the studies linked to leukemia.

Costco consultants say carbon monoxide tests at the company’s Sterling, Va. gas station found levels well below Environmental Protection Agency guidelines and that noise and odor studies further prove there will be little change in the surrounding Kensington Heights neighborhood.

Tillman acknowledged that she had been asked to comment on mega gas stations but noted that her office is not equipped to make health impact assessments.

To answer the council’s request regarding mega gas stations, her office has reached out to the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to confer on the issue and is awaiting an answer, she said.

Councilwoman Nancy Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park, chairwoman of the county's Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee, said her committee is scheduled to discuss the proposed zoning amendment at its July 9 meeting, but would be willing to wait to discuss the bill until Tillman can provide more information.

Acknowledging the council's other role as the county's Board of Health, Councilwoman Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring said the members do have to concern themselves with policies that ensure residents' health.

Sponsored by Councilman Craig Rice (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown, the erosion, sediment control and stormwater management bill introduced Tuesday would prohibit using coal tar and coal-tar pitch, two products containing polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, or PAH, as pavement products to control potentially dangerous runoff and ground contamination.

Coal tar and coal-tar pitch are among seven PAH compounds classified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as probable human carcinogens.

Although health impacts are a concern surrounding coal tar, Rice said it is really about the environmental impacts. The Department of Environmental Protection is expected to weigh in on the bill, he said.

Ervin, Council Vice President Nancy Navarro (D-Dist. 4) of Silver Spring and council members Marc B. Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park and Hans Riemer (D-At large) of Silver Spring co-sponsored the bill.

A public hearing on the zoning text amendment was scheduled for Tuesday evening. A hearing on the coal tar legislation is scheduled for 1:30 p.m. July 10. Exactly which council committee will discuss the coal tar bill has yet to be determined.

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