

Air Quality in Rowan: What Are the Facts?

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October 2004

CENTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

I think it's time to re-examine the facts about air quality in Rowan County and also to look at the progress we have made since the Clean Air Initiative began.

The Catawba College Center for the Environment and the Rowan Sustainable Community Development Commission began efforts about a year ago to educate the public about air pollution and work toward cleaning up our air.

What prompted these efforts? In 2003, the American Lung Association ranked Rowan as one of the worst counties in the nation for air quality. We recorded 74 ozone alert days from 1999 to 2001.

What is the reality here? Do we really have a problem or is this merely related to the presence of ozone monitors in Rowan? To find out, we began asking some questions.

Why were two ozone monitors placed in Rowan when some other counties had none? The N.C. Division of Air Quality says the reason is that we are located between two areas that suffer from air pollution. The latest ALA statistics rank the Charlotte-Gastonia-Salisbury metropolitan area 14th in the nation for ozone pollution and the Greensboro-Winston-Salem-High Point area 16th. Our region has worse air pollution than San Diego or Atlanta.

One might suspect that being downwind from either of these areas would make our air quality worse. And, sure enough, that's what the Division of Air Quality discovered.

Sheila Holman explained in more detail why ozone monitors were placed in Rowan. She notes that the bulk of the monitors were placed along the I-85 corridor because that's where the greatest concentrations of people live, and consequently that's where the most pollution is generated. Few monitors were placed along the coast, for example, because fewer people live there, plus they have the benefit of cleaner ocean breezes. The air coming off

the ocean hasn't passed over a polluted region.

From a budget standpoint, it just wasn't practical to place a monitor in all 100 counties. They had to determine where they thought a problem might be occurring. The N.C. Division of Air Quality's modeling team and Dr. Harvey Jefferies, a nationally recognized atmospheric modeling expert, recommended that monitoring sites be placed in Rowan because it was located between Charlotte and the Triad metropolitan regions.

A second question we asked was, "Why has Rowan consistently recorded more ozone alert days than even Mecklenburg?" (In the American Lung Association's 2004 State of the Air Report, Mecklenburg had 59 high ozone days compared to Rowan's 67.)

One answer is that it takes time for ozone to form. Nitrogen oxides emitted by autos must react with volatile organic compounds in the presence of heat and sunlight before the chemicals are converted to ozone. So by the time the chemicals get to Rowan, they have become ozone pollution.

The test results from the ozone monitors have caused many in Rowan to become alarmed. This includes a number of financial institutions because they realize that living in an area that does not meet federal air quality standards threatens the economic health and the quality of life in this county.

Tell me, if you were trying to find a place to locate your industry, would you choose a county that would require you to install costly technology because of its air pollution? Or would you rather go someplace where you didn't have to meet more stringent air quality regulations? Every industry that passes us by translates into lost jobs and lost tax revenue.

As this area's population increases, we're going to have even greater problems if we do not do something now. Mecklenburg's population increased 36

percent from 1990 to 2000. With a population of 750,000, Mecklenburg is choked with cars. And because of the way we have designed our communities, vehicle miles traveled have increased faster than the population has.

A number of people in our community, including our current county commissioners, our air quality commission, businesses and individual citizens, began tackling the problem because we felt that if we led by example, we would have a better chance of convincing other counties to do their part to clean up the air. That effort is working. Rebecca Yarbrough, the head of the Centralina Council of Governments, recently said Rowan is setting the example for the state and the nation in the battle against air pollution.

It has been gratifying to see so many people from different sectors come together to combat this problem. Let me highlight just a few of the things that have happened in recent months.

- A number of Rowan architects are examining ways to design green buildings in both the commercial and residential sector, and the Center for the Environment has pledged to help educate the public about the impact of green building practices.

- We have begun to develop a plan for alternative modes of transportation, such as walking and biking, through both greenways and efforts to make some of our municipal areas more pedestrian friendly.

- County government officials have initiated meetings with energy consultants to examine ways of saving energy and therefore reducing air pollution. They have already taken steps to begin the en-

ergy-saving process, like installing energy-efficient light bulbs, using photo cells for outside lighting and tinting windows to save on air conditioning.

- The city is seeking funding for running ultra-low sulfur biodiesel in its transit fleet and packer trucks.

- The Rowan-Salisbury Schools are retrofitting school buses to reduce diesel emissions.

- The Derrick Truck Stop on I-85 has received funding to electrify its facility so truckers do not have to run their engines to power heating and air conditioning and electronic devices when they stop for the night.

- Steve Jarrett, president of Superior Oil, will soon offer biodiesel, a cleaner-burning fuel, at his Penn Mart station.

It's a good indicator that we're making progress when the top administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Mike Leavitt, comes to Rowan to say he is here to help out and provide funds to help us clean up our air. That happened at the Derrick Truck Stop electrification event.

The momentum is growing. More and more people are lending their support to this effort. We're beginning to make an impact, and the surrounding counties recognize it. Now it's time to step up the progress, to build on the momentum that has propelled us to this point. Our children and grandchildren will thank us for it. ■