

Emanuel signals crackdown on piles of refinery waste **Mayor says city may require Southeast Side refinery waste be enclosed**

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With more dusty petroleum coke piling up on the Southeast Side, Mayor Rahm Emanuel suggested Tuesday that the city might require the black mountains of refinery waste to be enclosed for the first time.

In an email response to questions from the Tribune, an Emanuel spokesman said the city is considering a new ordinance that would require three storage terminals on the Calumet River to completely cover their piles of petroleum coke and coal. Another option would require the piles to be surrounded with high walls on three sides, leaving them open to the river.

The email was short on specifics, and the mayor's office has yet to unveil a formal proposal. But the regulations Emanuel envisions are the latest attempt to crack down on black dust that blows into surrounding neighborhoods from piles of petroleum coke — a high-sulfur, high-carbon byproduct of oil refining that is becoming a bigger issue as the United States processes more oil from the tar sands region of Alberta.

"Last week I asked my staff ... what we could do to stop what I think is both a public health hazard as well as an environmental degradation," Emanuel said during a news conference at the newly refurbished 95th Street Station on the CTA Red Line. "We're going to make sure we're protecting the people."

Residents of the East Side and South Deering neighborhoods say the dust clouds often force them to stay inside with their windows closed. Many have become increasingly angry about what they consider to be slow responses to their complaints from city, state and federal officials.

Since the Tribune and other media drew attention to the problems last month, Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency have filed complaints against KCBX Terminals Co. and Beemsterboer Slag Co. seeking immediate action to tamp down the dust. Emanuel signaled he would step in after the U.S. EPA last week ordered monitors erected around the storage terminals to measure lung-damaging particulate matter.

Companies have stored uncovered piles of coal and petroleum coke on the Southeast Side for decades, a legacy of shuttered steel mills and blast furnaces that once dominated the area. During an emotionally-charged community forum last week, several residents said chronic dust problems have worsened since the storage terminals began acquiring more petroleum coke, also known as petcoke.

Many blame the piles for leaving thick black grime on surrounding houses, a nuisance they said they reluctantly tolerated when the mills were still running and jobs were plentiful.

Peggy Salazar, an East Side resident and activist with the Southeast Environmental Task Force, questioned whether new city regulations can fix the problems. Some of her neighbors want Emanuel to order the piles removed altogether, similar to the action Detroit Mayor Dave Bing recently took in response to complaints about a giant mound of petcoke.

A few blocks north of the petcoke piles, Salazar noted, the city has given significant support to a developer who wants to turn the former U.S. Steel South Works site into a mecca for energy-efficient housing and businesses.

"We're tired of being a dumping ground while they talk about building this environmental Shangri-La so close by," she said. "Does covering these waste piles really change anything?"

KCBX, a company controlled by wealthy industrialists Charles and David Koch, owns two of the sites, one along 100th Street south of the Chicago Skyway bridge and a larger terminal between 108th and 111th streets.

In a statement, KCBX said it recently installed 42 new computer-controlled water cannons at the larger site that can douse the piles with up to 1,800 gallons of water a minute. The company is testing a system that automatically turns on the cannons based on weather conditions and adjusts to wind directions.

"We are committed to doing the right thing," said Jake Reint, a KCBX spokesman. "We want to be a good employer and good neighbor in Illinois and in every community where we operate. We welcome a productive conversation on this issue."

Beemsterboer has not responded to requests for comment about its storage terminal at 106th Street and the river.

The regulations sketched out by Emanuel's staff are modeled in part on California rules that require petcoke, coal and other raw materials to be enclosed or covered.

Much of the petcoke stored in Chicago comes from a nearby BP refinery in Whiting, where a federal legal settlement requires the oil giant to store any waste on site behind 40-foot walls. An enclosed conveyor and loading system is equipped with wind screens and water sprayers to keep dust down.

All of the petcoke from Whiting eventually is sent just over the state border to the uncovered piles managed by KCBX.

By the end of the year, BP is expected to complete an overhaul of the Whiting refinery that will make it the world's second-largest source of petcoke — more than tripling its output to 2.2 million tons from 700,000 tons a year.

To prepare, KCBX is seeking a permit to move equipment from its site on 100th Street to the larger terminal a few blocks away. But the Illinois EPA on Tuesday postponed a decision until its review of the company's operations is completed.

Petcoke can be used as fuel, but regulations tightly control the amount that can be burned without elaborate pollution controls. Most petcoke produced in the U.S. is shipped overseas to China and other countries with more lenient environmental rules.

Henry Henderson, Midwest director of the nonprofit Natural Resources Defense Council, said the sharper scrutiny should prompt a broader discussion about the future of the Southeast Side.

"Should petcoke ever be in close proximity to homes, schools and parks?" said Henderson, the first commissioner of the now-defunct Chicago Department of the Environment. "One thing is clear: We shouldn't ask our fellow citizens to live with pollution from an inherently dirty business that gives little back to the surrounding communities."