

Unit 3: Power



Baton Rouge councilwoman says landfill causing cancer, but health experts say evidence lacking

By Steve Hardy shardy@theadvocate.com December 15, 2018

For more than a year, residents near Baker have fought to shut down the local specialty landfill over concerns about odor, fire, and vermin.

But the councilwoman representing the area has taken it a step further, suggesting the site is causing cancer – a claim health officials say isn't supported by the facts.

Ronaldson Field was first permitted in 1997 and is seeking permission from the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality to continue operations for ten more years. The landfill typically accepts construction debris and wood waste, though it was allowed to take in waterlogged furniture and carpets in the aftermath of the 2016 flood.

When residents were asked in October to submit public comments on a permit renewal, nearly all asked the DEQ to reject the proposal because the landfill smells bad or because of non-specific health concerns.

Local councilwoman Chauna Banks – who represents the Alsen and St. Irma Lee neighborhoods – has honed in on the alleged cancer risks.

“One hundred percent of the residents in St. Irma Lee have been diagnosed and died of some form of cancer,” she told her Metro Council colleagues in an October meeting, reading off a PowerPoint presentation she prepared about Ronaldson Field.

When questioned about the assertion in a recent interview, Banks doubled down, saying that according to St. Irma Lee residents, everyone who has died in recent memory was killed by cancer.

For medical professionals, though, her claim beggars belief.

“(The landfill) is not going to cause cancer. You know what’s going to cause cancer? Fatty food, smoking, genes, lifestyle choices, the state epidemiologist Raoult Ratard, of the Louisiana Department of Health.

Parish Coroner Beau Clark also said he has not drawn or seen any link between Ronaldson Field and instances of cancer.

Lauren Maniscalco, liaison for LSU’s Tumor Registry, said the cancer rate in the census block around the landfill is not statistically significant when compared to the rest of Louisiana based on the available data on cancer tumors.

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Told of the assertions by health officials, Banks said she's talked to residents about their medical concerns and that the DEQ needs to take them seriously and do more studies. She said she didn't feel like repeating what she's already said about cancer rates.

"We've done all the work. We've had all the meetings," Banks said.

Ronaldson Field is mostly full of plants and construction material that's already in people's houses, Ratard said. So while her tried to allay cancer fears, the doctor acknowledged that there are legitimate concerns for people who live near landfills.

"The odors are not going to kill you, but they are going to make you feel very unpleasant ... Day after day it's going to affect your quality of life," Ratard said.

Fermenting waste produces sulfides and methane gas, "not sufficient quantities to cause health effects ... but our nose is very sensitive to it," he continued.

Ronaldson Field officials did not return calls seeking comment. In the past, landfill representatives have said they fill a vital role which ensures continued development in the region. They've also said that flood debris would have lingered much longer without their facility and pointed out that the landfill is in compliance with all the DEQ's regulations.

Though the city-parish dumped flood debris at Ronaldson Field in 2016, the local government does not currently have a contract with the facility, nor does it plan to use the site in the future, said environmental services director Richard Speer.

The city-parish has its own dump – the North Landfill – about four miles away off U.S. 61.

DEQ expects the rule on Ronaldson Field's permit renewal sometime next year.

"My folks are going through a lot comments right now. ... This one has attracted a lot of attention," said DEQ assistant secretary Elliott Vega. "There is some controversy."

DEQ denied another construction and debris landfill around Alsen about a year and a half ago, Vega said. The decision didn't get a lot of attention, but it does show the department is willing to say no to companies that can't prove that they're filling a need and adequately considering alternate sites, he continued.

Banks has contended that DEQ does an inadequate job monitoring Ronaldson Field and investigating neighbor's complaints about odors and other concerns. The department has defended its record.

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The Louisiana Environmental Action network has joined with Alsen and St. Irma Lee residents in opposing the permit renewal. The group argues that the state should slow down because there is a higher instance of cancer in the area and they need to determine the source before charging ahead with development.

“The common rhetoric we often hear from state agencies is that there is not a problem, to which I would say we do not have enough information to say that there is no problem, and the data we do have suggests there is a problem,” LEAN spokesman Michael Orr wrote in an email to The Advocate.

The local census block does have a cancer rate 13 percent higher than the state average. LSU’s tumor registry found a rate of 552 instances of cancer per 100,000 residents between 2006 and 2014. However, the rate and small sample size mean the state doesn’t believe the data indicate the area’s cancer rate is significantly higher or the result of chance, Maniscalco said.

Even if there is a higher cancer rate, it’s difficult to pin it on any particular facility, noted Clark, the coroner. Many petrochemical plants are also nearby, which could impact residents’ health, he said.

Those other sites make Ronaldson Field a weak target, said communications consultant and former environmental journalist Gerard Braud.

He’s sympathetic to neighborhoods which have long had to live among disruptive, foul-smelling facilities, but doesn’t think their scattershot strategy will work.

“You can’t just speculate and point your finger at a smokestack and say, ‘That’s the source of my ailments.’ ... You can’t just throw every fear at the wall like a bowl of spaghetti and see what sticks,” Braud said.

Banks allowed that other facilities may contribute airborne carcinogens, but traffic problems, water run-off, negative impacts on economic development and other concerns are all directly attributable to Ronaldson Field, Banks said.

Meanwhile, DEQ has promised to respond to all the community’s concerns, including the neighbors who just want to see their quality of life improve.

Works Cited

Hardy, S. (2018, December 15). Baton Rouge councilwoman says landfill causing cancer, but health experts say evidence lacking. Retrieved from The Advocate: https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/environment/article_e61204b0-f7e3-11e8-b290-339a9baca451.html