

# Pittsburgh Tries to Clear the Air on Pollution

Business, Environmental Leaders Push for Further Improvements to Aid City's Transition to Hub for Science and Technology

By KRIS MAHER

PITTSBURGH—It has been decades since industrial soot blotted out the sun here and streetlights were needed during the day to cut through the gloom, but less-visible air pollution still ranks among the nation's worst.



Getty Images;

Pittsburgh in 1890

So a new coalition including businesses and environmental groups has taken on the tricky task of persuading skeptical residents that their air isn't nearly as clean as it appears—an initial step toward making Pittsburgh's air fit its reputation as a city reinventing itself as a hub for science and technology.

"The air is so much better than it used to be, at least what you can see, that people are not aware that the air is still a challenge," said Bobby Vagt, president of the Heinz Endowments.

The nonprofit group has contributed \$4 million so far to the Breathe Project, the coalition that has drawn members from U.S. Steel Corp. to the Sierra Club. It is focused for now on raising awareness and promoting steps residents and companies can take voluntarily. Other ideas include steps to reduce vehicle pollution and, possibly, pushing for regulatory changes.

One example of Pittsburgh's new focus as a tech hub is Google Inc.'s 200-worker office here. The employees work on online commerce and data storage, among other things, a company spokesman said. The office added 50 people in 2011, but the city's air quality is a "big problem" when it comes to recruiting employees to work here, said Andrew Moore, a Google vice president and head of the operation.

Pittsburgh in 2010. The city has been recognized for its efforts to make the transition from an industrial city into a hub for science and technology.

"If we can't offer [clean air and clean water] to employees we need to recruit to fill the jobs of the future, then we will lose them to those cities that do," said Mr. Moore, who backs the Breathe Project.

Today's air-quality problems come primarily from tiny particles and chemical pollutants that are largely invisible but that health experts warn can contribute to problems such as asthma and heart disease. In 2010, the Pittsburgh area—with 2.4 million people—ranked third in the country for short-term particulate pollution, according to the American Lung Association, which lobbies for clean air. Pittsburgh has been among the top 10 cities since the rankings began in 2004.

## Invisible Threat

Pittsburgh's air ranks among the worst in the U.S. for short-term particle pollution\*

1. Bakersfield-Delano, Calif.
2. Fresno-Madera, Calif.
3. Pittsburgh-New Castle
4. Los Angeles-Long Beach-Riverside
5. Salt Lake City-Ogden-Clearfield
6. Provo-Orem, Utah
7. Visalia-Porterville, Calif.
8. Birmingham-Hoover-Cullman, Ala.
9. Logan, Utah-Idaho
9. Hanford-Corcoran, Calif.
9. Sacramento-Arden-Arcade-Yuba City, Calif.

\*Short-term particle pollution is a measure of the microscopic organic chemicals, metals, dust and other particles in the air averaged over a 24-hour period.

Source: American Lung Association

The particulates come from local sources including diesel engines, remaining steel plants and other industrial sites. They are also carried to Pittsburgh from coal-burning power plants in Ohio, Indiana and Illinois and then trapped by the Allegheny Mountains and river valleys.

Pollution levels are just one factor that affects asthma, but Allegheny County—which includes Pittsburgh—has one of the highest rates in the state. Of 73 Pennsylvania counties and school districts, Allegheny County had the ninth-highest lifetime prevalence of asthma among children under 18, at 11.3% in 2009, according to the latest statistics available from the state Department of Health.

The Breathe Project, formally unveiled in October, has studied efforts by other cities, including Houston and San Diego, to improve air quality by timing traffic lights to reduce idling and switching public buses to natural gas. Breathe, which hasn't received any government funding, also recently gave \$1 million to a program to help small construction contractors cut emissions.

"We absolutely support the project," said Joanna Doven, press secretary for Mayor Luke Ravenstahl, who recently proposed running city trash trucks on natural gas to cut emissions.

The Pittsburgh effort comes as lawmakers and companies in states including Texas and West Virginia have pushed back against stricter federal air regulations. A spokesman said the coalition hasn't ruled out seeking stronger air-emission regulations. That is a cause for concern among some.

"It's very important to have clean air. It's also important that you're not hindering small businesses," said Eileen Watt, president of the Western Pennsylvania chapter of Associated Builders and Contractors Inc.



The focus now, though, is on spreading the word about the city's air quality and the importance of improving it, starting with steps like biking to work and planting trees.

More than half of the residents here aren't aware that Pittsburgh's air ranks among the worst in the nation, according to a survey commissioned by the Heinz Endowments. Only 15% of residents feel that a "lot of work" needs to be done on it.

"When you look back, we had problems when we had the mills," said Richard

Wilson, who said he does tai chi outside without worrying about the air. "The air in Pittsburgh is pretty good."

Sentiments like that prompted Breathe to launch a \$500,000 media campaign that includes ads on TV, in newspapers, on billboards, on the sides of buses and at the homes of the Steelers and Penguins.

A 30-second TV ad shows purple dots floating across images of a jogger on a sunny day, children playing and an elderly couple walking, contrasted with shots of factories emitting white smoke. A narrator says, "Pittsburgh is a great place to live, but if we could see the invisible pollution in our air we'd realize the air quality in our region is among the worst in the nation."

Bob Butter, principal of Veritas Communications Advisors, a communications-consulting firm, said the campaign has avoided reinforcing the city's former Rust Belt image. "That's what's disarming about this. The sky is blue and the air looks pretty clean" in the ads, he said. "They've teed up a subject that otherwise was relegated to a few people that had a concern," he said.