

ARTICLE: METAL SHREDDING COMPANY MOVE SPARKS PROTEST

Linda Lutton. NPR Morning Edition.

In Chicago, a metal shredder plant is trying to move from a predominantly white neighborhood to a working-class, majority Latinx one that already suffers some of the worst air quality in Illinois.

RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:

In Chicago, there's a big fight over plans to build a metal recycling facility. The controversy has drawn together environmental justice advocates across the country. Linda Lutton of member station WBEZ has more.

LINDA LUTTON, BYLINE: This story starts on Chicago's North Side, where a metal shredding company called General Iron operated for a century. Picture mountains of mangled scrap metal, giant cranes picking up rusted cars as if they were toys. Lara Compton says she's been traumatized from living nearby.

LARA COMPTON: The fumes were just overwhelming. Your eyes would start to water. Your nose would burn. You would taste the metal on your tongue.

LUTTON: Workers in hazmat suits walked through her neighborhood picking up auto fluff, a byproduct of incinerating cars. General Iron shut down last year after numerous violations and further gentrification of the area. But the same owners want to open a new facility on the city's southeast side. They claim this one will be state of the art, far from homes on a former steel mill site in an area long zoned for industry. Southeast Side resident and environmental activist Olga Bautista has a name for that plan.

OLGA BAUTISTA: This is environmental racism. Bringing a known polluter from a wealthy white community to a Black and brown community is environmental racism.

LUTTON: Forty years ago, Bautista's family was drawn to this neighborhood specifically because of the heavy industry.

BAUTISTA: My family's originally from Mexico, and even in their dusty little towns in Mexico, they learned there was work in the steel mills here. And now we're dealing with the pollution that was left behind.

LUTTON: This area is home to dozens of current and former industrial sites, including toxic waste sites. But residents, among them the children and grandchildren of people who came here for jobs, are questioning the long-term costs to the environment here and to their health. Community cancer and asthma rates are high. Twenty-six-year-old Yesenia Chavez says as a kid, she wanted an inhaler like her friends had.

YESENIA CHAVEZ: So I grew up thinking that having asthma was normal because my cousins had it, my mom had it, my tias had it.

LUTTON: Chavez stopped eating solid foods for a month to draw attention to the metal shredder plan and to try to pressure Chicago's mayor to deny a permit. She and other hunger strikers galvanized support from environmental groups nationwide. Hundreds of doctors and public health workers signed

a letter opposing the shredder. Steve Joseph, whose company would run the new plant, says while residents have been vocal, they're wrong. He argues the new plant will be entirely different from the former operation.

STEVE JOSEPH: We've designed this thing from an environmental standpoint to contain dust, noise, water runoff and the environmental impacts. There will not be material that leaves our site.

LUTTON: Environmental activists are watching this case closely. Mustafa Santiago Ali of the National Wildlife Federation says historically, regulators evaluate permits in isolation. If an application meets requirements, it's approved. But there's now a national push to look at cumulative impacts on communities. Just because areas are zoned industrial doesn't mean they should be dumping grounds.

MUSTAFA SANTIAGO ALI: We cannot continue to create this toxic loading that happens with the communities who are either there or nearby.

LUTTON: The latest stimulus package includes \$100 million to help low-income and minority communities deal with the disproportionate impacts of pollution. In Chicago, it's the mayor and the Department of Public Health that will determine the outcome of this battle. The city recently announced it will delay permitting and ask the company for more information about dust and emissions. For NPR News, I'm Linda Lutton in Chicago.

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