

Meeting fuels outrage over fire

Residents are calling for action.

<http://southlandssun.co.za/72250/meeting-fuels-outrage-fire/>

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BLUFFITES have issued a call to action, following [last week's #DurbanFire](#), saying everyone must unite for the safety of the community.

The Bluff community meeting on Thursday, 30 March, hosted by the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) was the first of a round of public meetings to be held in various communities affected by the fire.

Read: [Air results in from #DurbanFire](#)

The vociferous outcry of residents while the Bayhead warehouse depot fire raged for three days over the weekend of 24 March was unfortunately not reflected proportionally at the meeting, where only about 70 community members arrived.

Resident, Ronel Lategan, registered the dismal turnout and said more people needed to stand together for a change to happen in the area. "Unless we get everybody to do something about it, nothing will change," she said as she urged more people in the community to attend meetings and demand action.

At a meeting at the site of the fire two days earlier, MEC for economic development, tourism and environmental affairs, Sihle Zikalala, said it would be [difficult to determine whether the smoke contained any harmful emissions](#) until a complete analysis had been done.



However, groundWork's Bobby Peek said the air quality monitoring facilities in the South Durban Basin have been faulty for years. A municipal member, who is known to the Sun, confirmed this and said they did not have the specialist equipment necessary to perform the required tests.

A private company called Skyside hearing about the need for testing to be done, stepped in to assist.

We heard of friends and family who were caught in the plume. We had phone calls from people who were worried, so we decided to do something. This is what we do and we felt we needed to help," said Skyside director, Quentin Hurt, who has been in the air testing profession for 25 years.

During the fire, there was no evidence to prove the smoke was safe or harmful and many community members panicked as the plumes reached their homes and left soot-streaks on buildings and cars in its wake.

This fear was reflected at the meeting, with many people asking why they could not be told if the air was safe to breathe and why the city allowed the perception of a blanket of silence to prevail throughout the emergency.

Llewelyn Julies, who attended the meeting, said they municipality should have mobilised as soon as they realised the fire was a danger to surrounding communities and set up mobile clinics within a 4km radius.

Many others echoed this sentiment and added that if the municipality had been communicating with them regularly throughout the fire, they would have been more assured of the city's ability to handle the situation and protect their homes and lives.

Bluff Crime Prevention Forum's Carl Knauff asked whether something like this needs to happen before Metro takes action? [Is there an evacuation plan?](#)

Peek responded: "They don't have one. Oopsie, they do, but they can't tell you about it. There is a plan on paper, but whether there is the infrastructure in place to implement it, they can't tell you."

This contentious point was reiterated multiple times during the meeting, which lasted two hours. With an average of three major incidents per annum logged by SDCEA since 2000, a localised emergency evacuation plan is of paramount importance.



eThekweni chief fire commander, Enoch Mchunu had the unenviable task of placating the community members who had gathered together.

He provided a list of all the items in the warehouse, along with their tonnage and the percentage of what was burned during the blaze. “This fire was the biggest we have experienced in eThekweni Municipality,” said Mchunu.

In answer to why it took so long to get the fire under control, Mchunu said the prevailing wind hampered their efforts. This was compounded by information that ammonia nitrate and

fertiliser were being stored on the premises. It became the priority of the firefighters to keep the flames from this area. It was later discovered that there was no ammonia nitrate.

“The danger to the immediate community (within a 4km radius) was eliminated on Saturday morning when the fire was brought under control. It is amazing we managed to save even parts of the warehouse. There were very few choices available and very little time to make decisions. The time it took to control the fire, by our standards, was record time,” added.

The community members applauded Enoch and his team of firefighters for their bravery, for protecting them and for responding to their calls to attend the public meeting.

Fire crews are still on site, as hay continues to smoulder. Mchunu said they would remain on site until it is completely extinguished.



“We live in fear, with one eye open,” said SDCEA co-ordinator, Desmond D’Sa. “This fire was just another example of what we face every day in the SDB. It is important that we develop and finalise an emergency evacuation plan immediately.”

Mchunu said emergency evacuation protocols were being developed for the SDB. Due to the size of the area, it was necessary to have multiple plans.

He said he was on site the day before the fire broke out at one such facility – the Umgeni Wastewater Treatment Works. This is the first of a number of facilities which will have an emergency evacuation plan put in place.

With the SDB surrounded by industry and other potentially hazardous installations, this is a necessary step the congregated community members insist must be taken to ensure their safety. “We were lucky this time, tomorrow we might not be so lucky. We need this plan in place immediately,” concluded D’Sa.