

Up in the air

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Environmentalists face an uphill battle on Pilsen brass foundry

The city's Environmental Department says it plans to respond by this summer to environmentalists' concerns about pollutants at the H. Kramer brass foundry in Pilsen.

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But they might have to go elsewhere for some answers.

The Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization—or as it likes to call itself, PERRO—met last week with Brendan Daley, government liaison for the Chicago Department of the Environment. In an interview after the meeting, Daley said that the DOE would not be able to answer all of PERRO's questions, only those within its jurisdiction.

For the rest, PERRO may have to hit up the Chicago Health Department, the state and federal Environmental Protection agencies, and the Labor Department.

"We don't want to be interpreting another agency's data, or playing middleman for another agency," Daley said.

Dorian Breuer, a PERRO

spokesman and head of the Pilsen Greens, said his group was "obviously disturbed that the department did not take more of the brunt of the workload."

PERRO wants to know, among other things, the specifics of the production process at H. Kramer & Co. Foundry, a list of all chemicals released by the foundry, the chemicals' potential effects on the environment, and a record of complaints made against the foundry. Some questions also probe employee safety at the H. Kramer & Co. foundry, and the health of Pilsen residents.

The push against H. Kramer & Co. Foundry, 1345 W. 21, first began when the Pilsen Greens circulated a petition against area coal-burning plants.

"We talked to 200-300 residents," said Breuer. "Somewhat to our surprise, the overwhelming concern they had was not the Fisk [Coal] Plant as it was the H. Kramer & Co. foundry.

One such resident was Maria

Chavez, who lives in Pilsen and grew up only a few blocks away from the H. Kramer foundry. Chavez had already tried to complain about the plant several different times. "I would just call the 311 and most of the time they would just take down my number, but I never heard back from them," said Chavez.

An environmental Web site, www.scorecard.org, under the umbrella of the group Environmental Defense, analyzes data from the federal EPA. The site considers the Kramer foundry to be in the top 10 percent of plants in the country in carcinogenic emissions. According to the scorecard, more than 3,800 pounds of lead were emitted at H. Kramer in 2002—2,300 of those in "fugitive emissions" not controlled through the foundry's smokestack.

H. Kramer Executive Vice President Randell Weil said that the foundry had a new filtering system installed last year. "That's a notable piece of equip-

ment," he said.

Weil added that his company employs about 125 people; about 20 percent of them live in Pilsen.

Weil referred all other questions to his attorney, who released a statement that read: "We are proud of our environmental record. The State of Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and the United States Environmental Protection Agency both classify us as a minor source of particulate emissions."

Lead-poisoning cases have declined steadily in Pilsen, as they have across the nation in the last seven years. According to statistics from the Chicago Department of Health, the percentage of Pilsen children with elevated blood-lead counts have decreased from just over 20 percent in 1997, to a little more than 4 percent in 2003. About 16 percent of children in East Garfield Park, by comparison, had elevated lead levels in 2003.

Breuer said that PERRO members don't want to shut down the plant; they just want to see it clean up its act. He added, however, that he isn't sure what steps the foundry could take to reduce emissions.