

Smigiel wants Norfolk Southern to act on coal dust

By Aaron Applegate
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NORFOLK

A city councilman wants railroad company Norfolk Southern to do more to control coal dust at its Lamberts Point terminal and is asking the council to weigh in.

Tommy Smigiel wrote in a letter that coal dust is a health concern and that the City Council has a “moral obligation” to get involved.

Some residents and environmental groups have complained about coal dust coming from the facility – the largest of its kind in the Northern Hemisphere.

Most of the coal terminal – built before the Clean Air Act of 1970 – operates without limits on particulate pollution, called “fugitive dust,” provided the facility doesn’t handle more coal each year than allowed by the state. Norfolk Southern hasn’t come close in years.

The state Department of Environmental Quality estimated that nearly 90,000 pounds of coal dust blew off the site last year.

In his letter, Smigiel said he wants Norfolk Southern to enclose with a dust suppression system the twin rotary dumpers used to empty coal from railroad cars and the conveyor belts that transport it to ships.

DEQ officials have said most of the coal dust from Lamberts Point comes from the dumpers, which were built in 1962 before it was common to enclose them.

Smigiel also wants the company to cover rail cars loaded with coal that travel from mountain mines to the terminal.

Finally, he suggested that the council ask the Virginia Department of Health to study the effects of coal dust around Lamberts Point.

Smigiel wrote that he noticed coal dust at Old Dominion University’s tennis courts when he coached high school tournaments there.

“Each tournament started off with brand new, fresh-out-of-the-can tennis balls,” he wrote. “By the time the matches ended, the balls were almost black because of the coal dust collected off the courts.”

Smigiel sent the letter to the council on Wednesday night, a few hours after about 20 residents met with Norfolk Southern executives at the company’s headquarters to discuss coal dust.

Norfolk Southern allowed a Virginian-Pilot reporter to listen to the discussion on a

conference call line.

At the meeting, Norfolk Southern CEO Wick Moorman said that while the company will explore options to reduce coal dust, he's not convinced it's a big deal.

"There are no facts to suggest this is a meaningful problem of any kind," he said.

Company analysis of soot at neighborhood homes and at air monitors near the terminal in 1988 found that much of the material wasn't coal dust, according to a - PowerPoint presentation at the meeting.

A 1996 DEQ report on particles from a home near Lamberts Point – the agency's only analysis – found "large amounts of coal dust and combustion products of coal, wood and oil." Other minerals, fibers and paint were also found.

Moorman said any action the company might take to reduce coal dust must make "some sort of economic sense."

Norfolk Southern spokesman Frank Brown said in an email Thursday that enclosing the dumpers is "mechanically unrealistic" and that covering coal cars is "impractical."

"We'll continue to look for ways to lower it even further, but some ideas just aren't workable," he wrote.

Smigiel asked council members to adopt a formal resolution endorsing his letter.

Councilwoman Theresa Whibley, who attended the Norfolk Southern meeting, said she will not support Smigiel's request.

"I have to admit, as concerned as I am as a physician about our air quality, I couldn't find the science to demonstrate that what they're doing is putting our citizens at risk," she said.

Norfolk resident Joe Cook, an environmental activist at the meeting, said he thought Norfolk Southern was dismissive of residents' concerns.

"They fell back into the standard corporate posture that 'We're doing more than what's required under regulations,'" he said.

"We hoped they would take more seriously the concerns of neighbors."

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