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SPECIAL REPORT



DAY ONE OF THREE

OUR AIR

It's worse here than in Baltimore, D.C. and Philly — and it's making us sick



Jason Malmont/The Sentinel

Where the Harrisburg Pike meets Interstate 81 and the turnpike, traffic and trucks converge. Pollution from trucks and other sources contains contaminants that we absorb into our bloodstream. Our air is more toxic than air found in more populated areas, according to the American Lung Association.

3 strikes against us: topography, location, industry

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Cumberland County's air is dirty, corrosive and loaded with microscopic carcinogens capable of infiltrating our bodies through the superhighway that is our bloodstream.

Our air is so dirty, in fact, that what we breathe is less healthy than the air in Washington, Baltimore or Philadelphia.

While experts say some progress has been made to improve the quality of what we breathe, many factors beyond our control combine to aggravate instances of asthma, allergies and other health conditions throughout the county. They include:

- Our topography. We're in a valley where atmospheric conditions allow sediments to linger

longer than in other areas. The natural barriers protecting us from blizzards are the same ones that help trap smog and diesel soot in our air.

- Our location. Our proximity to major metropolitan areas such as those surrounding Pittsburgh and New York City contributes to our air being dirtier than other areas of comparable size across the state.

- Our economy. Through farming, manufacturing and commercial truck traffic, businesses contribute significantly to our air pollution. It doesn't help that three interstates — I-81, I-83 and the Pennsylvania Turnpike — funnel tens of thousands of trucks through our county daily.

Yet experts admit our remedies are few while we continue to breathe air many believe

"Generally speaking, if you can't breathe, you can't do anything else."

NANCY PARKS
PENNSYLVANIA CHAPTER OF THE SIERRA CLUB

is dangerous.

Topography

Wedged between two mountain ranges, Cumberland County stretches west from the sprawling West Shore suburbs along the Susquehanna River to the rolling farmlands of Hopewell and Southampton townships.

But every municipality possesses an Achilles' heel. In Cumberland County, with 235,000

residents, that ubiquitous fault is air pollution, which is here to stay — for now.

"Generally speaking, if you can't breathe, you can't do anything else," said Nancy Parks, Clean Air Research Committee Chairwoman for the Pennsylvania Chapter of the Sierra Club. "You're in one of the areas that receives a battering from all sides."

The topography poses a challenge to improving air quality, said state Sen. Pat Vance, R-31.

"There are some contributing factors, i.e., our topography, that's not going to change," Vance said. "The topography of where we live, we're like in the bottom of a teacup almost. You're not going to change that."

Arleen Shulman, former air resources planning chief at the Department of Environmental Protection, said at a Clean Air Board meeting March 7 on regional issues. "While air quality measuring is getting better, in some cases it doesn't look that way because they (the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency) keep changing the standard. What might have been OK 10 years ago isn't OK now."

• See Air quality, A8

What's to come

Inside today

Legislating air quality: What have we done so far, and why isn't it working? Page A9

The facts: How do we monitor air quality? Page A9

The who, what and where: What does this all mean? Page A8

Our air: Why is it so bad? Page A8

Coming Saturday

Business: How do we strike a balance between growth and air quality?

Enforcement: How do we enforce existing laws on air quality?

Natural gas vehicles: What they do and how can they help?

Coming Sunday

Asthma and allergies: Who are the people affected by our bad air?

Salt caves: How does this unique therapeutic approach combat bad air?

WEATHER

65 / 38
— Page C8

INDEX

Capital Region.....	A6	Opinion.....	A7
Classifieds.....	B7-10	Police.....	A3
Comics.....	C6-7	Sports.....	B1-7
Faith.....	C1-4	State/Nation.....	A8-9
Lottery.....	A4	TV, People.....	C5

OBITUARIES — Page A2

- Day Jr., L. Corman — 79
- Hoover, John — 78
- Laird, Edwin — 77
- Ramp, Mary — 90
- Shughart, W. Robert — 87



United we stand