

Environmental Exchange

A publication of the Citizens' Environmental Coalition

Environmental
Health Issue
May 2004

The Houston-Galveston area's most comprehensive coverage of environmental news and events.

School bus report finds children at risk from idling

By *Dustin W. Rynders*
Contributing Writer

A much needed new report "Reducing Air Pollution from Houston-Area School Buses," explains the impact of school bus pollution and gives school districts, policy



makers, and citizens the information necessary to reduce emissions that affect student health. In its study, the Galveston-Houston Association for Smog Prevention found that the 7,500 school buses in the Houston-Galveston area emit 6 tons of nitrogen oxide, 381 pounds of particulate matter, and 1,300 pounds of noxious volatile organic compounds each school day. The study found that NOx reduction technologies still have a way to go, but that technologies to reduce particulates are widely available, cost effective, and essential to improve student health.

A large amount of the air pollution from school buses in the Houston-Galveston area comes from older, dirtier buses. Because school buses are driven fewer miles than heavy-duty trucks, school districts hold on to older vehicles for much longer than other fleet owners. The GHASP study found that one-quarter of the school buses in the Houston-Galveston region were built before 1990 and that these buses release an average of six times more PM and almost three times more NOx than today's average diesel bus.

Purchasing retrofit technologies for pre-1990 buses is not usually cost effective because the buses are near the end of their lives. Instead, school districts should be replacing pre-1990 buses as quickly as possible.

Because serious NOx reductions will be necessary in the Houston-Galveston region to comply with the Clean Air Act, the federal government has made some limited funding available to help reduce NOx. School districts are eligible for this funding, but GHASP determined that available NOx reduction technologies are still too expensive to qualify for available grants. Change, however, may be just around the corner. Some new selective catalytic reduction and exhaust gas re-circulation systems can reduce NOx by up to 90%, and these technologies are dropping in price.

Fortunately, school districts do not need to wait to reduce their harmful particulate emissions. High levels of PM pollution can pose a direct health risk to children, causing adverse respiratory effects, such as asthma, reduced lung function, and acute respiratory

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Disposing of medical waste

By *Jennifer Freytag*
Contributing Writer

Hospitals generate lots of trash. Everything from food containers to half-used mini-shampoos to small scraps of paper that describe what the patient ate can be found in a patient's room. That doesn't include regulated medical waste, or "red bag waste," such as plastic ventilator tubing, IVs, scalpels

and syringes, used tape and dressings, and human tissues.

Countless items make up the more than two million tons of waste hospitals produce every year. The Canadian Medical Association Journal estimates that a North American hospital generates 19.8 pounds of waste per patient every day. Around 20% is potentially hazardous medical waste, which is costly and difficult to deal with.



The EPA defines medical waste as, "any solid waste that is generated in the diagnosis, treatment, or immunization of human beings or animals." This definition includes what comes into contact with a body in an examining or operating room, radioactive material from testing and treatment, and cultures and pharmaceuticals.

Medical waste can spread disease. It can also be toxic if left untreated when it enters

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The Environmental Exchange is published by the Citizens' Environmental Coalition (CEC), an information clearing-house and communications network for environmental issues in the Houston-Galveston area. The CEC mission is to improve the quality of life and health in the region through education, dialogue, and collaboration. CEC serves the general public by bringing many diverse groups together to build awareness and stimulate discussion about environmental issues in the region. Programs include forums that give a balanced perspective on environmental issues, and information vehicles that enhance understanding.

tel (713) 524-4CEC (524-4232)

fax (713) 524-3311

email issues@cechouston.org

world wide web www.cechouston.org

mail 3015 Richmond Suite 270

Houston TX 77098

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The Citizens Environmental Coalition Education Fund, Inc., is a 501(c)(3) organization. Articles in this publication do not necessarily reflect the opinions of CEC, its trustees, officers or staff.

Perspectives

Pediatric Environmental Health

By Jane Woodward Elioseff

In 1996, Winifred J. Hamilton, PhD, MS, wrote an article for the Galveston-Houston Association for Smog Prevention that drew together for the first time, for the general public, known medical information concerning air pollution and children's health. Doctor Hamilton now holds a second master's degree in science, from Harvard University's School of Public Health, and serves as director of the new, entirely grant and foundation supported environmental health section of the Chronic Disease Prevention and Control Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine.

Winnie Hamilton is one of Houston's treasures. A dedicated and careful environmentalist, she and Cynthia Spiker, MPH, also at Baylor, organized a regional National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences town meeting in 2001 on community environmental concerns, as well as of a number of associated meetings, events, and special projects (see <http://www.envirohealthhouston.org/hazards/default.htm>). This year, Hamilton, with the tireless assistance of Rebecca Jensen, has been the driving force behind the first-ever Gulf Coast pediatric environmental health symposium, held March 19 with a nationally distinguished panel of speakers and attended by more than three hundred physicians, nurses, social workers, public health officials, students in the health professions, and concerned area residents.

Doctor Hamilton said, "The symposium was funded by the Houston Endowment and co-sponsored by Baylor, Texas Children's Hospital, and the Southwest Center for Pediatric Environmental Health in Tyler. Stuart L. Abramson, MD, PhD (Children's Hospital), Debra C. Cherry, MD, MS (SW-CPEH), and I were co-program directors. This spirit of collaboration is critical to what we're trying to do in creating an environmental health section at Baylor."

While none of the hazards described at the symposium are unique to the Gulf Coast region, Jonathan Ward, PhD, of the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, addressed a few that are of particular concern: high ozone levels, hazardous air pollutants, hazardous waste sites, and such persistent chemicals as mercury in water and the food chain.

A recurring theme in the presentations was the importance of the long known, but sometimes overlooked hazard that the metal lead poses to children. Bruce Lanphear, MD, professor at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, presented new research demonstrating that serious adverse health effects can result from exposure to lead levels previously thought to be safe. Discussing neurological impairments in children, Herbert Needleman, MD, of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, a foremost expert on lead and the author of 1979 research that was influential in the decision to remove lead from gasoline, argued persuasively that lead has no safe threshold. He emphasized recent research showing that blood lead levels of less than 5 micrograms per deciliter are associated with lasting cognitive deficits and behavioral problems (the current guideline for action is 10 ug/dl.) and said that blood lead is associated with lower IQ scores. Doctor Needleman also reported that an alarming relationship exists between low lead levels and criminal behavior.

The rising prevalence and severity of asthma, of great concern to physicians and parents, was addressed by Gregory Diette, MD, MHS, of Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. He described how multiple environmental factors interact to impact asthma. Sophie Balk, MD, of Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, NY, stressed the need for clinicians to become more aware of environmental hazards, noting that information taken during pediatric visits is essential for identifying children's specific harmful exposures so parents can work to protect them.

Taking a different approach to ways in which the environment affects children, Howard ("Howie") Frumkin, MD, DrPH, of Emory University, examined the impact of the built environment on health. According to Doctor Frumkin, providing a healthy environment for children includes offering physical activity, protection from injuries, clean air, strong communities, contact with nature, and a sustainable future. But, he said, our built environment is failing to provide these. As a result, children are decreasingly physically active, leading to unprecedented obesity levels and a multitude of other harms associated with obesity, including social isolation and diminished self-esteem. He

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Troubled waters

W. Barksdale Maynard, Walden Pond: A History. (Oxford University Press, 2004.)

On July 4, 1845, Henry Thoreau retreated to a tiny hut by Walden Pond, 15 miles west of Boston. Here, for two years, he exercised his choice “not to live in this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial 19th century.” The resulting book, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, appeared in 1854. Only a few hundred copies sold, and the obscure, 44-year-old Thoreau died of tuberculosis in 1862.

Since then, Thoreau’s testament to self-reliance, deliberate living, and transcendental awareness has become an American classic. At the same time, the modest body of water upon which he sought solitude has morphed into a cultural icon, one of our country’s most famous and abused sacred spaces.

In *Walden Pond*, W. Barksdale Maynard

— who teaches architectural history at Johns Hopkins and the University of Delaware — contemplates the 62-acre kettle hole in all its guises. Here we have Walden as literary mecca, environmental landmark, and cause celebre. Here we also have the pond as litter-strewn bathing beach, political volleyball, and object of parochial infighting.

Conservation has always been an issue at the pond. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s motives were entirely ecological when, in 1844, he purchased the small slice of waterfront upon which Thoreau would one day build. The Fitchburg Railway had just cut tracks through the woods beside Walden. A local tradesman had set up a sawmill not far from the pond, there to convert ancient chestnuts into ties for the train tracks.

Despite Emerson’s best effort, the real abuse of Walden was yet to come. During

the latter 19th century, the proprietors of the Fitchburg Railroad built an excursion park by the pond: concessions, swings, baseball fields. This park closed in 1902, but in 1913 the town of Concord hired lifeguards and began offering swimming lessons. A large bathhouse went up in 1917. Ultimately, during the last decade of the 20th century, the crowded swimming hole lay ringed by ever-tighter circles of sprawl, abutted by the town landfill, and threatened with still more development.

Such was the situation when rocker Don Henley formed the Walden Woods Project, a well-funded effort to protect Thoreau’s terrain from further desecration. Henley’s successful struggles against several would-be developers — among them Mort Zuckerman, who sought to build a massive office complex on Brister’s Hill, near Thoreau’s bean field — generated headlines worldwide. Recently, Henley’s organization has been instrumental in funding reclamation of the landfill.

Near the end of his narrative, Maynard quotes Concord resident and avid Thoreauvian Tom Blanding, who describes the pond as a symbol and indicator of where we are culturally. Pilgrims go away disappointed by Walden’s domestication: the crowds, the bathhouse, the trucks rumbling loudly down Route 126 in plain sight of birdwatchers and hikers. “But if Walden is disappointing,” says Blanding, “that is because Walden is true. It shows where our society stands in relation to nature.”

—Edward J. Renehan, Jr.

*Renehan’s books include *The Secret Six*, *The Lion’s Pride*, *The Kennedys at War*, and *John Burroughs: An American Naturalist*.*



South Padre World Birding Center offers deep sea trips

By Sarah Morgan

The World Birding Center at South Padre Island is gearing up for its next set of pelagic bird tours, giving nature enthusiasts a rare chance to see these deep-sea birds in their natural habitats.

Pelagic birds, rarely if ever seen on land, spend almost their entire lives on, in, and

over the deep water, and South Padre Island is one of the few areas in the United States where the birds can be viewed. While the West Coast also offers a relatively narrow continental shelf and rich pelagic bird life, the only other area in the United States where tropical pelagic birds are reliably viewed is off the coast of North Carolina.

Tropical pelagic birds like the Band-

rumped Storm-Petrel are a specialty off South Padre Island, said WBC guide John Arvin. On a good trip, watchers might spot as many as 10 different species, from the Magnificent Frigatebird and Cory’s Shearwater, to the rarer Yellow-nosed Albatross, Arvin said.

The geography of the area is particularly

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Medical Waste

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the general waste stream. The syringe that was used on a hepatitis B patient, for example, can spread the illness to uninfected persons.

Hospitals dispose of medical waste by decontaminating it and disposing of it in a landfill. Or they can incinerate it. Many Houston-area hospitals decontaminate at least part of their hazardous waste with an autoclave, which uses high-pressure steam to treat hazardous waste. Though some hospitals have their own system or contract with mobile treatment companies, others send their waste to the large autoclave in the Houston region located in Conroe and owned by Stericycle.

After treatment, local medical waste is often sent to landfills. According to Bruce Arnett, an environmental investigator for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, after treatment medical waste "can be disposed of in a permanent landfill. "Some hospitals ship it off site and they [the waste management companies] are responsible for taking it to a treater and disposal site," he says.

Incineration is common for many kinds of trash, but medical waste cannot be mixed with municipal waste in incinerators run by the city. There are two permitted incinerators in the Houston region that burn medical waste for the Houston region: one at UTMB Galveston and one in Chambers County.

Both disinfection and incineration have problems. Many hospitals have tried to reduce the amount of incinerated waste they produce because incinerators are notorious for polluting the air with dioxin and heavy metals. But landfills have been found to be an environmental hazard as well, often leaking and contaminating water or emitting hazardous gasses.

Scientists even disagree about which method is less hazardous. While some have called for a ban on incineration, David Marrack, MD, who has consulted on medical waste issues in Houston and around the world, says that good incineration technology exists and could be used to reduce the environmental costs of getting rid of medical waste. He states, "The problem is, the EPA and the state administrations and the environmental quality organizations dropped the technology. It isn't the cost, either. And the cost of the landfill – buying it and replacing it – is so high that the incinerator becomes cheap."



Because there isn't a way to give medical care without creating pollutants, the challenge is in dealing with the waste responsibly. The management of medical waste is under the jurisdiction of government agencies that issue permits for incinerators and autoclaves, and publish guidelines for tracking waste receptacles, registering medical waste transporters, and monitoring emissions from incinerators. Although these guidelines spell out penalties for violators, they do not address the larger problem – reducing the amount of waste produced and treating it with less environmental damage.

One of the first impediments to managing waste effectively is the carelessness of hospital employees. According to Arnett, it's important to make sure all waste goes to its proper place. He says, "Basically all the medical waste consists of either the sharps and needles, which go into their own special hard plastic container, or it's the non-sharp material, which can be sample bottles or clothing or any of that sort of stuff. That's all supposed to go into a red plastic bag." But when other waste is mixed in with "red bag" waste, the disposal process becomes inefficient and potentially hazardous. Arnett says that, "A lot of times, whoever is on the staff just throws anything they want to into it. So it's not necessarily medical waste that's really going into these bags. And nobody wants to open that red bag after it's been sealed off. So nobody checks to find out if it's all medical waste or if some of it's not."

Even more serious is the lack of real incentives for hospitals and waste manage-

ment teams to try new technology. While organizations such as Health Care Without Harm and Hospitals for a Healthy Environment offer support and recognition to hospitals that deal with waste in more environmentally friendly ways, the ultimate decision-making is left to hospital administrators. And there are pressures against change. Marrack said, "There's a tremendous economic pressure from the transporters and the medical waste disposal people, who want everything to go into their high-priced medical waste transporter or incinerator system. There's a huge vested interest in not changing the system."

Moreover, there is no real incentive or reward for changing the system by reducing red bag waste. He says, "You need to start at the big manufacturer's end. They need to devise systems and promotions for recycling. You need to put in economic incentives or disincentives for not recycling. There ought to be a real tax on not recycling."

Marrack also argues that the fear of malpractice suits prevents hospitals from trying to reuse items that have a low risk of spreading infection.

But the biggest problem is that the waste keeps coming. In the time it took to read this article, as much as 15,000 pounds of waste has accumulated in Houston hospitals. That's enough to fill four 2-ton trucks. 🗑️

Jennifer Freytag is a freelance writer and instructor at Houston Community College.

Buses

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illness. A number of studies, too, have associated particulate pollution with cardiovascular disease and death. Children are especially susceptible to pollution-induced illnesses because they inhale 50% more air per pound of body weight.

While school buses are idling at schools, traffic lights, and bus stops, fine PM levels inside the buses rise dramatically, and students riding or standing near the bus may be put at risk. When students are being dropped off at school or boarding buses to go home, a large number of buses may be gathered in a small space. Many schools have driveway coverings that keep particulate matter from dispersing quickly, and both riders and drivers can be exposed to especially high concentrations of PM. This hazard is eliminated if drivers turn off their engines until it is time for buses to leave. The Houston Independent School District has a model program to ensure that buses do not idle during pick ups and drop offs, but nearly two-thirds of area school districts did not report a bus idling policy when GHASP was doing its research. It is hard to imagine an excuse

for not taking this simple and cost-free measure to protect student health.

In addition to instituting and enforcing clear idling policies, districts need to retrofit as many buses as possible with cost-effective technologies that reduce PM pollution. Two main technologies have operated successfully on buses around the country.

- Diesel PM filters fit almost all buses



built after 1990 and reduce PM by 85% and volatiles by at least 60%. The filters cost between \$1,000 and \$1,500 per bus.

- A less expensive alternative, offering a lower percentage reduction, is a diesel oxidation catalyst, which can fit older buses and reduce PM emissions by 20% and VOCs by over 40%, for about \$500 per bus. With new diesel buses costing over \$60,000 each, the relatively small expense of retrofitting a bus is easily justified.

In summary, the GHASP report has analyzed a number of aggressive scenarios for reducing all school bus emissions over time. While government and industry continue moving in the direction of reducing all school bus emissions, the community should use this report to make a concerted effort to reduce PM emissions now. School districts need to implement strong idling policies and retrofit as many post-1990 buses as they can afford with PM filters and diesel catalysts. When cash-strapped districts have done all they can, parents and teachers must urge the government to provide funds to speed this process and improve student health. 🌱

Dustin Rynders is a law student and policy analyst at the University of Houston.

Padre Island birds

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conducive to these birds explained Arvin. An upwelling of cold, nutrient-rich water from the deeper regions of the Gulf occurs at the edge of the shallow continental shelf and at other topographical features like undersea mountains or canyons. This upwelling attracts the fish and other sea creatures that in turn attract birds. Using maps of the Gulf bottom, guides seek out these areas for the best bird-viewing.

Also, the continental shelf happens to be relatively narrow off the South Texas coast so the tours can reach the deepest waters where the highest numbers and variety of these pelagic birds are most likely to be found.

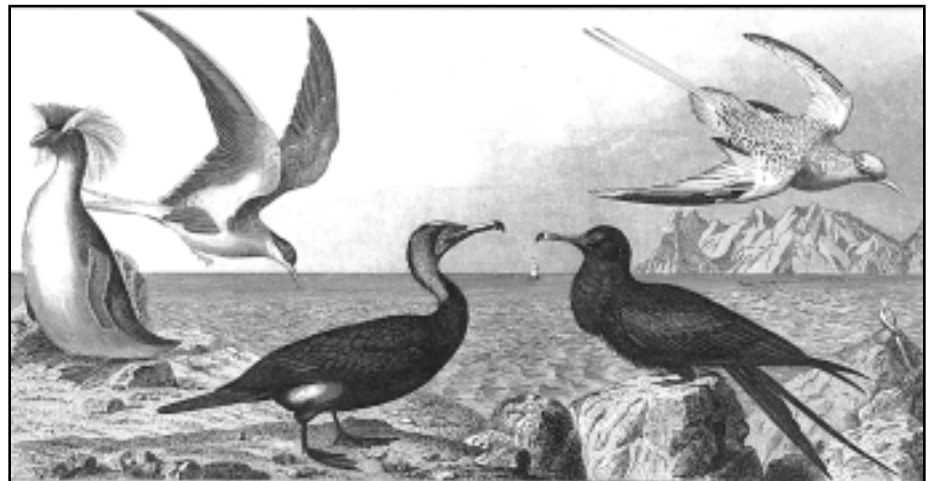
Along with being a convenient launch-site for deep sea birding trips, South Padre Island provides an important refuge for the colorful warblers, tanagers and buntings that migrate through each spring. Its expan-

sive saltwater flats, lagoons and marshes attract hundreds of species of shorebirds and winter residents as well.

The WBC is sponsoring three pelagic trips for the 2004 season, all aboard the 65-foot Osprey II excursion boat based there. These 12-hour expeditions are scheduled for May 21, July 16 and Sept. 24.

Arvin urges interested birders to sign up as soon as possible, since the trips are popular as well as infrequent. The Osprey II holds about 30-35 people.

For reservations and information about the WBC pelagic trips, please call 956-584-9156, extension 21. For information online, visit the Web (www.worldbirdingcenter.org). 🌱



CEC Notes

New managing editor joins publications team

The Citizens' Environmental Coalition is pleased to announce that Sarah Colleen Morgan has accepted the position of managing editor with the publications team. She is a senior in the journalism and creative writing departments at the University of Houston and says she is delighted by the opportunity to encourage awareness of environmental issues. Sarah has worked for the University of Houston student newspaper, the *Daily Cougar*, and has experience as an editorial assistant and intern at *Gulf Coast*, a journal of literature and fine art. She brings new ideas and a high level of enthusiasm to the CEC.

W.A. Parrish coal plant tour

Mothers for Clean Air toured the W.A. Parrish coal plant in Fort Bend County on Thursday, February 19. Parrish is the only coal-fired power plant in the Houston-Galveston area. The tour included video presentations, a chance to see the pollution control devices being installed, and a chance to have questions answered. Jane Laping, Mothers for Clean Air executive director, said, "This plant is huge! Three one-mile-long trains bring in coal from Wyoming every day. Yet Reliant is doing its part to reduce emissions."

Katy Freeway pollution study

The Spring Branch/Memorial Chapter of Mothers for Clean Air has commissioned a study to understand the environmental impact on local communities of emissions from automobiles on the Katy Freeway. Matt Fraser, assistant professor of civil and environmental engineering at Rice University, conducted an analysis of fine particulate levels caused by traffic along the Katy Freeway between IH-610 and Beltway 8. Fraser compared current freeway traffic of 280,000 vehicles per day with expected future use of 397,600 vehicles per day when the proposed expansion project is complete. The results indicate that particulate pollu-



tion from the freeway would increase 42%. Particulate levels were highest near the intersection of the Katy Freeway and the 610 West Loop. Lowering the freeway below grade, an alternative proposal, would reduce particulate levels by 10%.

Inhaling fine particles from freeway emissions can cause a range of health problems including cancer and brain damage. Living or going to school close to freeways is associated with health problems in children and the elderly, including respiratory illness, hospitalizations for asthma, and circulatory and cardiovascular disease.

The Mothers for Clean Air chapter is presenting the results of the study to elected officials, school board members, business associations, and the Texas Department of Transportation to make them aware of the health impacts from expanding the Katy Freeway as well as from other highway expansion projects in the Houston-Galveston area.

EPA proposes clean up of MDI Superfund site

The Fifth Ward Chapter of Mothers for Clean Air has been closely watching the clean up of the Many Diversified Interests (MDI) Superfund site through an EPA Technical Assistance Grant. The MDI site is a 36-acre abandoned steel castings and catalyst recycling operation contaminated with lead and other heavy metals. It is located directly across the street from Bruce Elementary School.

EPA is soliciting comments to their preferred alternative for cleaning up the MDI site, which will leave contaminated soil underneath existing pavement and foundations on the site. The Fifth Ward Chapter believes that this alternative would reduce the chances for proper redevelopment of the site. Therefore, the Fifth Ward Chapter is proposing an additional alternative that will remove all contamination (to a depth of 3 feet) to an approved location off site.

<www.mothersforcleanair.org>

Free bird walks

Beginning this spring, free bird walks are being offered in various nature parks throughout the city. Some of these walks are a result of a partnership of Houston Audubon with the Ornithology Group of the Outdoor Nature Club, Houston Parks and Recreation, and Friends of Hermann Park. Please check the list frequently, as we

will be adding walks throughout the season. If you are interested in starting a bird walk in your local park, please contact Mary Ann Weber, Education Coordinator at (713) 932-1639.

<www.houstonaudubon.org/>

May meeting: Houston's poor air quality

As executive director of the Galveston-Houston Association for Smog Prevention and a long-time environmental activist, John Wilson has had a wealth of experience with air quality issues in Houston. The recently published GHASP report "Where Does Houston's Smog Come From?" provides an unusual overview of many of our region's problems. Using health references and air pollution monitoring data from state and federal monitoring agencies, GHASP examined cancer risk, chronic health hazards, and the acute effects of air pollution exposure.

The report recommends additional air pollution controls to reduce industrial organic chemical pollution and nitrogen oxide emissions, increased scrutiny of hazardous air pollutants when issuing or renewing air pollution permits, and enforcement of current permitting.

For more information, log on to the GHASP web site at <www.ghasp.org> which has extensive information about Houston's air quality.

The public is encouraged to come to the Sierra Club meeting, Thursday, May 6, at 7:00 pm, Central Presbyterian Church, 3788 Richmond at Timmons in the Compaq Center area. The program begins at 7:30 pm. For more information contact the club line, (713) 895-9309.

<www.sierraclub.org>

Update on development of Tony Marron Park

In 2001, The Park People began planning the development of Tony Marron Park, 19 acres of empty land along Buffalo Bayou in Houston's East End. Working in partnership with the Houston Parks and Recreation Department and the Houston Parks Board, The Park People is continuing to raise up to \$2 million to complete this project. The Park People has broken ground for the development phase of plans to add much-needed soccer fields, trails, children's play areas, a pavilion, and many trees.

<www.parkpeople.org/index.html>

Eco Notes

Gulf Coast Institute investigates major transportation plan

Few people know about it, but it has the potential to change the face of Houston. We are talking about the \$77 billion Regional Transportation Plan (2025 RTP) that, among its many projects, would pave enough roadways to build a road from San Francisco to South Africa and help generate enough parking space to cover an area two and a half times the size of Manhattan.

The 2025 RTP is the region's most comprehensive, long-term transportation plan; it includes all projected road, bus, rail, pedestrian, bicycle, port, and airport improvements. The Gulf Coast Institute is researching the plan and publishing a series of "Transportation Bulletins" or fact sheets about the plan. They've also held several meetings to help generate awareness and educate the public about the RTP.

H-GAC has increased public involvement with the draft plan from one to six public meetings and pushed the deadline on approving the plan back a month. A group of 25 public officials are set to vote on the plan May 28th.

New report says chemical safety measures don't work

Chemical facilities owned by companies enrolled in an industry-sponsored voluntary safety program have had more than 1,800 accidents per year since 1990, according to a new report by the Texas Public Interest Research Group.

The report, "Irresponsible Care: How the Chemical Industry Fails to Protect the Public From Chemical Accidents," analyzes the history of accidents at facilities that implement Responsible Care®, a voluntary security code subscribed to by members of

the American Chemistry Council, the largest industry lobbying organization and loudest opponent of mandatory safety standards. The report criticizes Bush administration plans to address security at chemical facilities by continued industry self-regulation.

The US Environmental Protection Agency has identified more than 120 chemical facilities that each put more than one million people at risk of injury or death because of the hazardous chemicals they use and store on site. No federal government regulation requires industries to consider implementing inherently safer technology.

TexPIRG urged the Bush administration to use EPA's existing authority under the Clean Air Act to mandate that chemical facilities substitute safer chemicals and processes where possible. Barring such action from the Bush administration, TexPIRG urged Congress to pass legislation introduced earlier this year by Sen. Jon Corzine (D-NJ) and similar legislation by Rep. Frank Pallone (D-NJ) that would require facilities to consider changing their chemicals and processes where alternatives are available. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee of Houston has co-sponsored the House version of the legislation, which would vastly improve safety at chemical facilities in the greater Houston area.

Texas City breaks ground, Houston buys ads

Texas City broke ground for a new Galveston Bay container terminal at Shoal Point while the Port of Houston Authority was scrambling to buy more advertising space touting its own achievements.

The Shoal Point container terminal is privately funded and does not require tax dollars. Several speakers emphasized that it is to be operational in 30 months and will benefit the entire region.

Texas City applied in 2000 to the US Army Corps of Engineers for a permit to

construct the terminal on the dredge spoil disposal site at Shoal Point. The project received broad support, including from conservationists. In 2003 the permit was issued, designating Shoal Point as the least environmentally damaging site on Galveston Bay for a new terminal to serve regional cargo needs.

In dramatic contrast, a coalition of bay area cities and the Galveston Bay Conservation and Preservation Association (GBCPA) has filed a lawsuit in federal court challenging a Corps of Engineers permit that would allow the Port of Houston Authority to build a competing container port at Bayport.

Harris County residents are meanwhile being exposed to a steady stream of local advertising placed by the Port of Houston Authority in a transparent effort to counter the widespread public opposition to its Bayport proposal.

BNP starts Padre Island drilling Sierra Club urges intervention

(*Sierra Club, 4/15/04*) BNP Petroleum, a company based in Corpus Christi, TX, proceeded with plans to drill for natural gas on Padre Island National Seashore despite the fact the nesting season of the endangered Kemp's ridley sea turtle began in April.

According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Kemp's ridley sea turtle, the most endangered sea turtle in the world, nests on the beach from April into July. In the environmental assessment for the BNP project, the National Park Service established a protected season from April 16 to June 30 to minimize impacts on the sea turtle. However, the National Park Service cannot legally prevent BNP from drilling. BNP began its operations by hauling equipment on heavy trucks on April 6 and expects to complete the drilling on June 15.

Padre Island boasts the longest undeveloped beach in the US and is the longest undeveloped barrier island in the world. It is also one of the few places in the US where Kemp's ridley sea turtles nest.

According to the US Geological Survey, the estimated amount of natural gas under Padre Island National Seashore is roughly equal to the amount consumed in the US in a single day. Unfortunately, the mineral rights under the national seashore are either owned privately or, in some cases, by the State of Texas.



Pediatric health

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advocated for cleaner vehicles and less traffic, as well as a heightened awareness of how community design affects children. He ended by noting that children's environmental health is not just within the realm of pediatricians, toxicologists, and epidemiologists, it is the domain of us all: urban planners, transportation engineers, landscape architects, activists, neighbors, and parents.

Because of copyright concerns, only seven of the presentations are posted on the web; see www.envirohealthhouston/symposium04.

Jane Woodward Elioseff is a freelance writer and editor. She was the 2002 Green Party candidate for Texas commissioner of agriculture.



Citizens' Environmental Coalition

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Houston TX 77098

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