As New Rochelle grew, Black residents wondered what they were breathing. NY's air quality data will offer clues

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Key Points

Years of development over Black New Rochelle communities may be connected to higher rates of respiratory illnesses.

Now, New York is studying air quality there, and in nearly a dozen other areas across the state.

The project is one of several spending measures meant to benefit communities disadvantaged by the effects of pollution and climate change.

As a child, Stephanie Bartee bathed in a tin basin outside of her parents’ two-story home on Cedar Street. In their historically Black Pugsley Hollow neighborhood in New Rochelle that dated back centuries, not all of the streets were paved in the 1960s, the 65-year-old recalled. But everyone knew each other.

Much bigger streets soon paved over Pugsley Hollow, along with other Black communities in New Rochelle. Freeways, car dealers and wide thoroughfares carved the suburban city into what it is now.

Eminent domain forced hundreds of families out, razing areas that were known as thriving middle-class enclaves for Harlemites moving to the suburbs. Many were confined to apartments between these large developments. Bartee’s family ended up in public housing.

A half-century later, Black and brown New Rochellians in these areas continue to experience higher rates of respiratory illnesses and low birth weights, leaving them wondering what’s in the air they breathe.
Bartee has asthma. So do her two sons.

“Would you want your mother or kids to be thrown somewhere?” Bartee, a retired nursing assistant, said on a recent Friday at a Black history month exhibit at the local library. “We’re people.”

A new state program is monitoring air quality in communities that are considered most vulnerable to the effects of pollution and climate change. State regulators added New Rochelle neighborhoods into the lower Westchester region, which is one of nearly a dozen areas where the state is measuring air quality. The results aim to give residents a sense of what they’ve inhaled amid policies that upended Black communities like Bartee’s Pugsley Hollow.

“It was totally acceptable to overlook Black and brown community health in planning and development decisions,” said New Rochelle native Blaze Lightfoot Jones-Yellin, a professor of sustainability and environmental justice at the City University of New York’s John Jay College. “In fact, it was expected, because we had created an apartheid system where (for) one group of the population, it was considered acceptable for them to be treated as second-class citizens.”

The city of New Rochelle didn’t respond didn’t respond to requests for interviews.

**NY’s first push to monitor air quality:** ‘What am I breathing?’ Inside NY’s push to monitor air quality in low-income neighborhoods

**Roadways build over Black New Rochelle neighborhoods**

Records from at least the early 1800s described Pugsley Hollow, or the “Hollow” for short, as a historically Black neighborhood, composed of free people.

In 1799, the enslaver Hannah Pugsley freed an enslaved Black woman who shared the same name as her, according to New Rochelle clerk records from research on Pugsley Hollow by Anne Zahner, a commercial real estate investor.

The latter Pugsley’s descendants settled not far from the enslaver’s estate, forming Pugsley Hollow. Other Black people soon settled there, forming churches, schools and businesses.
Later, during migrations of African Americans from the South in the 20th century, the community grew and expanded to adjacent neighborhoods, such as the Lincoln Avenue Corridor and City Park. New Rochelle became Westchester’s largest Black community, replete with grocery stores, social clubs and churches.

In the 1930s, the federal Home Owners’ Loan Corporation carved apart neighborhoods through the discriminatory practice of redlining, which rated areas for approving home loans based on risk. The maps colored the Black neighborhoods in red, the highest risk.

This would help shape a series of postwar policies that dramatically altered neighborhoods. The state Thruway Authority constructed I-95 through New Rochelle, and a cloverleaf interchange on top of Pugsley Hollow, as part of a nationwide effort to build freeways.

The city also funded Memorial Highway, through the Lincoln Avenue Corridor, to connect major roadways. Meanwhile, in the 1960s, the “Cedar Street Redevelopment Plan” changed Pugsley Hollow with arterial highways and thoroughfares, along with shopping centers and an industrial park jutting through. A 1962 Yonkers Herald Statesman article indicated some 367 families "are to be moved" as part of the redevelopment project.

On Cedar Street, Bartee and her family were moved out of their home around that time. They eventually settled about a quarter-mile away in public housing, at the Peter Bracey Apartments, where Bartee has lived much of her life. A Toyota dealer now sits where her family’s home once was.

"The community was actually stripped of its assets in many ways, and then sort of severed into pieces," Jones-Yellin said.

The ramifications are still felt today.

**NY suburb's African American past** Suburb uncovers hidden burial ground as NY studies centuries of African American history

**Where — and how — would NY measure air quality?**

In 2019, New York passed its climate law to achieve net-zero emissions by mid-century. In doing so, the law also required that at least 35%, and a goal of 40%, of benefits from spending on clean energy and energy efficiency programs, projects or investments are meant
to go toward communities defined as disadvantaged from the effects of pollution and climate change.

In New Rochelle, several largely Black and Latino neighborhoods, including Pugsley Hollow, are listed as disadvantaged communities by state criteria. Despite this, New Rochelle wasn’t originally included in the list of cities meant to receive mobile air monitoring by the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

New Rochelle environmental attorney Raya Salter, a member of the state’s council tasked with carrying out the state’s climate law, pushed to include New Rochelle because of health effects and traffic congestion she’d seen in the city’s low-income communities of color.

For example, children under 17 in two New Rochelle ZIP codes encompassing historically Black and Latino neighborhoods exhibit higher rates of asthma emergency department visits than those in Westchester County and New York outside of the five boroughs, state Department of Health data showed.

Asthma has long been linked to air pollution, and children tend to be more susceptible to breathing in harmful toxins such as traffic-related fine particulate matter, according to Dr. Amy Brown, a pediatric pulmonologist at New York Medical College.

The state air monitoring program launched across five regions in early July. Mount Vernon, Yonkers and, now, New Rochelle began their monitoring in September.

The Bronx, long known for asthma rates and pollution, was among the first to be monitored by the DEC program. But Salter said New Rochelle, just down the I-95 freeway, isn’t much different. The Cross Bronx Expressway — long known as a harmful polluter for residents in the borough — is also part of I-95.

“We look at the Bronx and we’re like, ‘Oh wow, they’re the ones who really have pollution problems,” she said. “Look how close we are to the Bronx. This sort of wealthy bedroom community needs to wake up to the fact that we have an air quality problem.”

**Flood risk disclosures for renters** New York renters to get flood risk disclosures for properties with climate change
**Block-by-block monitoring**

The air monitoring comes from a fleet of contracted Toyota Priuses from the San Francisco-based company Aclima.

The cars have inlets attached that record levels of Ozone, Nitric Oxide, Nitrogen Dioxide, Carbon Monoxide, Carbon Dioxide and Methane. The vehicles also measure fine particulate matter, or PM2.5, which often comes from roadways. These pollutants have adverse human health effects, while also contributing to the greenhouse gas effect that causes climate change.

In January, the DEC updated Westchester residents on the first quarter of readings with summary maps. More comprehensive data of hyperlocal conditions are expected in the next year.

State analysts declined to provide more detailed results of quarterly readings. Margaret LaFarr, DEC's assistant director for air resources, explained that monitoring vehicles must pass through streets multiple times — accounting for factors such as wind and weather — before they determine pollutants’ sources or hotspots.

“We know that really across the country, there’s a legacy of environmental injustice and environmental racism. And oftentimes, there are differences in pollution burden, from community to community,” Adriana Espinoza, the deputy commissioner for equity and justice at DEC, said.

The study aims to understand air quality on a block-by-block level, she said - “How does that play out, and does what we know on the national scale also play out here in Yonkers, Mount Vernon and New Rochelle?”

'It's colored in Black and brown'

In fall 2021, Jones-Yellin, the professor, led trolley tours with New Rochelle Against Racism, or New ROAR, to raise awareness about environmental injustice in the city in light of a planned Starbucks drive-thru feet away from the Bracey Apartments and a nearby shelter for women and children.

In recent years, the area that was once Pugsley Hollow, part of a downtown overlay zone, has been rezoned for development.
The Bracey Apartments, part of the city’s housing authority, have a playground and basketball court directly abutting the planned Starbucks. The housing authority’s commissioners approved a measure against the drive-thru because of health and safety concerns.

In a unanimous vote in June 2021, the city moved forward with redesigning the lot that once housed a Pizza Hut to allow for the drive-thru, a requirement for Starbucks. There was no air quality analysis done, though the plan requires Starbucks to have air monitoring once it’s built. It isn’t immediately clear what pollutants they’d measure.

In July 2021, a Starbucks spokesperson said the company was committed to “building strong connections with the community both inside and outside our stores.”

Organizers sought to take people on a historic tour where traffic was rerouted through Black neighborhoods. The trolley, a repurposed bus, also stopped where urban renewal destroyed parks. Neighborhoods became less walkable, with large thoroughfares cutting off communities and business districts, leading to disinvestment for decades.

“You don’t have to be Bull Connor” to ignore the effects of these policies on certain communities, said Lisa Burton, an organizer with New ROAR, referring to the segregationist Birmingham, Alabama, police commissioner who opposed the civil rights movement. Rather, it is easier to ignore when those neighborhoods are "colored in Black and brown," she said.

Advocates expressed concern about rezoning the area for the Starbucks because more traffic would exacerbate air pollution in the area. It reflected the city’s neglect of communities of color, they said, especially as the city is redeveloping with high rises being built throughout the downtown area.

“This development is only going to exacerbate the multigenerational impact of redlining, underinvestment into communities of color, and people losing property values. Or people being able to say they’re having a great shot at the American dream,” said Paul Presendieu, the chair of the city’s new Environmental Advisory Committee, in a recent interview across from the planned Starbucks, where construction workers and police blocked traffic to make way for the drive-thru.

The Starbucks would provide more commerce, along with opportunities and amenities for residents in the area, said New Rochelle Councilmember Yadira Ramos-Herbert, who
represents the area and voted in favor of the new zoning.

Meanwhile, efforts to improve the city's air quality are underway, including the "Linc," which would close parts of Memorial Highway to make way for greenspace connecting Lincoln Park, separated by the freeway, to the Metro-North Train Station by walking and bike paths.

**Planting seeds**

Linda Tarrant-Reid wondered why so many Black children around Lincoln Avenue had asthma.

“You need the air to breathe,” said Tarrant-Reid, 73, the executive director of the nonprofit Lincoln Park Conservancy, which preserves history along the corridor. “And if you’re breathing bad air, you’re going to get sick.”

On a chilly Wednesday afternoon in February, she stood atop Lincoln Park’s basketball courts, where the old Lincoln School once was. In 1964, the city school board demolished the majority Black school after a federal judge ordered the school district to desegregate three years earlier.

Nearby on Lincoln Avenue, her father owned Mark’s Community Store, where he sold fresh produce. Each week, at about 4 a.m., he would drive to the Bronx Terminal Market to pick up items such as collard greens, mustard greens, string beans, potatoes and cabbage, Tarrant-Reid recalled.

Now, she has a small garden down a slope in Lincoln Park. She plans to expand gardens to more areas, to feed residents who are food insecure. The neighborhood would also have more greenery.

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