



# BUCKS COUNTY Courier Times

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# Respiratory risks, unproven causes



CHLOE ELMER / PHOTOJOURNALIST

More than 11 percent of residents in a census tract in Burlington City, New Jersey, report having asthma. The tract is across the Delaware River and downwind from Bristol Township plastics company Arkema and Bucks County's confluence of highways.

## Barrier\$ to Betterment

An occasional series on how income affects our lives

### The environment

**Sunday, Day 1:** From heavy industry to waste disposal in Lower Bucks, Falls and Waste Management talk about the landfills.

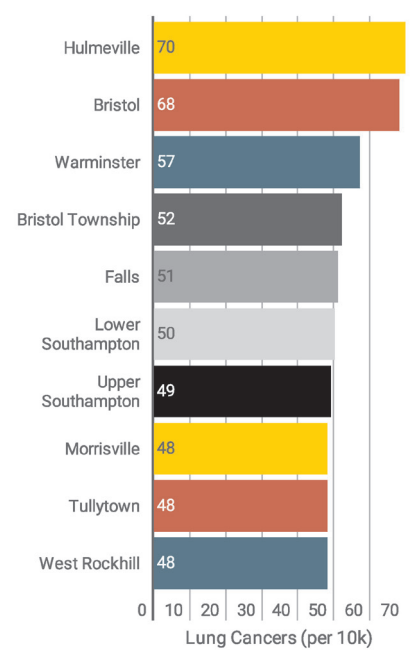
**Monday, Day 2:** Exposure to pollution along the Delaware River.

**Tuesday, Day 3:** Respiratory risks; unproven causes.

**Wednesday, Day 4:** Possible solutions to prevent pollution.

## Lung cancer rates in Bucks

An average of 33 out of every 10,000 Bucks County residents are diagnosed with lung cancer in a five-year period. But Lower Bucks towns all have higher rates, including Hulmeville (first in the county) and Bristol Borough (second). Below are the top 10 towns.



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Health surveillance data, 2009-2013

By KYLE BAGENSTOSE  
STAFF WRITER

### Part 3 of a 4-part series

Early April found Judith Diaz sweeping up the sidewalk outside her home on Bath Street in Bristol Borough. The 50-year-old was surrounded by her three young grandchildren, smiling toddlers running around the porch and playing in the spring sunshine.

Asked whether she had any concerns about her neighborhood's air quality, she hesitated for a moment. Nothing particularly troubling to her, she said, but her 19-year-old daughter has asthma so severe that she's reluctant to leave the house.

"In my opinion, she really doesn't come out that much; she's always in her room," Diaz said. "We do worry about it."

Her daughter has lived in the borough her entire life and was diagnosed with asthma as a 1-year-old, Diaz said. Trips to the emergency room aren't unusual, and she also has headaches, Diaz said.

Could the poor air quality in Lower Bucks, which data show has the highest levels of dangerous smog in the entire state, be to blame? Is it really possible that the cars, factories, industrial sites and waste facilities so prevalent in Lower Bucks could affect the health of those who live there?

It's possible, but extremely difficult to know for sure, according to Dr. Marilyn Howarth, a physician and director of the University of Pennsylvania's Center of Excellence in Environmental Toxicology.

Howarth says epidemiologists — scientists who look for patterns of disease and examine potential connections to health hazards — have devoted decades to studying whether health effects are more prevalent for people closest to industrial sites, such as landfills and incinerators. Still, much of the science isn't definitive because all the potential causes of illness — pollution, lifestyle behaviors like diet and smoking, genetics, and even randomness — are difficult to take into account.

Howarth said it's especially difficult to prove what causes health issues in communities such as Bristol Borough and Tullytown, which have lower median incomes than nearby towns and have poverty rates exceeding 10 percent. "How much of it (health impact) is attributable to environmental pollution; how much is (access to) health care ... how much is attributable to poor nutrition and smoking?" Howarth asked.

### Ailment disparities

But even without a definitive cause of health issues, she said, researchers can still observe some wide disparities.

"Asthma is a really good example," Howarth said. "We see elevated asthma rates in places where there are higher air pollutants ... When you see (an) increase (in air pollution) ... you increase the hospitalization rates in a way that's actually very clearly reproducible (in scientific studies)."

So what do available health data show for communities along Lower

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## Yates: Flynn open to blackmail by Russians

The former acting attorney general said she warned the Trump White House in January.

WASHINGTON — Former acting Attorney General Sally Yates told Congress on Monday she bluntly warned the Trump White House in January that new National Security Adviser Michael Flynn "essentially could be blackmailed" by the Russians because he apparently had lied to his bosses about his contacts with Moscow's ambassador in Washington.

The testimony from Yates, an Obama administration holdover fired soon after for other reasons, marked her first public comments

about the concerns she raised and filled in basic details about the chain of events that led to Flynn's ouster in February.

Her testimony, coupled with the revelation hours earlier that President Barack Obama himself had warned Donald Trump against hiring Flynn shortly after the November election, made clear that alarms about Flynn had reached the highest levels of the

U.S. government months before. Flynn had been an adviser to Trump and an outspoken supporter of his presidential candidacy in the 2016 campaign.

Yates, appearing before a Senate panel investigating Russian interference in the election, described discussions with Don McGahn, the Trump White House counsel, in which she warned that Flynn apparently had misled the administration about his communications with Sergey Kislyak, the Russian ambassador. White House officials, including

Vice President Mike Pence, had insisted that Flynn had not discussed U.S.-imposed sanctions with Kislyak during the presidential transition period. But they asked Flynn to resign after news reports indicated he had lied about the nature of the calls.

"We felt like it was critical that we get this information to the White House, in part because the vice president was unknowingly making false statements to the public and because we believed that Gen. Flynn was compromised with respect to the Russians," Yates said. "To state the obvious," she added later, "you don't want your

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Yates



59° Partly sunny  
39° and cool. All

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The Waste Management landfill has a variety of pollution control measures, including liner systems, daily soil layering, and water and gas management systems, according to company spokesman John Hambrose.

CHLOE ELMER / PHOTOJOURNALIST

## Risks

Continued from Page A1

Bucks' Route 13 corridor? For one thing, asthma rates are elevated.

The website Policy-map.com uses U.S. Census Bureau data to track asthma rates by census tracts, which are typically made up of several thousand people. Data from 2013, the most recent year available, show an estimated 241 adults — about 9.97 percent — who live in Diaz's census tract have asthma.

That rate is the fourth highest of any census tract in Bucks and compares to a countywide asthma rate of 8.96 percent for adults. If Diaz's tract was at the county average, 25 fewer adults would have asthma.

A mile to the north, in Bristol Township, two census tracts framed by I-95, the Pennsylvania Turnpike and Route 13 have the highest asthma rates in the county, at just over 10 percent. A census tract comprising the western portion of Doylestown Borough is third highest in the county, at 10.02 percent.

In total, the number of census tracts in Bucks with high asthma rates south of Route 1 is nearly double the number north of Route 1 — 19 compared to 10.

A census tract in Burlington City, directly across the river and downwind from Bristol Township plastics company Arkema and the highways, trumps them all: 11.59 percent of adults there have asthma.

Other serious lung ailments also appear to cluster in Lower Bucks as well. PolicyMap tracks data for adults diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, emphysema and chronic bronchitis.

In a census tract comprising most of Tullytown, 10.59 percent of adults have been diagnosed with at least one of those diseases. That's the second highest rate in the

county, where the overall average is 7.65 percent. The western tract of Doylestown Borough is tops, with 11.92 percent of adults having at least one of those illnesses.

### Air pollution worries

Diaz isn't the only area grandmother worried about the air.

In 1970, Bristol Township's Helen Wagner, husband Bill Wagner, and their young child moved from New York City to Bucks County's idyllic Levittown suburbia. It was a nice area, she said, free from the sights and smells of a large metropolis like New York.

"When you would go over one of the bridges (from New York), the landfill was so bad in New Jersey you wanted to choke, in the car, with the windows up," Wagner, 72, said.

Forty-seven years later, those smells have found her again, wafting in on overcast days from the large landfills in south Falls. Wagner said she and her husband have allergies that have been getting worse over time, although she's not sure if that's just a part of aging. But it's their grandchild who worries them most.

"I have a grandson who has asthma, and when he spends the summer here with me I have to keep him in the house," Wagner said.

### A cancer risk?

Data also show elevated cancer rates in municipalities along the Route 13 corridor, but experts such as Howarth quickly caution that cancer is one of the most difficult illnesses to link to environmental hazards.

That's because on top of all the lifestyle factors researchers have to account for, cancer doesn't act as predictably as something like asthma, she explained.

"For the majority of cancer-causing agents ... they often contribute to a number of cancers in a number



of (body) areas, so they're very hard to study," Howarth said.

Still, researchers have been working on the subject. Asked to provide some of the best studies on health effects near waste sites, Drexel University sociology professor Diane Sicotte, who studies environmental justice, pointed to two large scientific reviews from Europe. The studies themselves combined data from hundreds of health studies, in an attempt to gather as much information as possible.

The two European studies correlated birth defects with proximity to landfills, and found associations of lung cancer, non-Hodgkin lymphoma, soft-tissue sarcomas and childhood cancers with proximity to incinerators.

Houston-based Waste Management owns three large landfills in Falls; the facilities combine to form Pennsylvania's largest municipal waste complex. The company sold the nearby Wheelabrator waste incinerator to Energy Capital Partners, also headquartered in Houston, in 2014.

Scientists have devoted decades to studying whether health effects are more prevalent for people closest to industrial sites, but much of the science isn't definitive because all the potential causes of illness are difficult to take into account, according to Dr. Marilyn Howarth.

CONTRIBUTED

### Waste Management responds

John Hambrose, a Waste Management spokesman, wrote in an email that the company doesn't believe the studies cited by Sicotte "are useful to discussion of our Fairless Landfill or any modern landfill in the United States." Waste Management's landfills have a variety of pollution control measures, such as "carefully built and monitored" liner systems, daily soil layering, and water and gas

management systems, he added.

"Published scientific studies and public health investigations we have conducted for our facilities have not produced any information that indicates a concern to public health," Hambrose wrote.

Jordan Osbon, communications manager for Wheelabrator, declined comment.

Whatever the cause, Pennsylvania Department of Health data do show that lung cancer does appear elevated in municipalities along Bucks' Route 13 corridor. The agency tracks diagnoses of dozens of forms of cancer and publishes them on an annual basis.

Data from 2009 to 2013 show Bristol Borough has the second highest rate of lung cancer in the county, with about seven cases per 1,000 residents. During that same period, the overall county rate was about four cases per 1,000 people.

Hulmeville had the highest rate of lung cancer, but because the borough's population is so small, even one or two cases of cancer can inflate its rate.

Bristol Township was fourth, Falls was fifth and Tullytown was ninth. Each had about five of every 1,000 residents diagnosed with lung cancer during the five-year period.

Studying the data, most of the corridors' communities were about average for non-Hodgkin

lymphoma rates.

However, Tullytown ranked sixth for the disease and also topped the list for overall cancer rates. In Tullytown, about one in every 21 residents was diagnosed with some form of cancer between 2009 and 2013. That compares to an overall county rate of closer to one diagnosis per 32 people, and a state rate of about one in 33.

As Howarth pointed out, factors beyond air quality contribute to cancer rates.

The Philadelphia Health Management Corp. is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that conducts regular health surveys in the region. Data from the 2012 survey show about 24 percent of Lower Bucks residents smoke cigarettes, compared to 16 percent in Central Bucks.

A well-designed health study would also have to look at factors such as diet, exercise, job exposures and other factors. Even if all those factors were ruled out, experts say it couldn't be definitely proven that a particular facility or air pollutant was to blame.

But what does a resident like Bristol Township's Wagner think about the possibility that Lower Bucks' waste and heavy industries are affecting the health of residents?

"It doesn't help," she said.

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### Correction

Bristol Township did not have to make cuts to its housing renovation program in 2016. A story published in Monday's edition was incorrect.

TODAY

59°  
39°  
Partly sunny and cool

### LOTTERIES Mon., 5-8-17

#### NEW JERSEY

Pick 3: 2-6-4, Fireball: 5  
Pick 4: 3-3-3-3, Fireball: 5  
Cash 5: 3-14-19-20-42, Xtra: 4  
Pick 6: 16-25-27-32-42-49, Xtra: 3  
Midday Pick 3: 1-8-7, Fireball: 6  
Midday Pick 4: 6-6-2-7, Fireball: 6  
5 Card Cash:

7♥ 6♦ 5♣ 4♠ 3♣  
7H 6D 5C 4S 3C

#### PENNSYLVANIA

Pick 2 Day: 5-7, Wild: 0  
Pick 2 Evening: 9-1, Wild: 0  
Pick 3 Day: 8-1-1, Wild: 0  
Pick 3 Evening: 2-5-3, Wild: 0  
Pick 4 Day: 2-6-5-2, Wild: 0  
Pick 4 Evening: 4-3-9-2, Wild: 0  
Pick 5 Day: 2-4-7-1-0, Wild: 0  
Pick 5 Evening: 3-5-1-5, Wild: 0  
Cash 5: 11-15-17-26-33  
Match 6: 8-11-16-36-38-44  
Treasure Hunt: 14-18-24-29-30

### MULTI-STATE LOTTERIES

Mon., 5-8-17      Fri., 5-5-17      Sat., 5-6-17  
Cash4Life:      Mega Millions:      Powerball:  
22-34-42-46-57 3    4-23-33-47-53 7    11-21-31-41-59 21



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