

**MINUTES OF MEETING OF THE  
ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ADVISORY BOARD  
February 6, 2025**

**MEMBERS PRESENT in person:**

**MEMBERS PRESENT via Teams:**

Adam Cutler, Chair  
Dr. Heather Bedi  
Curtis Jones  
Sophia Lee  
Rafiqya Muhammed  
Rashida Lovely  
Dr. Jennifer Baka  
Bobby Hughes  
Jerome Shabazz  
Jacquelyn Omotalade  
Tom Torres  
Dr. Lisa DePaoli  
Ramon Johnson  
Mia Ray

**MEMBERS NOT PRESENT:**

Dr. Horace Strand

**NON-MEMBERS PRESENT:**

Winnie Okello  
Kara Spade  
Manar-ul Islam Swaby

**DEP STAFF PRESENT IN-PERSON:**

**DEP STAFF PRESENT VIA PHONE:**

Fernando Treviño  
Marina Fletcher  
Ariana Genna  
Andrea Fields  
Dong Yoon Kim  
Amani Reid  
Emily Green  
Maria Ocasio  
Jordi Comas  
Elspeth Koehle  
Natasha Fackler  
Harry Hoy  
Laura Campbell  
Lena Smith

**CALL TO ORDER:**

*Fernando Trevino, Special Deputy Secretary, Office of Environmental Justice, announced that the session is being recorded and that by participating in the meeting, attendees are consenting to being recorded for record keeping purposes (9.36 a.m.).*

Chairman Adam Cutler called the meeting to order and offered opening remarks, at 9.36 a.m. He welcomed the new members to the Environmental Justice Advisory Board (EJAB) and gave them an opportunity to introduce themselves.

Curtis Jones shared about his background with the EJAB members.

Rafiqya Muhammed introduced herself. She talked about her business and nonprofit and work in the City of Harrisburg. She encouraged the new members to reach out.

Chairman Cutler asked to pause introductions to keep to the schedule. He said they would come back to introductions later in the day.

### **DEP UPDATES:**

*Natasha Fackler, DEP Chief of Staff*, talked about all the work the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has done. Natasha talked about the cuts in the permit backlog. In 2024, DEP reviewed over 40,000 applications and did not have to make any pay backs. In 2024, DEP conducted over 100,000 inspections, and the dam safety program inspected all of the high hazard dams. The oil and gas program conducted the most inspections in the program's history. DEP reduced over 8 million tons of pollutants from the air.

Natasha stated that Acting Secretary, Jessica Shirley reiterated the support and thanked EJAB's liaison efforts of engagement between communities and DEP, especially in 2025.

Q&A followed the updates. The Q&A session started at 9:49 a.m.

Dr. Heather Bedi asked for updates about federal funds and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA).

DEP is working with its parent organizations on the federal level. DEP was given guidance to continue work as is. It has been business as usual for DEP.

Dr. Bedi asked how much money the Commonwealth already received, and how much can be reimbursed.

DEP fiscal team is looking into it.

Tom Torres asked if that includes RISE PA

DEP will move forward with that program until they hear otherwise.

Tom asked what the set up financial set-up of the program.

Natasha clarified that this program, and many others, are reimbursement programs where DEP is to spend the money and then get reimbursed for it.

Bobby Hughes shared that federal funding that his organization accesses has been paused. It has made grantees ask if they should stop working on projects. Many of the programs are focused on capacity building and are within environmental justice (EJ) areas.

DEP does have a resource account set up where people can submit questions. She said the DEP is still trying to understand what is going on.

Jerome Shabazz asked if there would be any impact or decision from DEP regarding saving specific language, phrases and words. He said he heard of some grant recipients being asked to strip certain language from work plans, like equity, environmental justice, etc.

Natasha said DEP is committed to doing environmental justice work. Fernando echoed what Natasha said. He said that DEP does not control the federal process, but that is very specific for grants that have direct ties with the federal government.

The EJAB thanked Natasha for joining.

### **OEJ UPDATES:**

Fernando said that the Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ) does not have a lot of updates since the last time that EJAB met. DEP received 294 permits in environmental justice areas, 19 were trigger permits that required Enhanced Public Participation (EPP). OEJ received 15 requests to opt-in permits into Enhanced Public Participation. OEJ is developing a new Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to help permitting and OEJ staff improve their participation in the permitting process and enhanced public participation

In 2024, OEJ met with more than 230 individuals/community leaders and more than 230 community-based organizations. OEJ will be moving into a more comprehensive way to track community engagement in 2025.

OEJ will be able to share their 2025 action plan very soon. It will be shared ahead of the next EJAB meeting. In 2025, OEJ will continue to prioritize engagement and will focus on areas they did not cover in 2024.

Juan Serrat is no longer with DEP. OEJ is in the process of working on a replacement to join the Office.

Q&A followed the updates. The Q&A session started at 10:08 a.m.

Rafiqya submitted an EJAB nomination and asked their resume be shared with DEP's HR team. Rafiqya will resend his information.

To address the regional EJAB representation, DEP focused on candidates from Northwest and Western PA regions. Chairman Cutler asked if there is a timeline for Juan's replacement. Fernando said that he would brief the EJAB when OEJ has a final candidate in place.

Bobby asked to use the next few minutes to do brief introductions. The EJAB members present introduced themselves to the new members.

## **REVIEW OF THE NEW PROCESS**

Fernando explained the new process for OEJ to bring recommendations to the EJAB. OEJ will submit in advance a recommendation request. The request will contain 1-2 paragraphs explaining what the issue is, a section of specific asks, and a proposed timeline. Fernando asked the EJAB to internally develop a process so that they can raise issues and recommendations with OEJ.

## **DEP RECOMMENDATION REQUESTS**

### *Recommendation 1:*

Fernando turned it over to *Harry Hoy*, the Office of Environmental Justice's *Governor's Science and Technology Fellow* to review OEJ's first request to the EJAB. Harry shared OEJ's PennEnviroScreen tool and gave some contextual information about it. The Interim Final Environmental Justice Policy, mandates that this tool and its methodology are updated regularly. The tool has 32 indicators that use various data sets. There are up to 100 data sets that make this tool run. The goal is to make the tool more accurate at the ground level.

The recommendation and request to the EJAB are to create a working group to assess and improve this tool. Harry added that the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) EJ Screening tool is no longer live, following the deletion of the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool. As of this morning, PES is the only environmental justice screening tool for the residents of PA.

The working group would be focused on GIS data, efficacy, and transparency. The work would consist of ensuring quality datasets, benchmarking PES compared to other EJ tools, supporting ways to make the tool more useful, and identifying other ways to improve PES.

The proposed timeline for this ask is that by the end of February, EJAB would decide on the recommendation; by end of May EJAB will make recommendation for DEP; and by the end of August, DEP will formally invite members to the working group.

Fernando emphasized the need for this work. DEP does not want a formal advisory group, but a small group of experts to maintain the tool.

Chairman Cutler suggested bringing in people who worked on federal advisory groups who could be resources.

Tom asked if the EJAB members could recommend people outside of the EJAB.

Fernando clarified that DEP wants help to identify people externally. The EJAB members can serve in the workgroup if interested, but OEJ also wants to include external contacts. The request is not for the EJAB to create a sub-working committee to do this work.

Dr. Baka volunteered for this group. She has been looking at these tools across states in the US and said she would be happy to help out here. She mentioned a former graduate student who would be ideal for this working group.

Harry extended an invitation to any of the new members to teach them about PennEnviroScreen and share informational tools and resources on PennEnviroScreen.

Rafiqya asked how many people they want to serve as a part of the workgroup and reiterated the need for community involvement. Fernando responded that DEP wants the EJAB to help decide the appropriate number of people.

Chairman Cutler reiterated there should be a technical expertise and effort, but there needs to also be community input.

*Recommendation 2:*

Fernando provided some context on the second request stating that it is more long term and aspirational. Fernando says a lot of the feedback OEJ has gotten focuses on addressing how the OEJ can measure the impact of Enhanced Public Participation.

*Jordi Comas, North Central Regional Coordinator, Office of Environmental Justice*, shared what his experience as a coordinator is like, giving an example of a gravel mine that was proposed that qualified for Enhanced Public Participation. OEJ is seeking advice from the EJAB to learn how to better assess the impact this work is having, looking at what can be done to measure the quality of OEJ engagement.

Ramon Johnson gave an example of his work in developing a quality processing committee. Having a small committee identifying the goals of what each tool is trying to accomplish and creating feedback mechanisms like Google Forms would be helpful. This would satisfy both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Rashida Lovely stated that concerns need to be heard and feedback from the community needs to be written down. Specifically, she outlined the need for information from the EJAB to create an outcome document that might be distinct from an OEJ outcome document.

Curtis agreed with what Rashida was sharing. He said the EJAB and OEJ need to walk folks through process. He suggested a more informational approach so that community members better know what is going on.

Tom highlighted the need to analyze other avenues to have an impact on projects. This will also impact the community's relationship with the DEP. Tom brought up the examples of the EJAB and OEJ's work historically.

Chairman Cutler brought up the importance of learning from historic victories in engaging the community in the permitting process.

Curtis brought up that in certain communities, community leaders are listened to and that this is an important way to engage communities.

Rafiqya brought up the need for youth involvement. She also brought up issues with the PA Department of Transportation's bridge projects in the cities of Steelton and Harrisburg.

Chairman Cutler encouraged members to reach out to him offline to volunteer with these efforts.

Jordi added that the end of the permitting process begins the compliance process and said that DEP can be better at letting people know that they play a part in the compliance process.

The EJAB moved to take a 15-minute break starting at 11:22 a.m.

### **PUBLIC COMMENT:**

The public comment session began at 11:43 a.m. with Fernando giving a brief statement about public comments and how response will be given to commenters.

There were no requests for public comment.

### **EJAB RECOMMENDATIONS TO DEP:**

Rafiqya asked when the meetings would be public again.

Chairman Cutler stated that since the pandemic started there has been less public attendance at meetings. He cited accessibility concerns for low meeting attendance, for example, the timing of meetings.

Sophia Lee stated that language access might be an impediment in many instances. She asked if DEP or EJAB issues notices in other languages.

Fernando reminded that the previous meeting was public and that there will be two public meetings this year. He also said that DEP does promote EJAB meetings, but that OEJ and EJAB have not been successful in bringing community to EJAB meetings. DEP now has a full-time consultant developing its language access plan.

Jerome asked if OEJ or EJAB did anything for the members that just stepped down from their positions within the EJAB. He asked if they were given any recognition letter.

Fernando said that *Acting Secretary Jessica Shirley* is working on letters of recognition. Both of the former members that stepped down will be getting letters from DEP.

Jerome suggested finding ways to organize information and discussed creating an EJAB newsletter

Chairman Cutler suggested a recommendation that EJAB can make to OEJ, to be more accessible and have clearer lines of communication with the community.

Jacquelyn Omotalade wants to track communications, especially if sending newsletters

Rashida asked to look into legislation about construction codes to reduce energy consumption and legislation looking at international standards. Chairman Cutler agreed with the need that Rashida outlined in her suggestion.

Tom reminded that proactive outreach has closed the gap on a lot of the communications issues. He said that the OEJ nor EJAB are not the best to lift up EJ success stories because DEP is responsible for many of the issues. Additionally, success stories are already covered by other groups in the state and nationally.

Jacquelyn said that beyond success stories, it is about process and setting right expectations.

Dr. Bedi said that resources are not always known to groups we are working with. Maybe it is more of a collection of resources. She echoed Rashida's point on energy and says that EJAB should keep an eye on New York which is attempting to pass legislation addressing energy poverty.

Curtis highlighted the importance of accuracy and truthfulness. He reminded everyone that this is local work and that some folks will always look down on the government and DEP. He suggested it is important to try to get the ear of people that will actually listen.

Jerome said that the Public Utility Commission has a good presentation that would be helpful. He said that PA is going to need a lot more energy production in the future for data centers. He wants to make sure that external information is blended into their work.

Chairman Cutler said the EJAB should put a working group together to assess what they are doing on communications and outreach to provide intentional guidance.

Chairman Cutler asked how often board member want to meet offline and what structure they would want to meet in.

Jacquelyn flagged privacy considerations when collecting data and information.

Rafiqya said that there is still an EJ in PA Facebook and informational webpage up. She suggested that EJAB can look at and update their existing social media presence. EJAB did a statewide conference as well (2021). They put together a framework that the current EJAB can still utilize. EJAB worked with students from Harrisburg University and can see if they are still willing to volunteer to maintain the webpages.

Bobby mentioned House Bill 109 by Rep Vitali, which deals with amending Title 27 and environmental justice. Bobby will not make a comment on behalf of EJAB but has been asked about the bill but wanted to bring it to everyone's attention.

Chairman Cutler gave information on previous iterations of the bill and on his understanding of the current bill. He said that it is defiantly something EJAB will want to weigh in on.

Fernando said that OEJ was aware of the previous legislation and that both him and *Former OEJ Director, Justin Dula* provided testimony on the bill. DEP and OEJ will wait for the final version of the current bill to determine next steps internally. Fernando reiterated the importance of EJAB having a formal recommendation process to bring up items to OEJ. He also reiterated that the role of members as advocates is different than their roles as EJAB members. He wants to ensure that the recommendations being brought up by EJAB are within the scope of DEP.

Chairman Cutler reminded members of their former goal for the Office of the Environmental Advocate which did not fall under DEP's purview. Regardless, the EJAB wants to figure out who can do something about these items.

Rashida said she initially had a difficult time understanding the EJAB's role. However, she does have some pushback. She has seen a deterioration of the group and on "both sides." She said that DEP should have a less defensive role when EJAB brings things up. She hopes that EJAB will be more fruitful in the future.

Fernando acknowledged that DEP would continue to improve on requesting specific advice to maximize full EJAB participation and engagement. He wants to make sure these conversations have more structure and hopes that the new process is a solution for this.

#### **WRAP UP AND NEXT STEPS:**

Chairman Cutler asked the EJAB about building in an extra monthly meeting into their schedules.

Curtis suggested that they appoint someone to hold themselves accountable.

Rafiqya suggested meeting on Wednesdays.

Chairman Cutler thanked OEJ for the recommendations and the EJAB.

#### **ADJOURNMENT:**

The February 6, 2025, EJAB meeting adjourned at 12:52 p.m.