

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

MEMBERS PRESENT in person:

MEMBERS PRESENT via phone:

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:

The February 6, 2025 Environmental Justice Advisory Board (EJAB or Board) was called to order at 9:36 a.m. By Chairman Adam Cutler.

NEW MEMBER INTRODUCTIONS:

Chairman Cutler welcomed new member Curtis Jones to the Board and invited him to introduce himself. Mr. Jones shared his background. Then, Chairman Cutler opened the floor for members to introduce themselves. Ms. Muhammed introduced herself, highlighting her work in Harrisburg and encouraging members to connect. Following Ms. Muhammed's introduction, Chairman Cutler paused further introductions to accommodate presenters schedule.

DEP UPDATES:

DEP Chief of Staff Natasha Fackler highlighted key Department achievements: over 40,000 permit applications reviewed with no repayments required, more than 100,000 inspections conducted, all high-hazard dams assessed, record-setting oil and gas inspections, and 8 million tons of air pollutants reduced. She relayed Acting Secretary Jessica Shirley thanks to EJAB for its engagement role.

Discussion

Dr. Heather Bedi asked how federal freezes of IRA funding was impacting the agency. Ms. Fackler responded that operations are continuing under existing guidance while fiscal assessments are underway. Mr. Torres asked specifically about RISE PA funding, and Ms. Fackler explained that the program will proceed. She clarified that RISE PA is a reimbursement model from the EPA. Mr. Hughes expressed concern about funding pauses in some EJ areas. Ms. Fackler acknowledged the concerns and referenced the Department's resource account. Mr. Shabazz shared he has heard reports of grant recipients being told to remove terms like "equity" and "environmental justice from grant agreements." Ms. Fackler affirmed DEP's commitment to EJ, and Special Deputy Secretary Treviño explained such directives stem from federal grant rules. EJAB thanked Ms. Fackler for the updates.

OEJ UPDATES:

Special Deputy Secretary Treviño reported that in 2024, DEP received 294 EJ Area permits, including 19 that triggered Enhanced Public Participation. OEJ received 15 opt-in requests. A Standard Operating Procedure is being developed to improve internal coordination with permitting and Enhanced Public Participation processes. OEJ engaged with over 230 individuals and 230 community-based organizations, and will implement a more structured engagement tracking system in 2025. The 2025 action plan will be shared before the next EJAB meeting. Juan Serrat has departed from his role within DEP, and OEJ is working to fill his role.

Discussion

Ms. Muhammed requested her nomination for an EJAB member be shared with DEP HR. SDS Treviño explained that OEJ is prioritizing candidates from Northwest and Western PA. Chairman Cutler inquired about filling the vacant coordinator position, and SDS Treviño committed to update EJAB once a candidate is identified.

REVIEW OF THE NEW PROCESS:

SDS Treviño described OEJ's new process for submitting recommendations to EJAB. Each request will include a summary, specific asks, and a timeline. He encouraged EJAB to develop its own process for submitting recommendations to OEJ.

OEJ RECOMMENDATION REQUESTS:

Recommendation 1:

Harry Hoy, OEJ's Governor's Science and Technology Fellow, presented a recommendation to form a working group to improve the PennEnviroScreen tool, which uses 32 indicators and up to 100 datasets. As the EPA's EJ screening tool is now offline, PennEnviroScreen is currently the only screening tool available in PA. The working group will focus on GIS data quality, transparency, and benchmarking.

The proposed timeline: decision by end of February, recommendations by May, and DEP invitations to working group members by August. SDS Treviño clarified this will not be a formal advisory group, and OEJ seeks participation from both EJAB members and external expertise.

Discussion

Chairman Cutler recommended bringing in federal advisory experience. Dr. Baka volunteered and suggested a former student. Ms. Muhammed emphasized the importance of community involvement, and Chairman Cutler expressed that technical and community perspectives should be balanced.

Recommendation 2:

SDS Treviño introduced a second, longer-term recommendation focused on evaluating the effectiveness of Enhanced Public Participation. Regional EJ Coordinator, Jordi Comas, shared a story of Enhanced Public Participation during the permitting of a proposed gravel mine as an example of the need to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of Enhanced Public Participation. EJAB was asked for their expertise on measuring engagement quality and effectiveness.

Mr. Johnson proposed the formation of a small committee to identify tool goals and create feedback mechanisms. Ms. Lovely emphasized documenting community concerns and suggested creating a distinct EJAB outcome document. Mr. Jones supported conducting more informational outreach to help communities understand processes. Mr. Torres and Chairman Cutler highlighted the value of past engagement successes. Ms. Muhammad stressed the importance of youth involvement and raised issues with a PennDOT bridge projects. Mr. Comas noted the importance of public understanding in the compliance phase. The board paused for a 15-minute break at 11:22 a.m.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

The public comment period began at 11:43 a.m. There were no public comments

EJAB RECOMMENDATIONS TO DEP:

Chairman Cutler reminded the Board of a significant reduction in public meeting attendance since the pandemic, citing accessibility concerns. Ms. Lee raised language barriers.

Mr. Shabazz asked whether departing EJAB members received recognition. Mr. Treviño confirmed that Acting Secretary Shirley is preparing letters. Mr. Shabazz proposed the creation of an EJAB newsletter. Chairman Cutler supported clearer community communication. Ms. Omotalade suggested tracking outreach through newsletters.

Ms. Lovely recommended a EJAB role could be reviewing legislation related to energy efficiency and international standards. Chairman Cutler supported the idea. Dr. Bedi suggested a centralized resource list and endorsed tracking New York's legislation on energy poverty.

Mr. Jones underscored the importance of honesty and connecting with willing listeners. Mr. Shabazz recommended including energy infrastructure in planning, particularly with increasing demands from data centers. Chairman Cutler suggested a working group to improve communications and outreach.

Chairman Cutler discussed meeting frequency and structure. Ms. Omotalade flagged data privacy concerns. Ms. Muhammed noted that EJ in PA's Facebook and informational website are still active and could be updated. Harrisburg University students might help maintain those platforms.

Mr. Hughes mentioned that House Bill 109, environmental justice legislation, was introduced in the House of Representatives. Chairman Cutler agreed that EJAB should weigh in. SDS Treviño explained that the Department will wait for the final version before taking a position on the legislation. He reminded EJAB members that their advocacy roles differ from their formal EJAB roles. SDS Treviño encouraged structured recommendations relevant to DEP's scope.

Chairman Cutler acknowledged that while some issues—like the creation of an Office of the Environmental Advocate—are outside DEP's jurisdiction, EJAB still wants to identify responsible stakeholders. Ms. Lovely recognized that she hasn't always understood the role of EJAB members in the past, but also expressed concerns over the group's direction and called for

more constructive dialogue. SDS Treviño committed to improving structure and clarity in OEJ's requests to maximize EJAB engagement.

WRAP UP AND NEXT STEPS:

Chairman Cutler asked whether the board should add a monthly meeting. Mr. Jones recommended assigning someone for accountability. Ms. Muhammed proposed Wednesdays. Chairman Cutler thanked OEJ and EJAB for their work.

ADJOURNMENT:

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