

Email Ties Alderman Cardenas to Polluter

by Jacqueline Serrato

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A family in attendance at the January 16 meeting of the Southwest Environmental Alliance at the National Latino Education Institute in McKinley Park. (Photo by Jacqueline Serrato)

Worried residents from seven Southwest Side neighborhoods met January 16 to discuss permitting that would grant an asphalt plant permission to continue to operate across the street from their largest public park. 12th Ward Alderman George Cardenas, who chairs the Committee on Environmental Protection and Energy, backed the zoning for the plant, MAT Asphalt. Cardenas was notably absent from the town hall, which drew other elected officials.

Cardenas has told constituents in public meetings that he had no prior knowledge that MAT Asphalt was moving into his ward. In 2019, Cardenas's spokesperson, Liliana Escarpita, told [Block Club Chicago](#): "Going back to I guess two years ago, we were just as surprised as everyone else when we saw the huge silos in that plant development in that district."

But an email provided to the Weekly by [Neighbors for Environmental Justice](#) suggests that Cardenas and MAT Asphalt owner Michael Tadin Jr. had begun discussing the plant as early as February of 2017.

In the email, Tadin's attorney Amy Degnan, a partner at the law firm Daley and Georges Ltd. (which was founded by then-Mayor Richard J. Daley in 1936), was attempting to set up a

meeting for her client with the Department of Planning and Development.

“[Tadin] said Alderman Cardenas told him we would have a meeting with DPD to discuss [the plant],” she wrote to zoning officials Patti Scudiero and Steven Valenziano in February 9, 2017. “He would like to request that meeting is scheduled.”

A month later, Cardenas [supported](#) the rezoning of the adjacent residential land as mixed-commercial, which was necessary for the plant to begin operations.

That summer, MAT Asphalt filed an application with the IEPA for a construction permit. The application was approved despite the fact that the IEPA did not collect public input, a move that was harshly criticized by 12th Ward residents. Around the same time, MAT Leasing, which is owned by Tadin’s father, was donating \$10,500 to a Cardenas-affiliated PAC chaired by his brother.

In June 2018 the Tribune [reported](#) that the political action committees [Twelve PAC](#) and [Friends of Cardenas](#) had accepted tens of thousands of dollars from Tadin-owned businesses.

“We are hopeful [Cardenas] will change his mind and join his constituency instead of standing with MAT Asphalt, who provides him campaign contributions, or as some would say, ‘political payoffs,’” activist Mary González said.

Cardenas’s office did not respond to requests for comment by press time.

Environmental Alliance

Residents and community organizations formed the [Southwest Environmental Alliance](#) to challenge dirty industry in [Pilsen](#), [Little Village](#), [McKinley Park](#), [Bridgeport](#), [Brighton Park](#), Canaryville, and [Back of the Yards](#), after data revealed that those areas harbor concentrated levels of pollution from manufacturing districts in the vicinity. In a meeting held at the National Latino Education Institute—just a short walk from the asphalt silos—about three hundred people considered the impact that local industry is having on the health and quality of life of their families.

At the January 16 meeting, a [color-coded map](#) created by the Natural Resources Defense Council was displayed, showing graded pollution levels in the city caused by diesel trucks, dusty materials, noxious odors and other environmental hazards. The landscape was bright red in Southwest Side communities and in the often-overlooked Southeast Side, near the Calumet River.

“Aren’t you upset knowing that there’s so much asthma in our communities? That our babies are getting sick?” Theresa McNamara asked the crowd. “Do they have it on the Northside? Not like this. They may have asthma, but not like this. They may have cancer, but not like this.”

In the front row sat local, county and state officials: 1st District state Senator Tony Muñoz, state Representatives Theresa Mah (2nd) and Aarón Ortíz (1st), 25th Ward Alderman Byron Sigcho-Lopez, 7th District Cook County Commissioner Alma Anaya, U.S. Representative Daniel Lipinski (3rd), all of whom publicly committed to working with one another to clean up their districts.

A petition addressed to John J. Kim, the IEPA's acting director, demanding that the agency deny a ten-year permit for MAT Asphalt, had already collected 3,000 signatures by the time the town hall was held.

"One of the things that we can do immediately, and I think we should all commit to that," said 25th Ward Alderman Sigcho-Lopez at the town hall Thursday, "is to make sure that we don't take money contributions from polluters."

IEPA Hearing Pending

The IEPA provides public notices as a matter of policy, but the practice is not mandated by law. Last March, State Senator Muñoz sponsored a bill that required the IEPA to notify state elected officials when new developers apply for a pollution permit. The directive, however, does not necessarily mean officials will inform constituents.

At the town hall, Mah said she has another piece of legislation "that would require that plants like MAT Asphalt, when they are coming into a community...have to have a public hearing before their permit gets approved, and that considerations are made for the surrounding areas."

In a statement, Tadin said, "Our emissions are less than one-fourth the allowable level, according to the IEPA draft permit issued in late 2019... We remain committed to being a good neighbor, and look forward to presenting the facts about MAT Asphalt's responsible and environmentally sound operations at the Illinois EPA permit hearing."

According to Neighbors for Environmental Justice, the IEPA is in the process of scheduling a permit hearing for the spring—probably in March—that will include a meeting to share the contents of the MAT Asphalt permit and a written comment session.

"I think this is environmental racism, given that these neighborhoods are overwhelmingly people of color, Latinos, African-American, and Chinese, to name a few," said González at the town hall. "No one asked us if this would be okay, because they knew the answer would be no. So they did it quietly, passed around some cash, and magic happened."

Correction, January 21, 2020: *A previous version of this article stated that Ald. Cardenas had supported the rezoning of the plant property as mixed-commercial. He supported the rezoning of the land adjacent to the plant property.*

January 22, 2020: *This article has been updated to include comment from MAT Asphalt owner Michael Tadin Jr.*

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Jacqueline Serrato is the editor-in-chief of the South Side Weekly.

Tim Hadac

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Richard J. Daley was not mayor in 1936.

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