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# Drive to clean up S.F. freeway, construction air pollution

Proposals' goals: limit pollution, help residents breathe easier

Marisa Lagos Updated 11:01 am, Tuesday, July 15, 2014

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**IMAGE 1 OF 5**

A bicyclist pedals past a construction site next to freeways in the Mission Bay neighborhood.

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Freeway-adjacent neighborhoods such as the Bayview and South of Market have the unfortunate distinction of being the most polluted in San Francisco.

These neighborhoods, on the eastern side of San Francisco, are also seeing the most new construction.

Now, a supervisor is looking to ensure that new homes, schools and day care facilities in high-pollution areas of the city are constructed with technology that protects residents from asthma, heart disease and other illnesses associated with fine particulate matter.

On Tuesday, District 10 Supervisor [Malia Cohen](#) will introduce legislation that would require developers constructing or retrofitting buildings in those areas to install ventilation systems that reduce the amount of particulate matter that can get inside.

As for outside, a companion measure, also by Cohen, will require city contractors to use lower-emission diesel equipment and reduce other exhaust emissions while they work on public projects.

"It's important that we ensure that new housing as well as construction projects are utilizing the best technology possible to protect public health," Cohen said. "When we talk about environmental issues, it's not just about cleaning up Superfund sites - it's about residents being able to protect themselves every day."

The legislation is the result of collaboration among numerous city agencies, including the [Department of Public Health](#). [Karen Cohn](#), an environmental health program manager at the department, said the new filtration requirements will update and streamline a 2008 law that required developers of new housing projects larger than 10 units in polluted areas to assess potential air-quality issues. If dust and pollution levels reached a certain threshold, the law required the developer to install high-quality ventilation systems.

## S.F. a leader

The city was the first to adopt this type of law in 2008 and remains a leader in the area, according to [Phil Martien](#) of the Bay Area [Air Quality Management District](#), which has also helped San Francisco develop its air-filtration requirements.

Since the 2008 law was approved, about 80 projects have been reviewed and 35 percent of them were found to need the ventilation systems, Cohn said. Residents who live in buildings built before 2008, however, don't have those protections.

[Joe Walseth](#), who lives on Berry Street near Interstate 280 and the [King Street Caltrain Station](#), said that he noticed large levels of soot and other dust accumulating on his balcony. He installed fabric filters on air ducts in his unit to at least capture some of the particulate matter that flows inside. Those filters need to be changed monthly, he said.

"I work at the [Health Department](#), so I knew filters were available that I could use," said Walseth, who manages the department's childhood lead prevention program. "Unfortunately, they don't filter out the small particulate matter that's most dangerous."

Under the proposed legislation, Cohn said, virtually all construction projects within a newly mapped "air pollution exposure zone" - which includes Walseth's building - will have to install a ventilation system that meets specific criteria. The zone was created using modeling that factored in fine particulate matter pollution, excess cancer risk from all sources and proximity to freeways.

## Construction costs

The changes, if approved by the [Board of Supervisors](#) and signed by the mayor, could increase construction costs but would also eliminate the need for a developer to conduct an analysis, Cohn said.

"This will make it easier for project sponsors. They won't have to hire modelers if this passes," she said, adding that the creation of an air pollution zone - which will be updated every five years - also would make the entire process "more predictable" for developers.

"All future residents should be protected from air pollution," Cohn said.

It's not clear whether developers - particularly those who operate on a smaller scale - will oppose the proposal. [Angus McCarthy](#), president of the [Residential Builders Association](#), could not be reached for comment. But [Oz Erickson](#), chairman of real estate developer [Emerald Fund](#), said he has some concerns about a blanket requirement.

"As a general rule, I support having proper air quality inside units," he said, noting that his company is installing filtration systems that would meet the legislation's requirements in several of its existing projects.

But he would prefer that developers be given the option to conduct testing, he said.

"In many parts of the (air pollution exposure zone) it's probably appropriate, but the concern is always that the requirement is an expensive addition, and it might be superfluous for some projects," Erickson said. "I would want to make sure the air is actually dirty."

Pollution generated by cars and other machinery has been linked to pulmonary and heart diseases, as well as low birth weights, increased risk of preterm delivery and diabetes in women, and childhood asthma and bronchitis.

## 2,800 premature deaths

The Bay Area Air Quality Management District says 2,800 premature deaths each year in the region are linked to air pollution - and believes 90 percent of them are related to fine particulate matter. The [California Environmental Protection Agency Air Resources Board](#) recommends building housing at least 500 feet from major roadways and 1,000 feet from busy distribution centers and rail yards.

Cohen said that as the city seeks to transform many formerly industrial areas of the Bayview and other parts of the city into residential neighborhoods, it's simply "smart planning" to mitigate potential health effects from the beginning.

She said she doesn't anticipate too much resistance to her proposals. The Department of Public Health has been conducting outreach to residents, developers and others on the proposal since last fall.

"It's never too expensive to protect public health," she said.

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