Coastal advocates address handling the neighborhood toxic site

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Local and state environmentalists and coastal advocates gathered on Jekyll Island over the weekend to learn about what to do when dangerous substances are in the neighborhood or community.

Led by One Hundred Miles’ Alice Keyes and Georgia Interfaith Power and Light’s Codi Norred, discussion Saturday touched on environmental justice, the overall theme for One Hundred Miles’ Choosing to Lead Conference.

Norred said there’s no way to work on climate issues without achieving justice for people on pollution matters.

“What does it mean in Georgia?” Norred asked. “Typically environmental injustices are hidden under our radar on purpose, and are hidden in systems that are designed to be complex so that we don’t ask questions about them.”

Keyes touched on how the concept relates to the Arco neighborhood in Brunswick.

“One don’t think we need to go over the biggest challenges, but when I look around the Arco neighborhood that surrounds the LCP Superfund site, I can’t help but see that the majority of the people there are women, children and the elderly who are African-American, and there is a growing
immigrant population there as well,” Keyes said.

She added that 57 percent of Arco residents, on average, are living at or below the federal poverty line.

Keyes recalled the proposed deal between Honeywell and the state government for compensating the community for lack of use of the polluted area. The proposal: $4 million to be used to build fishing piers, boat docks, “that type of thing, to increase access to contaminated waters and contaminated fish, Keyes said. “It’s quite problematic.”

She said the fact that the area remains contaminated and the seafood inedible concerns her, though people continue to fish and recreate there.

“It's a very accessible public resource,” Keyes said.

Education, communication and collaboration between different community organizations and legislative advocacy are among the practical steps that should be taken.

Heather McTeer Toney, who went into environmental advocacy after serving as the Environmental Protection Agency’s Southeast Region administrator and two terms as the youngest mayor in the history of her hometown of Greenville, Miss., talked about bringing people together.

Toney said oftentimes people or affected groups aren't brought in to necessary conversations because they weren't asked to participate. At other times, groups come in with an idea of doing something without asking residents affected what they need.

She said what works best is to include more people in the conversation, not fewer.

Toney said tackling important issues in environmental protection and conservation and coastal resiliency takes an effort not unlike what it takes to get out of escape rooms, where locked in groups have to figure how to get out by solving a series of puzzles.

“You have to use the skill set of the people in the room to figure out how to get out of the room within a (set) time...,” Toney said. “It’s a ton of fun and super-stressful. But it’s amazing what happens when people work together.”
She noted, “The most successful people who get out of the escape room listen to each other and they figure out who has what or the best skill set, and they put people to work doing those things that they do well.”

Keyes was impressed by the broad opposition to the deal struck by the EPA and Hercules regarding the Terry Creek Superfund site. A significant portion of that came from people talking with elected officials.

Keyes praised U.S. Rep. Buddy Carter, R-1, saying he “has done a great job to raise awareness about suffering in (the 1st District) in the U.S. Congress. He has introduced the Community Cleanup Act. It hasn't gone very far, but he's brought it up and he has a vision around these issues.”

Carter introduced H.R. 3382, the Community Cleanup Act, in June of last year. It would require more direct notice and involvement of local governments at the locations of Superfund sites.

The bill was referred to the House Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change, on which Carter serves, but it can be hard for a member of the minority party to get legislation moving in Congress without significant majority party effort. The bill does have a Democratic co-sponsor, U.S. Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester of Delaware.

There are 15 hazardous sites in Glynn County, four of which are administered under the federal Superfund program. Eleven others are listed under the state’s Hazardous Site Inventory list.

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