

Environmental activists want in on Durban fire probe

Mercury News | 5 April 2017

Kamcilla Pillay

Environmental activists have called on city officials to include them in the investigation into the recent industrial fire in south Durban – which raged for three days and smouldered for several more.

Representatives of Earthlife Africa, groundWork, the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) and residents of the affected communities gathered at St John the Divine Anglican Church in Glenwood to discuss the way forward.



The fire in South Coast Road raged for three days last month. Picture: Emergency Services

Representatives from the eThekini fire department – scheduled to address the concerns raised, which included health impact, damage to property, and the emergency plan for the South Durban Basin – had not arrived at the time of publication.

The Mercury reported last week that Durban's disaster management plan had been poorly received by community and environmental activists, who believed it had not been adequately updated in years.

Environmental experts said it was unacceptable that there were no early warning siren and public address systems in place in the South Durban Basin. They said the plan relied too heavily on commercial radio to communicate information to the public.

Experts said that soot, released in the fire, could comprise acids, chemicals, metals, soils and dust, which could lead to serious health problems.

Bobby Peek of groundWork told those gathered last night that they had had a meeting with the city and requested to be part of any team looking into the incident.

"We want to be part of all technical teams," he said.

Shanice Gomes of SDCEA reiterated the serious incidents in the area – 55 in total – since 2000.

Desmond D'Sa of the same organisation said it was imperative that all roleplayers participated in the investigations process.

"We need more safety inspectors, and to make sure that legislation is being enforced to prevent incidents like this one."

Vanessa Black of Earthlife Africa said that, for a change, it wasn't just south Durban that was affected.

She said Durban residents were living next to one of the country's largest petrochemical clusters, which housed many hazardous industries.

"But there is no database of what chemicals are being housed in these factories and warehouses.

"That is a problem."

The Mercury