

Testimony on R.B. 5145: AAC Environmentally Stressed
And Environmental Justice Communities

Alan L. Benford
25F Cliffside Drive
Manchester, CT 06042
Energy and Technology Committee
February 26, 2008

Good morning Senator Fonfara, Representative Fontana, Senator Duff, Representative Nardello and members of the committee. My name is Al Benford, and I live in Manchester. I am a Unitarian Universalist and an active participant in Congregations United for Racial Equality and Justice, known as CUREJ (courage). CUREJ is a coalition of congregations formed to combat racism. CUREJ is an institutional member and I am an individual member of the Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice (CCEJ).

My Unitarian Universalist faith does not have a single theology though many of us are believers in God. What we hold in common are the principles of how we shall live in this world. The first principle is to "affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person." That means that wealth, color, ethnicity, geography or any other factor will not impact upon whether a person has value. That value is inherent in every person. This is consistent with the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which says, in part, "No State shall . . . deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." In other words, all persons shall be treated equally under the law. The Connecticut Constitution has similar provisions.

Testimony given by Dr. Mark Mitchell, President of CCEJ, has pointed out that pollution sources are often concentrated in urban communities, and in small areas of suburban and rural towns. The people nearby, most often poor and/or People of Color, are more seriously affected by the pollution generated by these facilities. This is wrong on its face, and when the 14th Amendment is considered, it is a violation of their constitutional rights. They are not getting "equal protection of the laws." This is especially egregious when it is understood that the 14th Amendment was passed specifically to protect the rights of former slaves and their descendents.

This pattern has evolved over decades and will not be corrected by a single law or in a short time. Raised Bill 5145 is a start, a very necessary and important start.

Certainly an overall goal should be to reduce pollution everywhere. A short-term goal should be protection of communities where pollution is already concentrated from exacerbating the situation.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King once said:
"Cowardice asks the question, 'Is it safe?' Expediency asks the question, 'Is it politic?' But conscience asks the question, 'Is it right?' And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but because conscience tells one it is right."

This quote does not exactly apply in that this bill does not challenge anyone's safety. It enhances it. This bill is not impolitic, in that it provides protection for a wide range of constituencies. In my opinion, the most important element in this quote is the call to do what is right. I say this based on my religious convictions and my faith in the Constitution of the United States, with special reference to the 14th Amendment.

Thank you for this opportunity to talk to you today.