Both in the extraction and the burning processes, coal is deadly to humans and to the environment. One coal plant is estimated to cause $156 million in health damages annually, through asthma, heart attacks, and brain damage. In Massachusetts, a 2010 report from the Clean Air Task Force showed that pollution from coal plants causes 250 deaths, 211 hospital admissions, and 471 heart attacks every year. Coal is also one of the largest contributors to climate change in MA. In 2009, coal contributed to about 50% of our carbon emissions from the electric sector. Climate change puts Boston and many other Massachusetts coastal communities particularly at risk from sea-level rise. Bill H.2935 calls for regulations that will essentially phase out coal in the Commonwealth by 2020, while also helping the workers and communities transition successfully. As many coal plants will already be shutting down in the foreseeable future, this bill will help ensure a smoother transition.

■ The Bill
H.2935: An Act to transition to a clean energy Commonwealth.

■ Excerpt from Storybook
“Burning coal ...fundamentally alters the climate, resulting in countless human deaths and imperiling the civilization itself. 100 million human beings are expected to die from burning fossil fuels by 2030...Clean energy like solar and wind allow us to continue powering our homes and businesses without requiring our brothers and sisters around the world to die. It’s win-win. We still get energy and they still get to live. It’s time to get moving.” (Craig Altemose, Executive Director of Better Future Project)

“After moving to Easthampton, I found that my asthma was coming back. I’d had it as a child and I grew out of it for a long time...When I found out that there was this coal plant nearby...I kind of felt that it was affecting me directly. I have a two year-old nephew and a niece on the way, and I worry for them...because the asthma rates here are higher than normal. Coal has got to go.” (Kim Finch, Easthampton resident)
Elevator Speech

Good morning, my name is Vivian and this is Tali; we are students from Brandeis University interested in policy change.

We all share a responsibility for maintaining healthy communities. Unfortunately, coal plants are posing health risks that include increased asthma rates and mercury toxins. Currently there are two plants operating in Massachusetts threatening the health of residents in Holyoke and Somerset. The Brayton Point power plant, located in Somerset, is the largest single source of toxic air pollution in Massachusetts. These plants are dilapidated, unprofitable and are likely to cease operations by their own accord in the near future.

We are asking for your support with Bill H. 2935: An Act to transition to a clean energy Commonwealth, as a solution to protect citizen health while maintaining the fiscal security of the community. Before this proposal there was no aid to laid-off coal plant workers. The Act allows the affected community to adopt community-transitioning funds, which establish worker retraining programs concentrated in clean energy jobs. This bill acts as a plan for a steady and accountable phase-out of coal-fired electric plants by 2020.

This is a critical bill to the future stability of the Commonwealth and will serve as a progressive template for transitioning to a clean nation tomorrow. We ask for your support today to approve this at a committee vote in order to ensure a cleaner, healthier future.

Letter to the Legislator

Dear Representative Chan,

As students from your alma mater, Brandeis University, interested in social justice and policy change we share a concern for the health and well being of local communities. We are currently working on a piece of legislation to move Massachusetts towards being coal-free and moving towards cleaner energy by 2020. More specifically, we are writing to ask you to support H.2935 An Act to transition to a clean energy Commonwealth, which is currently in the Joint Committee on Telecommunications, Utilities and Energy. As a member of this committee your input on this matter is critical to our bill’s progression.

We all share a responsibility for maintaining healthy communities. Unfortunately, coal plants are posing health risks that include increased asthma rates and mercury toxins. Currently there are two plants operating in Massachusetts threatening the health of residents in Holyoke and Somerset. The Brayton Point power plant located in Somerset is the largest single source of toxic air pollution in Massachusetts. These plants are dilapidated, unprofitable and are likely to cease operations on their own in the near future.

The bill is the solution to both protect citizen health and maintain the fiscal security of the community. It allows the affected community to adopt community-transitioning funds which establish worker retraining programs concentrated in clean energy jobs. This bill acts as an agenda for a steady and accountable phase-out of coal-fired electric plants by 2020. Detractors are concerned about the loss of local jobs and tax base of the facility, however, these plants are likely to close on their own in the near future and workers would have to be relocated regardless. With this bill in place there will be a blueprint of what to do next for workers and the community. Furthermore, this bill is revenue neutral and would not require any additional taxes on Massachusetts residents.

This is an important bill to the future stability of the Commonwealth and will serve as a progressive template for transitioning to a clean nation tomorrow. As a supporter and sponsor of many various energy-efficiency and environmental bills including H.2919, H.2920 and H.677, we hope that you will be interested in continuing positive environmental justice efforts. We ask for your support to H.2935 in order to ensure a cleaner, healthier future.

Thank you for your time and concern.

House Ways and Means Script

We all value healthy communities, and share responsibility for keeping them healthy. However, polluted air and a polluted environment in Massachusetts threaten our healthy communities. Areas around coal-fired power plants are suffering the consequences of exposure to polluted air. In Holyoke, which houses the Mount Tom coal plant, the asthma rate is twice the statewide asthma rate. Richard Purcell, a Holyoke resident, explained how he had had childhood asthma that went away by age 10. He served for decades in the U.S. Army, and upon return bought a house in Holyoke. He soon found that his asthma mysteriously returned, and though at first thought it was caused by Gulf War syndrome, his doctor later confirmed that it was probably caused by the local coal plant. Richard is just one example of the many Massachusetts residents – including many children – whose daily lives and health are affected by our coal plants. These people are sick because of how we choose to get our energy. And as Richard noted, these coal plants are placed in poorer communities, the communities that need the most help. But instead, people who are often living from paycheck to paycheck have to worry on top of that about paying for their asthma meds, which can be $250 per month.
Another issue is that our coal plants are contributing to climate change, as coal is the top contributor to climate change in America. Climate change threatens our social and economic well-being through threats such as increased drought, water and food insecurity, sea level rise, and increases in spreadable diseases. In Massachusetts right now, we have three operating plants: Brayton Point in Somerset, Mount Tom in Holyoke, and the Salem Harbor Plant, which is already scheduled to shut down.

But we as a Commonwealth can move beyond coal. Our bill, An Act to transition to a clean energy Commonwealth [H. 2935], will help phase out coal plants in Massachusetts by 2020. The bill proposes a blueprint for a methodical transition from burning coal to using cleaner energy sources. It further requires worker retraining and funding to help the transitioning communities. The bill asks the companies to produce a plan that the Department of Energy Resources (DOER) would then use to establish a statewide plan for shutting down coal in Massachusetts by 2020. The bill would not mandate that the plants close, but rather it provides the tools to the DOER to pull the trigger if they see it as necessary. The bill further requires worker retraining in the clean energy sector, and establishes a community transitioning fund – paid for by the plants based on their carbon emissions – to help finance the transition in the communities.

Given that these plants are over 50 years old, and that most plants have a 30 year lifespan, it seems likely that they will be unprofitable in the near future anyways. In September 2012, the Mount Tom plant reduced its workers from 60 to 25. New England Public Radio quotes Rick Sullivan, the Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs, as saying “You know, if you’re looking at the energy crystal ball we can safely say that sometime in the near future these facilities will in fact be offline.” It seems that regardless of whether this bill is passed or not, the plants may shut down on their own in the near future. This bill ensures that the transition for the workers and the communities is smooth, and that there is assistance with this process.

This bill would be revenue neutral and would not require any additional taxes on Massachusetts residents, though it would put additional responsibilities on the agencies. A report from the National Academy of Sciences suggests that each plant has “hidden” health and environmental costs of $156 million on average, and therefore we can expect to reclaim some of these hidden costs by shutting down the plants. However, it is important to note that the local communities would suffer an initial loss of state revenue from property taxes of the plants. In Somerset, the Brayton Point coal plant provides $13 million in taxes annually, and Mount Tom provides $614,000. The main arguments against this bill are that it would hurt the communities economically and would lay off workers, and we acknowledge this as an important and very real concern. However, as we have demonstrated, the plants are likely to close on their own in the near future. Having this bill in place would ensure that when this happens, there are funds in place to help smoothly transition the town and retrain the workers. And eventually, when the properties are transitioned, the towns can earn the revenue back.

It is important to understand the true gain of this bill, which is setting Massachusetts up to move beyond coal towards a cleaner environment and healthier communities. In the last session, this bill had 14 co-sponsors; now it has 54. The time is now for Massachusetts to take a stand and help lead the nation in moving away from deadly energy sources and to promote healthy communities. We therefore ask you to support this bill to help it succeed in creating a cleaner, healthier Commonwealth.

Op-Ed

A coal stack emitting what looks like smoke. Smog, mercury, and soot in the air. A child coughing upstairs because of asthma. This is not how you would wish to live. And yet, thousands of Massachusetts residents face this reality everyday because they live near coal plants. And this is why coal has got to go, and why you should support Bill H.2935, An Act to transition to a clean energy Commonwealth.

For example, take Richard Purcell, a Holyoke resident who lives near the Mount Tom coal plant. In 1991, Richard was discharged from the U.S. Army after nearly 15 years of service, and he bought a house in Holyoke. But then a strange thing started to happen. He started to get asthma-like symptoms, which he hadn’t experienced since he was a child. Concerned, he went to his doctor, thinking it was Gulf War syndrome. It was there that he learned the truth: that he was suffering from asthma again because he was now living so close a coal plant.

Besides the Mount Tom plant in Holyoke, remaining plants in Massachusetts include Brayton Point in Somerset [one of the largest polluters in New England], and a plant in Salem [slated to shut down in 2014]. These coal plants are causing the surrounding communities’ health to suffer. The asthma rate in coal communities is twice the state average, and it is also the number one cause for children to miss school. Pollution from coal plants can lead to smog, and doctors liken inhaling smog to getting sunburnt in your lungs. And, a single coal plant is estimated to cause $156 million in health care costs for those affected by the toxins...
emitted from coal. Sound like an environment that you would want to live in? I didn’t think so.

If we look beyond the immediate effects of coal plants in the communities, we see an uglier picture. Coal is one of the greatest contributors to climate change. Climate change, among other things, threatens to increase severe weather patterns, flooding and drought, food and water shortages, and a higher rate of disease transmission. Even when we look to where the coal comes from, we see destruction. Half of our coal in Massachusetts comes from mountaintop removal, which blows off the tops of mountains to reach the coal underneath. This devastates the surrounding communities by polluting their drinking water, and it generates tons of waste. The other half of our coal comes from Colombia, where the mining is linked to human rights violations. Coal is destructive at every point in its lifespan.

But fear not. There is another way. There is a bill in the state legislature entitled, “An Act to transition to a clean energy Commonwealth,” (H. 2935) which would set Massachusetts up to move towards cleaner electricity by 2020, and which creates a blueprint to transition away from the coal plants. It calls for the Department of Energy Resources to create a shutdown plan, and establishes a community transition fund that the plants contribute to, which the communities can use to help mitigate effects of closing down the plants. Plus, there’s retraining for the employees in the clean energy sector. These plants are becoming unprofitable; last September, Mount Tom laid off 40 workers. And a little over a month ago, Mount Tom announced it would go off the grid for a year in 2016 – with no plan for the community or employees in place for the year. This bill provides a plan to transition away from coal responsibly and account for the effects on the communities and workers.

Look around you. Feel the air in the breath you are taking. If your air is clean, and doesn’t raise your risk for asthma, appreciate it and don’t take this for granted; thousands do not have the luxury of clean air. And join the fight so that Massachusetts residents no longer have to suffer from polluted air in their backyards. Talk to your representative, and tell them that YOU want to move beyond coal.

Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Tali

The second most important meeting we had concerning the bill was during our second time at the State House. Vivian and I had a scheduled meeting with Senator Downing, the Senate Chair of the Joint Committee that our bill is in, and we wanted to ask for a favorable report. When we walked in, I noticed a cabinet covered with stickers, many of which were environmental, energy, and food related. We first met with a member of his staff, who was relatively a new employee at the State House. I think it was helpful to speak with her before we actually met with Senator Downing, so that we could warm up our elevator speech pitch and be ready to talk to the senator. Furthermore, we got to hear what questions she brought up, and it made me feel more confident that we could answer them – our research paper had prepared us well.

Once Senator Downing arrived, we moved into his office, introduced ourselves, and began our elevator speech (which I think went really well). Following this, we had a pretty in-depth conversation with him about the bill, his questions and concerns, and the underlying values that we were discussing. I was impressed with how knowledgeable he was about the bill and energy issues in general. He seemed to know quite a lot about this issue. In particular, he brought up the example of the Salem Harbor plant, which recently shut down half of its operations and is slated to shut down completely by 2014. The argument about the tax revenue to the town by shutting the coal plants down became more real when it was discussed by a decision-maker who has to consider the issue from all possible angles. The overall sense I got from him was that he was generally very supportive of the bill and issues, and understands the importance of clean energy both for health and environmental reasons. Yet he just felt that he was concerned about, and that we need a plan. It was more in the details, rather than the overall idea, that he was concerned about, and these are concerns that I definitely understand.

I think overall, this was a very good meeting. It lasted for nearly 30 minutes, and was at times an intense discussion of values, of how the environment affects people, and on climate change. At the end, we also started discussing other environmental issues, such as a bill that he filed to get the state to divest its funds from fossil fuel companies (which Seattle has successfully committed to doing). As I am working on the Brandeis Divestment Campaign to divest our endowment, we were further able to relate on this issue. I felt that we had a genuine discussion and that our voices were heard, especially by someone in a powerful position in the Joint Committee of our bill. Our other meetings lasted no more than ten minutes, and while the aides definitely listen, this was the most personal and genuine discussion I had.
Vivian

Tali and I met up with Senator Downing in his office at the statehouse during our first advocacy trip. We chose to visit Senator Downing because he is the Chair of the Joint Committee on Telecommunications, Utilities and Energy, which is the committee our bill is in currently.

Senator Downing was very approachable and he was surprisingly well informed about this bill (which cut our elevator speech short). He immediately told us that he was in favor of clean energy practices. He also told us some history of the bill that we didn’t even know, so we learned a lot from him. Our meeting was very conversational, back and forth. He ultimately played it safe and told us that it was too early to tell whether or not this bill would be able to go forward. After Tali and I walked out of his office and down the hall to coordinate which representative we were going to meet up next, Senator Downing walked up to us (in the hallway) and gave us the names of a few representatives we should meet up with, namely, Representative John Keenan from Salem. Salem, as you know has a plant that is slated to shut down the summer of 2014. Senator Downing explained that Representative Keenan was originally against the bill because the “Salem plant fiasco” caused him so much stress, however since that chapter of the Salem coal plant has closed, Senator Downing said that Rep. Keenan would be more willing to listen to more information about this bill. With Downing admitting this, this was very humanizing and it made the Senator seem like real person.

Update

As of January 22, 2013, H.2935 was in the Joint Committee on Telecommunications, Utilities, and Energy awaiting a hearing.

For more information

Beyond Coal Campaign

http://sierraclub.org/coal/massachusetts