

What the Winston-Salem - News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) - February 7, 2022
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Ruby Gordon was already in bed last Monday night when she got the first call notifying her to evacuate her home in northern Winston-Salem.

The call was related to a fire at the Winston Weaver fertilizer facility on Cherry Street, about three-quarters of a mile away.

Gordon had driven by the building thousands of times. Sometimes she would see a truck coming or going, but, she said, "I didn't know what was in that building, to be honest with you. I knew it was there, but I didn't know what was in there."

More than 500 tons of ammonium nitrate were in the Winston Weaver plant when the fire started on Jan. 31, with roughly 100 additional tons on a railroad car at the site.

The common fertilizer ingredient can explode if it comes into contact with wood, paper or other compounds. It has been linked with multiple deadly blasts in the United States, including a 2013 explosion in West, Texas, that registered at 2.1 on the Richter scale, killed 15 people and injured more than 250. A rental truck loaded with two tons of ammonium nitrate exploded in Oklahoma City in 1995, leveling the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building and killing 169 people.

WINSTONFIRE02-020322-EDH.jpg Ruby Gordon hugs her granddaughter Gracelyn Gordon, 4, at Gordon's home in Winston-Salem, N.C., Thursday, Feb. 3, 2022. Gordon lives within the evacuation zone for the Winston Weaver Company fertilizer plant fire.

Gov. Roy Cooper's executive order

When Gov. Roy Cooper addressed environmental justice in an executive order last month, it was geared toward neighborhoods like Gordon's.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool, about 51% of the roughly 6,500 people who live within a mile of Winston Weaver are Black and 26% are Hispanic. The per capita annual income in the area is \$17,423, well short of Forsyth County's \$30,769.

Cooper's Executive Order 246 called for "meaningful, fair and equitable public engagement" to "avoid and remedy harmful impacts on communities most severely and frequently impacted by economic and environmental health." It also discusses cumulative impacts - the idea that multiple pollution sources layer on top of each other to create more significant hazards.

The area within a mile of Winston Weaver, for instance, is in the 91st percentile nationally for exposure to fine particulate matter in the air, the 93rd percentile nationally for exposure to ozone, and the 92nd percentile for cancer risk from air quality, according to the EPA's screening tool.

The community is bordered to the east by U.S. 52, a highway that was built through the city's Black neighborhoods in the 1960s under the guise of eliminating what city leaders at the time called "blight."

R.J. Reynolds opened its Whitaker Park plant a mile southeast of Winston Weaver in 1961. When it opened, the facility - which closed in 2011 - was considered the largest cigarette plant in the world.

There's an asphalt plant slightly southeast of the Winston Weaver plant, as well as a packaging facility.

Immediately surrounding the plant are mostly small businesses - car repair shops, a staffing agency, the corporate headquarters of an independent wrestling company - with residential neighborhoods branching off of Indiana Avenue and Cherry Street nearby, typically made up of modest one- or two-story homes on large lots that belie the fact that this area was once considered out in the country.

Like Gordon, many of the thousands living within a mile of the plant had little to no knowledge that a facility posing risks like Winston Weaver existed in the middle of their neighborhood.

A blast, and heavy smoke

D.D. Adams also lives about three-quarters of a mile from the plant. She was sitting on the couch in her Marlowe Avenue home when she heard and felt the first explosion. About an hour later, Adams recalled feeling two smaller blasts rattle her home.

Adams, who has represented Winston-Salem's north ward on the city council since 2009, said, "Most people don't know. Not just my neighborhood, all neighborhoods. We like to think of things like a matrix: As long as I don't know and somebody else is handling it, I'm good."

"But incidents like this open people's eyes," she continued, "to how much they don't know and what little bit they should know."

WINSTONFIRE06-020322-EDH.jpg Joe Jackson, right, talks with Winston-Salem city council member D.D. Adams after a press conference in Winston-Salem, N.C., Thursday, Feb. 3, 2022. Jackson temporarily moved in with his mother to help take care of her while her community is part of the evacuation zone of Winston Weaver Company fertilizer plant fire.

Chenita Johnson lives on Patterson Avenue, two blocks outside the evacuation zone that stretched for a mile radius around the plant from Monday evening until Friday morning. Johnson has lived in the area for 40 years, but like Gordon had no idea about the quantity of ammonium nitrate being used at the site she routinely passes.

"There are a lot of people who live right at ground zero there who didn't understand what was at that factory," Johnson said, "and there were a lot of people who had seen the factory who didn't know what it was."

Thursday afternoon, Johnson posted a video of hazy smoke from **the fire** reaching her home. **The** clouds smelled like something burning and something else Johnson couldn't place, so she retreated inside and kept all of **the** doors and windows closed.

"When it came down Patterson it didn't feel safe," Johnson said. "We had to mask **in the** house."

The Winston Weaver plant

The Winston Weaver plant did not explode like **the** West, Texas, facility.

Instead, firefighters fell back, letting **the** unpredictable substance burn up and monitoring **the** site via drones flown overhead. They now believe that much of **the** ammonium nitrate has burned away, or at least enough to let crews **in** hazmat suits move around **the** site, checking on hot spots and shifting rubble as clouds of white smoke from **the** warehouse's remains billow around them.

WINSTONFIRE01-020322-EDH.jpgSmoke continues to rise from **the** remains of **the** Winston Weaver Company fertilizer plant **in Winston-Salem, N.C., Thursday, Feb. 3, 2022.**

The Winston Weaver facility included five buildings spread over more than eight acres, according to Forsyth County property records. On **the** western edge of **the** property was **the** nearly 48,000-square-foot warehouse built **in** 1939 and renovated **in** 1963. There were also two smaller warehouses and an office building, each built later.

Joe Jackson, whose parents bought their house **in north Winston-Salem in the** early 1970s, said **the** plant kept a low profile. He recalled peering over as he drove past to see a small blue sign identifying **the** facility, but nobody ever told Jackson or his parents **what** was happening inside.

"There was not any indication, no understanding of people that we knew that there was a place there that contained **the** storage of ammonium nitrate or any kind of chemical that could cause **the** disruption that this has," Jackson said.

During a Thursday briefing, **Winston-Salem Fire** Department officials said there have been "some minor incidents" at **the** site **in** recent years. Incident reports obtained by **The News & Observer** show there have been four **fire** department calls to **the** Winston Weaver facility since 2017.

On Jan. 27, 2017, **fire** officials found light smoke at **the** facility and were told a heater that was being used to burn off product occasionally smoked when starting **in** cold weather.

The next call was at 7:42 a.m. on Dec. 8, 2019, when **the** fire department found a short circuit had caused a meter box on **the** side of **the** warehouse to catch **fire**. Another electric incident brought firefighters to **the** facility on March 6, 2020, when a cluster of wires began to arc and smoke but did not catch **fire**.

The most recent call came at 6:52 p.m. on Dec. 26, 2021, when an electrical failure caused machinery to drop hot materials onto a fertilizer pile, causing **the** pile to smolder.

Firefighters tried to flood **the** area with water but faced challenges because **the** “pile of fertilizer material” had hardened into **what the** incident report describes as “a rock like substance.” Ultimately, **the** fire department called a wrecker and hazmat crew **in** to remove **the** pile of fertilizer from **the** factory.

A day after **the** last incident, **the Winston-Salem Fire** Department conducted its annual inspection. Winston Weaver received no violations, according to records obtained by **The News & Observer**, but **the** inspector did find “parts of **the** building **in** poor condition.”

The buildings did not have sprinkler systems and were not insulated, according to Forsyth County property records.

When Winston Weaver’s first building was constructed **in** 1939, it was outside of city limits.

Adams, **the** city councilwoman, said, “I had friends that lived out that way. It was farmland, chickens, hogs, country. **The** plant was there, **the** community built up around **the** plant and it was annexed into **the** city. That’s no different than any city **in** America.”

Also like many cities **in** America - and especially **in the** South - **the** people who purchased homes **in the** industrial area immediately around **the** fertilizer plant were mostly Black.

“Wherever you find factories, hazardous material, loud noise businesses, dry cleaning, automotive, anything that creates something that has chemicals, that’s where Black folks were forced to move to,” Adams said.

WINSTONFIRE04-020322-EDH.jpgA vehicle drive down Retnuh Drive, which is within **the** evacuation zone for **the** Winston Weaver Company fertilizer plant fire, **in Winston-Salem, N.C.**, Thursday, Feb. 3, 2022.

Winston-Salem’s history and **what** comes next

Segregation laws between 1912 and 1940 concentrated **Winston-Salem’s** Black population **in** East **Winston-Salem** and along **what** would become **the** U.S. 52 corridor, said Russell Smith, a geography professor at **Winston-Salem** State University. Even after those laws were struck down, Smith said, they continued to shape where Black people either could or chose to live.

“They’re forced into these spaces, one, because that’s **the** only part of **the** city that they can live (due to segregation), maybe feel comfortable **in**, have a sense of community. And then **the** second part is **the** economic aspect of where they could afford,” Smith said.

And one of **the** places where Black people could afford to live, especially after U.S. 52 displaced Black neighborhoods like Happy Hill and Belews Street, was around **the** Winston Weaver plant.

Policymakers, Smith said, need to weigh **the** jobs and tax revenue offered by industrial facilities like Winston Weaver against **the** environmental consequences of having it **in** a community.

“Especially when they’re **in** such close proximity to thousands of people and when something does

go wrong, those people are bearing **the** brunt of all of **the** advantages that **the** rest of society has benefited from over **the** decades that they've been **in** existence," Smith said.

WINSTONFIRE05-020322-EDH.jpgA playground area by Marvin United Methodist Church, which is within **the** evacuation zone for **the** Winston Weaver Company fertilizer plant **fire**, sits empty **in** **Winston-Salem**, N.C., Thursday, Feb. 3, 2022.

Executive Order 246, which Cooper signed **in** early January, recognizes that climate change has a disproportionate impact **in** communities where people of color and people who earn low incomes live. It acknowledges cumulative impacts and **the** importance of state government **in** addressing **environmental** disparities.

The order calls for a public input process that could lead to additional executive orders addressing **environmental justice**. Perhaps most tangibly, it calls for **the** appointment of an **environmental justice** point person **in** each Cabinet agency and public participation plans guiding how those agencies interact with communities that will be affected by their decisions.

Jackson, who is caring for his 91-year-old mother, learned of **the** fire Monday evening when a relative called to ask if they were evacuating. He turned on **the** TV and learned more **about what** was happening through **the** news media.

He ultimately decided to stay put **in the** home, which was slightly outside of **the** evacuation zone. It was safer to take **the** chance that **the** plant would not explode, he said, than to risk taking his mother to a shelter **in the** midst of **the** COVID-19 pandemic.

As **the** smoke clears, Jackson and many others are left with a list of unanswered questions.

"None of **the** whys were clearly explained to me," Jackson said. "Why it existed. Why would this plant be there with that quantity of ammonium nitrate without some kind of information shared with **the** people of this community. **What** to do and when to do it should something go wrong."

Fertilizer-PlantFire.JPGA plume of smoke from **the** Winston Weaver Co. fertilizer **fire** drifts west, Tuesday, Feb. 1, 2022, as seen from a drone near University Parkway **in** **Winston-Salem**, N.C. , **north of the** fire. **The** uncontrolled **fire** at **the** fertilizer plant has forced thousands of people to evacuate. Firefighters warn that chemicals at **the** site near Wake Forest University could cause a large explosion. Authorities urged people within a mile of **the** site to take shelter elsewhere. No injuries have been reported since **the** fire started Monday night, but officials say a huge explosion could still happen through Wednesday.

Ruby Gordon and her husband, Harold, have lived **in** their Retnuh Street home since 1975. From **the** front porch of their three-bedroom ranch, it's easy to gaze over a small valley and see and hear traffic from U.S. 52.

When **the** first call came Monday night suggesting that they evacuate, **the** Gordons were already **in** bed. A few minutes later, **the** phone rang again, saying that an evacuation had been ordered. Still, **the** Gordons decided to stay.

"I said, 'Well I'm just going to trust **the** Lord's going to take care of me tonight and I'll deal with it tomorrow,'" Gordon recalled on Thursday. "And then once I looked out and saw all **the** neighbors were still here, everybody was still here, so I said, 'Well OK, we're all going to take this together.'"

Thursday afternoon, Gordon was babysitting her 4-year-old granddaughter, Gracelyn. As Gracelyn watched cartoons inside, Gordon stood outside, saying **the** Winston Weaver plant should not be allowed to rebuild **in** its former location.

"It should be **in** a place where if it catches **fire** or whatever it won't harm anyone," Gordon said, "especially because now we know **what** was all up **in** there, how much was **in** there. ... So no, I don't think it needs to be built back around here, around **the** neighborhood."

Johnson, who smelled **the** smoke from her porch, believes **the** Winston Weaver plant would have relocated already if **the** parts of **Winston-Salem** that expanded around it over **the** last 80 years had brought white or wealthier residents.

At a minimum, she said, Winston Weaver would have had much lower quantities of ammonium nitrate on hand if it were **in** another part of **the** city.

"I don't think people really knew how dangerous this really is," Johnson said. "I don't even know how that was allowed, I really don't."

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