Pressure is mounting throughout California to clean up air pollution from industry and vehicle tailpipes that has for decades burdened low-income communities, such as Barrio Logan and National City.

To that end, Assemblyman Todd Gloria announced a new bill on Friday aimed at beefing up oversight of such efforts in the San Diego region. Specifically Assembly Bill 423 would overhaul the governing board of the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District, the top air-quality agency in the region.

“To date, the board has been governed solely by the county Board of Supervisors, but it’s clear that this district can and should do more to clean up the air and protect public health in every community, in every part of our region,” Gloria said at a news conference in downtown San Diego to announce the legislation.

The bill would increase the number of people on the air district’s board from the five current supervisors to 11 representatives. The new board would include elected officials from the 18 cities in the county on a rotating basis based on population, as well as subject matter experts and members of the public. The county Board of Supervisors would continue to have two seats.
Supervisor Dianne Jacob, who chairs the air district board, issued a statement in response: “The County is currently reviewing the proposed legislation to determine whether or not there are any fiscal impacts to county government.”

Nathan Fletcher, the only other supervisor to comment on the legislation, said he backed the proposal. “I have long advocated for this type of approach to diversifying the composition and strengthening the impact of our regional air quality efforts,” he said in a statement. “Our goal is simple — ensuring we have clean air for our families. This legislation supports that effort, and I look forward to working with Assemblymember Gloria to make it a reality.”

The bill would bring the air district's governing structure more in line with the other large regional air-pollution agencies throughout California, such as the South Coast Air Quality Management District, San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the Bay Area Air Quality Management District.

The San Diego air district has operated for more than two decades under an exemption to state law that requires the largest such agencies to include both county and city officials on their governing boards.

“San Diego has a serious air pollution problem. We need new leadership. We need a proactive air pollution board whose goal is to improve public health and ensure that everyone can breathe clean air,” Diane Takvorian, executive director of the Environmental Health Coalition, said at the media event.

“There is an astonishing lack of information available to the public,” she added. “Every resident should be able to know about every facility that has an air-pollution permit. They should know what pollution is emitted into their neighborhood and what the health risks are.”

Also in attendance were leadership from Climate Action Campaign and Service Employees International Union, SEIU, local 221, which represents workers at the air district.

“The days of being divided by false choices of job versus environment are over in California,” said David Garcias, president of the local union.

Gloria’s announcement follows a statewide campaign, funded by the California Air Resources Board, to empower local air districts to crack down on toxic emissions in targeted low-income communities near ports and warehouses.

The San Diego air district has been holding stakeholder meetings in Barrio Logan as part of what looks like historic efforts to address long-standing pollution concerns.

Millions in state funding has started to flow into the San Diego region as part of the air board’s Community Air Protection Program. The program was mandated by the state legislature in 2017 under Assembly Bill 617 and is largely funded by the state’s cap-and-trade program.

While the state air board has traditionally regulated emissions from mobile sources such as port and construction equipment, regional air district have also started to take up this mantle in a number of different ways.

Environmental Advocates working in low-income neighborhoods in San Diego would like to see the air district ramp up efforts to regulate everything from diesel-powered freight trucks to cranes and forklifts at the Port of San Diego.

Twitter: @jemersmith

Phone: (619) 293-2234

Email: joshua.smith@sduniontribune.com

Copyright © 2019, The San Diego Union-Tribune

This article is related to: San Diego County, Barrio Logan, Nathan Fletcher