

THE TIMES

Conservation Law Center launches new Region-focused Environmental Legal Aid Program

Interpreting the complex system of permits and standards that regulate the Region's many industries can be a daunting task.

"You've got to be an environmental scientist or an engineer to respond to these permits," Gary resident Doreen Carey **said during an October panel** held at Indiana University Northwest.

Though he may not be an engineer, attorney Mike Zoeller has been helping Lake County community groups parse dense environmental permits for over a year. Now Zoeller is working with the **Conservation Law Center**, which operates out of Indiana University's Maurer School of Law, to establish an Environmental Legal Aid Program that will provide free legal services to residents of Gary, Hammond, Whiting and East Chicago — all cities that have been overburdened with pollution for decades.



The Conservation Law Center has worked with Gary Advocates for Responsible Development, or GARD, to petition against an air permit that was issued to Fulcrum, a waste-to-jet fuel plant looking to come to Gary.

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Molly DeVore, file, The Times

"These are the areas that have the most intense industrial activity and also the greatest percentage of minorities. These are also the communities that have the least access to the resources needed to understand and address their environmental concerns," Zoeller explained. Northern Lake County is "also just a phenomenal environment. It's just a remarkable piece of earth ... it's been pretty much ravaged for over century, but the nature's still there."

In October 2022, Zoeller, who previously worked for the U.S. Department of Justice, was hired by the Environmental Law and Policy Center to lead the **newly-created "Northwest Indiana Air, Parks and Water Protector Project."** In this role, Zoeller represented Gary Advocates for Responsible Development, or GARD, when the group **petitioned against an air permit issued to Fulcrum Bioenergy**, a waste-to-jet-fuel facility planned for the Buffington Harbor area of Gary. GARD was represented by Zoeller and Kim Ferraro, a senior attorney of the Conservation Law Center.

"It is next to impossible for community groups to challenge environmental decisions that impact their health and environment without additional expertise to help navigate the scientific and legal complexities involved," Carey, who is also the president of GARD, said in a recent news release. "Mike and Kim were instrumental in getting our concerns heard by local industry and government agencies."

Zoeller said GARD is currently waiting for the Indiana Office of Environmental Adjudication to reach a final decision in the case.

The ELPC's Northwest Indiana Protector Project will continue with Associate Attorney Ellis Walton; Zoeller said he expects to partner with the ELPC through his new role.

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Mike Zoeller.

Provided

The Conservation Law Center's, or CLC's, free legal aid program hopes to help residents overcome the systemic barriers that have led to environmental injustices. Zoeller said the legal aid program will tackle a wide-range of issues — everything from industrial air permit renewals to illegal dumping.

“I’m looking to provide some street-level advocacy for just regular residents,” Zoeller said. The legal aid program use a "community lawyering" model which works to empower citizen-driven advocacy. Zoeller will help residents access and interpret permitting materials, will negotiate with local industry and, when necessary, will take issues to court.

This summer the CLC will host community listening sessions in each of the four cities. Over the next few months, Zoeller will meet with activists, community groups, faith-based organizations and local elected officials to determine what the highest-priority issues are.

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