

SHELBY COUNTY**County poised to join city to ask facility to reduce cancer-causing emissions**

By [Keely Brewer](#), Daily Memphian

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Sterilization Services of Tennessee located in South Memphis has been under scrutiny since last fall when the Environmental Protection Agency said living near the facility could increase residents' lifetime cancer risk by up to 2,000 in a million. (Patrick Lantrip/The Daily Memphian)

A small, but patient, group of South Memphis residents concerned about a cancer-causing pollutant in their neighborhood waited five hours to address the Shelby County Board of Commissioners yesterday, March 8.

The Shelby County Commission is considering a resolution directed at Sterilization

Services of Tennessee, a facility on Florida Street that sterilizes medical equipment and, as a byproduct, emits a cancer-causing chemical called ethylene oxide, or EtO.

Memphis air pollution study flawed, expert says

The business has been under scrutiny since last fall when the Environmental Protection Agency said living near the facility could increase residents' lifetime cancer risk by up to 2,000 in a million.

“We ask that you use every ounce of your power to help us,” Memphis Community Against Pollution president KeShaun Pearson told the County Commission. “The people of South Memphis have a right to have clean air.”

During a committee meeting on Wednesday, the board heard a resolution sponsored by Commissioner Edmund Ford Jr. that would call on Sterilization Services to halt its fugitive emissions — the emissions that escape through vents and windows — without waiting for new federal regulations mandating that it do so.



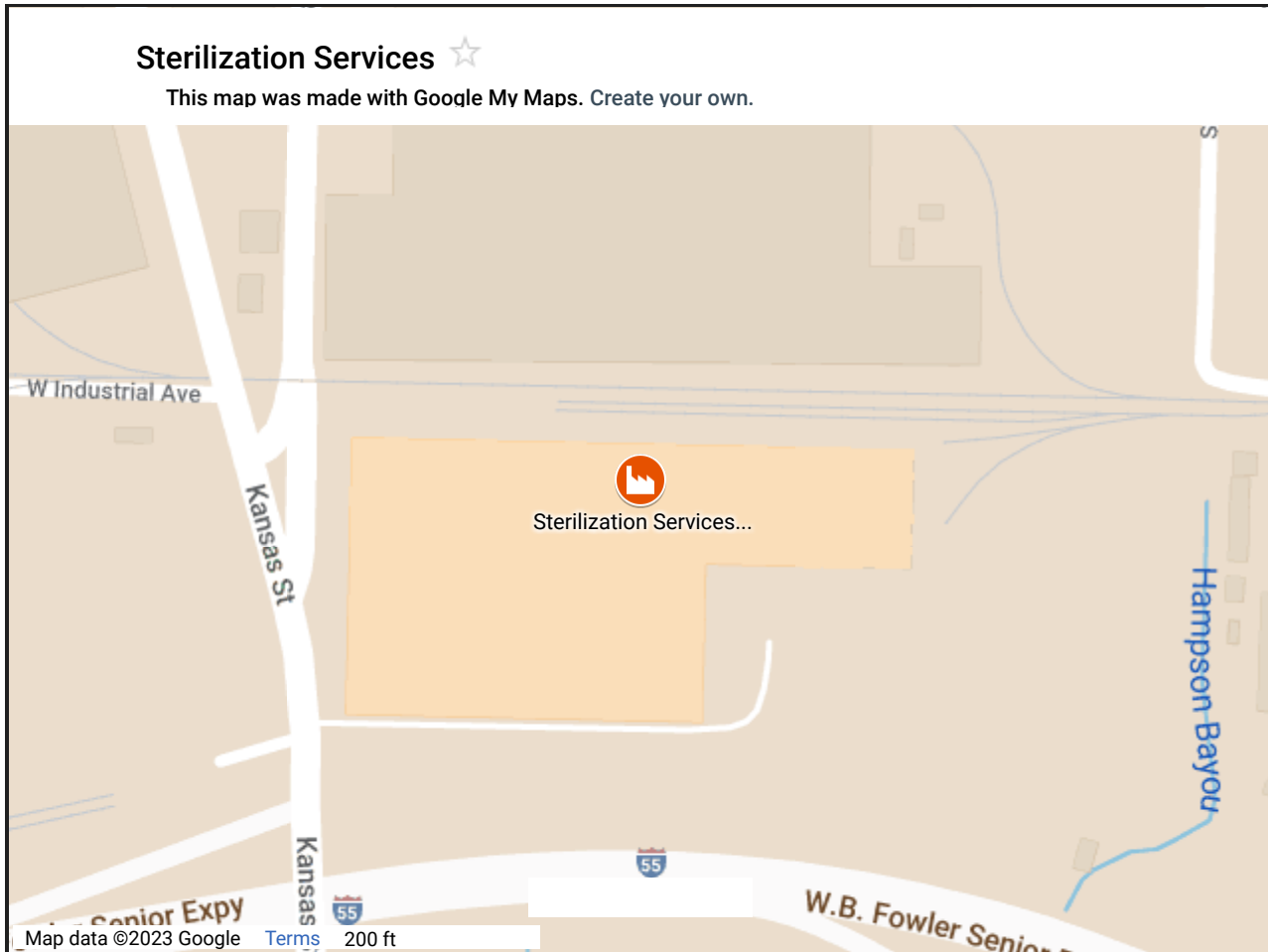
KeShaun Pearson

Commissioner Britney Thornton applauded the South Memphis residents who showed up and said she was disturbed to hear their concerns.

Given the elevated cancer risks to South Memphians and the speed with which the federal government enacts regulations, the County Commission's resolution would support all of Sterilization Services' immediate efforts to reduce EtO fugitive emissions.

No legal authority to stop South Memphis EtO emissions, Health Department says

“We need to think proactively, so that your children and your children’s children don’t have to be here advocating for clean air,” Thornton said.



The board will vote on the non-binding resolution at its meeting Monday, March 20, following suit with the Memphis City Council, which passed a similar resolution in January.

Sterilization Services is currently following federal regulations, but the EPA’s standards haven’t caught up with its own science. More protective rules are moving through the regulatory process and could be approved by October of this year.

Local pressure on Sterilization Services has mounted since learning that its sister companies in Atlanta and Richmond, Virginia, have voluntarily lowered emissions

in those communities.

The Daily Memphian has contacted Sterilization Services numerous times seeking comment and the company has repeatedly refused an interview.

Scientists gauge Mallory Heights' cancer risk from EtO



Angela Johnson, with Memphis Community Against Pollution, speaks during a Mallory Heights CDC meeting at the South Branch Library in January to inform residents about their cancer risk from Ethylene Oxide emissions from Sterilization Services of Tennessee. (Brad Vest/The Daily Memphian file)

“Sterilization Services of Tennessee has been like a ghost,” said Angela Johnson, another member of MCAP. “They haven’t said a word.”

Once new regulations are approved, Sterilization Services would have up to three years to comply with them, unless the EPA expedites the process.

“We don’t have three years,” said Rose Sims, who lives near the facility. “We need them to do something now.”

In past months, MCAP asked the Shelby County Health Department to use its emergency powers to compel Sterilization Services to cut its emissions, but the health department said it cannot do anything until new regulations are in place.

For now, the community is waiting for the results of the Health Department’s first-ever cancer cluster study, which is expected to shed light on the area’s historical cancer rates. The group’s hope is that Sterilization Services will voluntarily reduce its emission, even without new rules.

Memphis facility should reduce cancer-causing emissions, City Council says

“We do want people to know that we are concerned and that we want something done. This won’t be the end of it,” resident Cheryl Ballard said.

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Keely Brewer is a Report for America corps member covering environmental impacts on communities of color in Memphis. She is working in partnership with the Ag & Water Desk, a sustainable reporting network aimed at telling water and agriculture stories across the Mississippi River Basin.