

Andrew Hoffman

Marathon Petroleum and Southwest Detroit: The Intersection of Community and Environment

Driving on I-75 near Detroit, Riley Novakⁱ reflected on what she was witnessing. Novak, chief environmental officer of Marathon Petroleum Corp., was driving from Marathon's headquarters in Findlay, Ohio, to its Detroit refinery. It was the morning of Tuesday, June 2, 2020, eight days since George Floyd's death and five days since the start of Detroit's renewed Black Lives Matter protests. Exiting from the freeway, Novak observed protest posters and began to read the signage closely.

The death of George Floyd, a Minneapolis Black man painfully murdered under the knee of a white police officer, sparked protests around the United States, reaching cities around the world. Demonstrators focused on the ongoing U.S. history of police brutality, racism, and killings of Black Americans. The Detroit protests, starting on May 28, had begun peacefully with individuals gathering outside the Detroit police headquarters.¹ However, by the morning that Novak entered Detroit, there was a city-implemented curfew of 8 p.m. and more than 244 people had been arrested.²

Novak was visiting Marathon's Detroit refinery to assess the facility and its environmental impact, particularly on the people living in the 48217 ZIP code. Located in southwest Detroit, the refinery had been at the center of environmental racism accusations in recent years. Residents, who were predominantly Black and Hispanic, had voiced concerns over the local air quality.

After reading a protest sign with the words "For My Future Children #blacklivesmatter," Novak thought about how Marathon impacted the lives and the future generations of Detroiters living near the refinery. What could she do to mitigate Marathon's environmental impact on the local communities? Would Marathon Petroleum be able to positively impact this region? What were the potential solutions? Or, was it too late?

ⁱ Riley Novak is a fictional character.

Published by WDI Publishing, a division of the William Davidson Institute (WDI) at the University of Michigan.

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