

# **CRAIN'S** CHICAGO BUSINESS

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## **Why Lightfoot and her public health chief should deny this permit**

The proposed move of metal shredder General Iron from Lincoln Park to the Southeast Side is a textbook case of environmental racism. It has to stop.

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General Iron's North Side facility

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The general public's awareness of public health has grown immensely during the COVID-19 pandemic. This, along with a rising racial justice movement, makes the connection between structural racism and health inequities impossible to ignore.

Chicago has a long history of structuring health risks in a racist way.

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As a case in point, the proposed move of polluting metal shredder General Iron/RMG from Lincoln Park, a predominantly wealthy and white Chicago

community, to the Southeast Side, a predominantly Latinx, Black and working-class community, is a textbook case of environmental racism. Southeast Side residents are demanding that Chicago officials deny the final permit to this facility. People throughout Chicago support this demand, including dozens of community groups and elected officials.

If Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Dr. Allison Arwady, commissioner of the Chicago Department of Public Health, were to fail to deny the permit to General Iron/RMG, people on the Southeast Side—who are already overburdened with heavy air pollution—will suffer worse environmental burdens and poorer health while Lincoln Park residents benefit from cleaner air and better health.

Thus, a failure to deny this permit would again structure health risks in a racist way.

This has got to stop. This polluting facility does not belong anywhere in Chicago, and it definitely should not be allowed to relocate to and concentrate more air pollution on the Southeast Side.

The General Iron/RMG permitting decision should be based on city plans with explicit commitments to health equity, racial justice and to eliminating health inequities caused by air pollution.

Health inequities are systemic patterns of differences in health status and outcomes measured across population groups that are unfair, unjust and remediable. Health inequities in heart disease, cancer and asthma are related to air pollution. Long-term exposure to air pollution harms people's health and can make people more susceptible to severe cases of and death from COVID-19.

[Healthy Chicago 2025](#), Chicago's latest community health improvement plan, focuses on health equity and eliminating Chicago's health gaps. This plan, published in September 2020, is remarkable for both noting that racism is a root cause of health inequities and emphasizing an antiracist approach, including environmental justice strategies. Also, the [Chicago Air Quality and Health Report](#) identifies the Southeast Side as a community that “must be prioritized for efforts to mitigate and reduce air pollution.”

Sooner or later, change will come. Will the Chicago officials listen to and heed demands from residents organizing for their rights to clean air and health? Will they follow the city's community-informed plans for environmental justice and health equity—plans published by these very officials?

Lightfoot and Arwady must decide on which side of history they will be on when this case study of environmental racism is written. A broken permitting process—that absolutely must be fixed—is no excuse for worsening environmental racism in the here and now. Chicago officials should fight against the racist structuring of health risks rather than participating in its creation.

Southeast Side residents' lives are at stake. Polluters' profits should not be prioritized over the lives of Black, Latinx and working-class people who live in Chicago's Southeast Side. Lightfoot and Arwady should use their authority to deny the permit to General Iron/RMG.

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