

April 29, 2025

Christopher S. Christman, Abington Township Manager
Thomas Hecker, President, Abington Township Board of Commissioners
1176 Old York Rd
Abington, PA 19001

Re: SPS Technologies Fire on February 17, 2025 and the Future of the SPS Property

Dear Mr. Christman and Mr. Hecker:

As residents who are deeply involved in matters involving the environment and public health in Abington Township, we have conducted a review of the publicly-available information concerning the explosion and fire at SPS Technologies on February 17, 2025 and offer the following comments in light of the ongoing potential risks to the community and environment. What occurred at SPS was one of the largest environmental and public-health disasters in the Township's history. But in the aftermath, it affords the Township an opportunity to consider a different path forward, including by adding much-needed green space, tree canopy coverage, and a riparian buffer along the Tookany Creek. As SPS evaluates the future use of their property, we urge the Township to explore other options for the SPS site and be ready to take action to ensure that future generations of Abington residents do not face similar disasters.

The February 17 SPS Disaster's Impact on the Community

As a result of the SPS explosion, debris spread throughout the adjoining neighborhoods and smoke filled residents' houses. Thousands of residents were forced to shelter in place or evacuate, as even those outside of the evacuation zone sought temporary shelter so that their families did not potentially inhale toxic smoke. Schools across the Township were closed for multiple days due to air and water quality concerns, to prevent students from unnecessary exposure, harming children's learning experience and upending parents' childcare needs.

Of the 797 respondents to the Greater Glenside Civic Association survey¹ — 99% of whom are local residents — more than half identified air and water quality, environmental impact, and handling of chemicals of concern (COCs) as their most pressing concerns. Survey results further highlighted that over 600 respondents cited long-term health and safety implications for the surrounding community/first responders as the top concern. Other leading concerns from survey participants included the future use of the site and associated environmental safeguards, economic impacts, and continued monitoring and transparency for the incident.

History of Dangers to Human Health and the Environment at the SPS Factory

While the scale of the February 17 disaster was unprecedented at the SPS factory, SPS has a long and well-documented history of practices that endanger human health and the environment, including violations of environmental regulations and laws.

- Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) inspections of the waste management practices at SPS have documented violations 11 separate times since 2005.²

¹ <https://bit.ly/4iRf3by>

² https://www.ahs.dep.pa.gov/eFACTSWeb/searchResults_singleFacility.aspx?FacilityID=669058

- In 2023, SPS entered into a consent agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and paid \$109,805 to resolve multiple hazardous waste storage and disposal violations, including improperly accumulating and storing:³
 - A 55-gallon drum containing a cyanide solution;
 - A separate 55-gallon drum of flammable mineral spirits;
 - Contaminated personal protective equipment;
 - A cubic-yard container of solid paint-related waste labeled “hazardous waste”;
 - Forty-two unidentified and unlabeled containers; and
 - Eight open containers of hazardous waste that were not properly sealed, including containers labeled “cyanide bath filters,” cadmium fluoroborate,” “waste cyanide solutions,” and “toxic.”
- Notably, the 2023 consent agreement with the EPA faulted SPS for failing to have an “adequate contingency plan” related to the hazardous waste generation and storage.

By the very nature of its work, SPS utilizes and stores toxic chemicals that are known threats to human health, including cadmium, chromium, silver, and cyanides.⁴ In the 1980s, SPS leaked trichloroethylene - a degreaser labeled as a known or probable human carcinogen - into the Tookany Creek.⁵ That degreaser was noted by the EPA in 2023 as among the chemicals that were improperly stored. From 1983 until at least 2014, groundwater wells monitored elevated levels of cadmium and trichloroethylene from SPS.⁶

The history of violations by SPS, particularly in the last few years, underscore the ongoing and future risks posed by having a factory of that type in a residential neighborhood.

Air Quality

The Monitoring Activities and Data Report prepared by TRC Environmental Corporation (TRC) on behalf of SPS reported that hundreds of residential properties in a more than 3.5-square mile area encompassing Abington Township, Cheltenham Township, and Jenkintown Borough were affected by airborne fire-related debris that settled on their properties, necessitating collection, cleanup, and testing for potential contaminants.⁷ During the fire itself, smoke and fumes from the fire filled residents’ homes and lingered for days. Thankfully, since the fire ended, air quality monitors have not detected any chemicals of concern (COCs) in the air outside the facility.

Water Quality

Preliminary surface water samples collected in Tookany Creek near the facility indicated the presence of cyanide⁸ at concentrations exceeding the DEP and EPA drinking water standard of 0.2 mg/L.⁹ Fortunately, there are no drinking water intakes in Tookany Creek downstream of SPS. Routine monitoring of the stream for a time

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[https://yosemite.epa.gov/OA/RHC/EPAAdmin.nsf/CAFOs%20and%20ESAs/B2D85AE328EF240385258A370052C3DB/\\$File/SPS%20Technologies%20LLC_RCRAs%20and%20CAFOs_Sept%202022%20to%202023.pdf](https://yosemite.epa.gov/OA/RHC/EPAAdmin.nsf/CAFOs%20and%20ESAs/B2D85AE328EF240385258A370052C3DB/$File/SPS%20Technologies%20LLC_RCRAs%20and%20CAFOs_Sept%202022%20to%202023.pdf)

⁴ <https://www.inquirer.com/news/pennsylvania/sps-technologies-fire-chemical-waste-20250218.html>

⁵ https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2016-02/documents/spstechnologies_sb.pdf

⁶ https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2016-02/documents/spstechnologies_sb.pdf

⁷ <https://www.spsupdates.com/docs/trc-update.pdf>

⁸ Cyanide refers to “Total Cyanide” which is the sum of all cyanide species, including free cyanide, weak acid dissociable cyanide, and strong metal cyanide complexes.

⁹ <https://files.dep.state.pa.us/RegionalResources/SERO/SEROPortalFiles/Community%20Info/SPS-Tech/2025.02.18%20and%202019%20DEP%20CN%20sampling%20Results.pdf>

period of at least a year after the site cleanup concludes is necessary to ensure that there is not ongoing impact to water quality.

Soil Quality

The fallout from the debris, smoke, and other chemicals released by the explosion and fire have raised serious concerns about whether nearby soils have been contaminated and will need to be remediated. The DEP and TRC conducted independent soil sampling between March 14 and March 18 at selected schools, public parks, and residential properties in the vicinity of SPS.¹⁰ DEP's initial review of soil results show that some arsenic, lead, and PAH¹¹ levels are above state standards, but those results are consistent with what is normally found in urban areas. These initial results suggest that the values for the other tested compounds are below regulatory or health standards, suggesting that particulate fallout from the SPS fire has not contaminated nearby soils in a way that will harm public health. A more comprehensive review of all local data will be conducted to determine if any high levels might be linked to the SPS fire and to assess potential health risks associated with the community's use of both private and public properties for recreational and sports activities. We acknowledge and appreciate the Township's decision to withhold permits for sports leagues at Hallowell Park this year, demonstrating a prudent and proactive commitment to public health and safety.

Chemical and Waste Management

Although the factory's main chemical storage area was thankfully not directly impacted by the fire, a statement by SPS indicates that the chemical storage has been removed.¹² However, public concern remains for the chemicals and other hazards left behind in the fire-damaged areas that still require removal, dismantling/demolition, and cleanup. This concern is amplified by the fact that SPS incurred numerous citations for mishandling chemicals even before the fire occurred.¹³

Tax Impact

According to Montgomery County property records and discussions with members of the Township Board of Commissioners, SPS pays approximately \$23,000 in township property taxes and \$145,000 in school taxes annually on its 31.74 acre property.¹⁴ In addition, under the Local Tax Enabling Act, SPS Technologies is exempt from and pays no local business taxes because it operates as a manufacturing business. If the SPS property were to be used for another purpose, the financial impact on residents' taxes could be minimal, and other uses for the property have the potential to significantly increase the Township's tax base. A township commissioner has stated that taxes will not be raised on account of SPS not rebuilding, should they choose to do so.

¹⁰ <https://www.pa.gov/agencies/dep/about-dep/regional-office-locations/southeast-regional-office/southeast-community-information/sps-technologies.html>

¹¹ PAHs refer to polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons which are a class of chemicals that occur naturally in coal, crude oil, and gasoline. They are also produced when coal, oil, gas, wood, garbage, and tobacco are burned.

¹² <https://www.spsupdates.com/fag/>

¹³ <https://www.inquirer.com/news/pennsylvania/sps-technologies-fire-factory-future-20250227.html?id=swTK1XuKaqCHg>

¹⁴ <https://propertyrecords.montcopa.org/pt/search/commonsearch.aspx?mode=parid> (the parcel ID is 30-00-35584-00-8)

Recommendations Moving Forward

As decisions are made about the future use of the SPS property, we strongly urge the Township to consider the following factors:

1. ***Regain Public Trust***

Investigate and clearly communicate the cause of the fire and implement specific measures to prevent future incidents. At present, it remains unclear how SPS will ensure compliance with current environmental, zoning, and other regulations, given the now-compromised infrastructure of their factory, which is over 100 years old. The traumatic impact on thousands of residents must be addressed with genuine concern. Public safety must remain the top priority moving forward, through clear and decisive action—regardless of whether the site is reopened, redeveloped, or converted into open space.

2. ***If SPS Does Not Rebuild: Ensure a Comprehensive and Transparent Cleanup and Prioritize Open Space***

SPS, DEP and the Township should commit to a thorough dismantling, demolition, and remediation process—one that prioritizes public safety in all phases of operation, adheres to rigorous environmental testing and cleanup standards, and maintain open and ongoing communication with input from the Township’s Environmental Advisory Council, Shade Tree Commission, and the public regarding the site’s future use. The property could be transitioned into mixed-use, shared between commercial properties and new green space. In those circumstances, the Township should consider partnering with the DEP through its Brownfields to Playfields program to expand the green space and tree canopy coverage in what is currently all impervious surface. Such an approach is consistent with the recommendations to expand Township open space and reduce paved surfaces set forth in the Master Tree Action Plan¹⁵ and Comprehensive Recreation, Open Space, and Parks Plans,¹⁶ which were adopted by the Board of Commissioners.

3. ***If SPS Rebuilds: Commit to Sustainable and Safe Operations***

Any redevelopment of the property by SPS should incorporate the following criteria:

- The most clean-energy building designs and manufacturing processes available.
- State-of-the-art waste minimization and handling practices across all media (air, water, soil, waste).
- Minimal noise and light disturbances to reduce the impact on the surrounding neighborhood.
- Annual environmental audits by an independent, third-party consultant.
- Hiring a full-time Environmental Manager who has one of the following certifications:
 - Certified Hazardous Materials Manager
 - Certified by the American Academy of Environmental Engineers
 - Other nationally recognized Environmental certification
- Full compliance with current Township codes, ordinances, and other regulations to prevent the recurrence of a fire, out-of-service fire suppression systems, or the other types of past violations documented above.
- Require that SPS set aside part of the property for green space, including at a minimum an appropriate riparian buffer with the Tookany Creek and sufficient tree cover to help offset the significant impervious surfaces. This would still allow the Township to make at least some progress toward the goals set forth in the Master Tree Action Plan and Comprehensive Recreation, Open Space, and Parks Plan referenced above.

¹⁵ <https://www.abingtonpa.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/17927/638381522302800000>

¹⁶ <https://www.abingtonpa.gov/home/showdocument?id=17785&t=638248517934930000>

Closing Statement: A Call for Vigilance and Responsible Redevelopment

SPS, incorporated in 1903, began operations at its current location in 1920—an era when industrial facilities were often placed within walking distance of workers' homes, and the health risks associated with industrial pollutants were not well understood. The recent explosion and fire underscore the serious dangers of maintaining a heavy industrial operation within a densely populated residential neighborhood. While initial environmental reports indicated no immediate risks to human health, the potential long-term impacts on soil, water, and air quality by SPS operations demand ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and a dedicated effort to rebuild public trust.

We hope you will consider our comments and recommendations and continue to engage stakeholders in future discussions related to the SPS site. We look forward to your response regarding next steps.

Thank you for your consideration,

Anna Nicholaides - Ward 12
Andrea Soo - Ward 12
Andrew Christy - Ward 10
Travis D'Onofrio - Ward 12
Nicole Tomlinson - Ward 10
Kathryn Hemsley - Ward 12
Kristin Gaenssle - Ward 12
Robin Eisman - Ward 13
Patricia Gallagher - Ward 9
Meryl Hyatt - Ward 10
John Kennedy - Ward 11
Susan Myerov - Ward 12
Nancy O'Neill - Ward 12
Mitch Gertz - Ward 10
Michael Melchiorre – Ward 15
Peaches Cooper – Ward 9
John Sorrentino – Ward 13

Cc:

Ashley McIlvaine, Assistant Township Manager
Members of the Board of Commissioners