

# Issue of the Year: The Smoking Dump

PHILIPSBURG--“I would start coughing and then I can’t breathe. ... It affects my asthma,” said thirteen-year-old Sara Bharwani of the always-smouldering and smoking dump looming over St. Maarten’s capital Philipsburg.

Hers is just one story of many told by St. Maarten’s residents who have to live with the choking and hazardous effects of the constantly-flaring-up dump.

Sara’s story is no different from that of many others of the country’s children and adults suffering from the thick smoke billowing up for the dump and clouding neighbourhoods. She has missed more than two weeks of school combined over the course of 2018, giving her the addition stress of catching up with schoolwork.

Her challenge to breathe fired in her the need to act. Sara has rallied fellow teens to speak out about the dump and the problems it is causing. The movement has spawned an online survey to gauge the effects of the dump fires. The group has even ventured on the dump itself to talk to people who live there about their survival.

Resident Barbara Cannegieter is also affected by the smoke. She, like Sara, has channelled her rage about the lack of a proper and permanent solution

to “Mount Dump” into a court case. Her advocacy has led to a court decision pushing government to move faster and in a more structured way to end this health and environmental hazard.

For the first time in recent years, one issue – the smoking dump – has galvanised St. Maarteners and mobilised many to take their own action to affect change.

The dump has touched every facet of society and has engaged the “trias politica.”

Parliament has had meetings about the dump.

Government, at every opportunity, has expressed its concern and commitment to fixing the dump.

The court has had its say in the dump saga, as has another link in the justice chain – the Prosecutor’s Office. The latter, in recent weeks, has raided several offices of companies attached to the management of the dump. The fallout of this is still not fully known.

Yet, none of those entities have yet been able to bring about the one thing St. Maarteners for which are screaming, from the grassroots to the hilltops: an end to the smoke and constant fires.

There have been some tiny sparks of hope. Government has gotten funding from the World Bank for a massive multi-million-dollar fire suppression project. This Dutch government-financed project will not end the dump crisis. It will merely



*The constant flare-up of the ever-burning dump has been the ubiquitous topic on St. Maarten in 2018. Residents who endured nature’s wrath in the form of Hurricane Irma in 2017 were and continue to be assaulted by the manmade hazard that is the dump. The all-encompassing nature of the dump saga and the community’s demand for a solution have led The Daily Herald to make this the Issue of the Year.*

stop the fires if successful. The smoke will die away and the Fire Department will have a needed respite from its constant battle with angry orange infernos.

When the fires are out, the dump will continue to reach for the sky one straw, one car battery, one plastic bottle and one Styrofoam box piled on each

*Continued on page 7*

