

Trying to clear the air on air pollution

One participant's account of an only partially successful attempt at open communication at Airlie House

by Richard H. Gilluly

"I haven't heard the word suffocation here," said the environment writer for a major Eastern daily newspaper. "That's what we're talking about, you know, suffocation."

He went on to say that Council on Environmental Quality figures show that pollutants dumped into America's air increased from 142 million tons in 1966 to more than 200 million tons in 1968.

The place was Airlie House in Virginia, where the Public Affairs Council (an association of corporate public relations men), the National Academy of Sciences and the Environmental Protection Agency held a three-day seminar last month on air pollution. About 100 businessmen, journalists, scientists and state and Federal officials were invited to attend and participate.

Could they reach a consensus? Or even communicate? The answer to both questions appears to be a highly qualified "yes."

Airlie House, formerly for the rich, is still a posh rural retreat that now serves largely as a meeting place for seminars, sales meetings and the like. Really a small town, it is nestled in soft, green rolling hills, its narrow macadam streets mainly paths for walking rather than for automobiles. To be there is a welcome surcease from the noise and pressure of urban life. But given the subject of the meeting, perhaps just such pressure was needed.

From the nuts and bolts point-of-view, the meeting was certainly a success. State air quality officials—as well as an economist—were vocal on such matters as whether there is really a need to require all new automobiles to meet the high emission standards required in 1975 and 1976. And the basic economics of air pollution control—how to balance benefits against costs—was shown still to be a highly imprecise field of study (SN: 7/31/71, p. 75).

One of the ground rules of the seminar—one that could have resulted in more frankness than actually prevailed—was that journalists present could not attribute remarks to speakers by name without specific clearance. The

meeting was, in journalese, a "deep background." But sometimes it was no deeper than the frequent reiteration of the cliché that the failure of the Edsel proves business gives Americans real choices. When one participant suggested a real choice would not be between cars and cars but between cars and rapid transit trains, he was hushed.

But some of the discussions were interesting and informative. Environmentalists tend to believe, for instance, that the 1975 and 1976 auto emission standards are a carefully thought out, precise approach to urban air pollution and that any resistance to them is auto-company generated. Not so, said a New England state air quality official. It is likely, he said, that auto companies will make money on the controls—as they did on seat belts. Installing them on all autos is a highly inefficient shotgun approach, he felt. Instead, he asked, why not equip autos with the controls only if they are going to badly air-polluted areas?

But this argument was countered by a New Mexico conservationist (a scientist professionally) who said one of New Mexico's prime attractions to new industry as well as tourists is its crystal clear air. New Mexicans, he said, want to exceed Federal ambient air standards; any degradation of air such as might be caused by autos with inadequate controls would be unacceptable. A California air quality official, speaking from a somewhat different point-of-view, also defended emission controls for most autos in his state, for the obvious reason that air pollution there spreads well beyond city boundaries.

An economist provided perhaps the most telling argument against the 1975 and 1976 auto emission controls. "Our strictest emission controls are being applied against automobiles," he said. In terms of a real cost-benefit analysis, "this is based on nothing." The emission controls will cost some \$4 billion annually. "Do we really want to do it?" he asked. Needed, he said, is a detailed analysis that will allow citizens to get maximum air pollution

abatement for their dollars. It is possible that far more net benefits might be achieved by spending less money on auto emission controls and more money on some other air pollution problem, he asserted.

And the economist was by no means an advocate of a go-slow approach to air pollution abatement. Although he admitted that estimates on the costs of air pollution still are highly unreliable, early indications are startling. A 50 percent reduction in urban air pollution might result, he said, in a 4.5 percent decrease in urban mortality and morbidity. The actual dollar saving could be in the neighborhood of \$8 billion a year, he added. But he and the state officials both stressed the "technological gap," the absence of clear-cut knowledge not only of the effects of pollutants but, sometimes, of the costs of abatement. An economically rational abatement approach cannot evolve till more facts are known, many speakers suggested.

The newspaperman who summed up the meeting found such a discussion a little too lofty, however: "Whether abatement will cost 'X' dollars or 'Y' dollars is pretty academic, especially since the total figure will be only a small percentage of the gross national product. How much would you pay to prevent your mother or your wife or your sister or yourself from suffocating?"

He was one of two or three persons among attendees who deeply questioned various assumptions, such as the "high cost" of pollution abatement. The economist was another. He criticized the practice of stating the total gross costs, rather than the annual costs, of a particular abatement program as a means of making it sound prohibitively expensive. He further emphasized that the benefits of pollution abatement can far exceed costs.

It was fortunate that the newspaperman had the last word; some earlier participants who brought up such questions were given short shrift. For instance, a representative from EPA's youth advisory group asked a General Motors executive if auto companies are not schizoid if on the one hand they claim to be devoted to environmental clean-up while on the other they advertise power, speed or size. Because of the way the session was set up, the GM man managed not to get around to replying.

Perhaps it was too much to ask that the sessions examine the broad philosophical and behavioral aspects of the environmental crisis. But these are areas that are scarcely being examined at all on the official level anywhere. The Airlie House seminar indicated that officials seem still to be inhospitable to such examinations. □