

Ecology Center, NAACP to battle 'environmental racism'

By Daniel Johnson
Daily Staff Reporter

YPSILANTI — In an unprecedented move, a local environmental group and the Ypsilanti-Willow Run Branch of the NAACP announced plans yesterday to collaborate on educating the community about pollution prevention.

The alliance rose out of concern generated by recent studies indicating that race is the single-largest factor influencing exposure to environmental hazards.

"We believe that our partnership with the Ecology Center promises to address some of southeast Michigan's most serious environmental problems, which disproportionately affect people of color," said Raymond G. Mullins, executive director of the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Organizers say the union of the Ecology Center and NAACP for this task is one of the first such collaborations ever between an estab-

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lished environmental organization and civil-rights organization.

The alliance received \$25,000 in the fall from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, a private grant-making organization. Part of the fund sponsors the Ypsilanti Pollution Prevention Project, or YP3, to inform and empower citizens of diverse ages, backgrounds, races and political affiliations about pollution prevention.

Community meetings are scheduled this month in Ypsilanti to provide residents with information about existing pollution and to mobilize citizen action. The project aims to identify and direct efforts at "toxic hot spots" in the area.

"This project will give people a chance to say what they're not often asked about," said Jennifer Jamison Lofton, NAACP member and YP3 coordinator.

YP3 members plan to utilize findings from research now being conducted by the Ecology Center in conjunction with Wayne State University. The study is probing the correlation between exposure to environmental hazards and race in the greater-Ypsilanti area.

The study is similar to research conducted in 1992 in the Detroit area by University SNRE Profs. Paul Mohai and Bunyan Bryant. Mohai and Bryant found race to be the single-largest determining factor regarding the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities. National

response to the study caused the battle against "environmental racism" to swell.

"In Washtenaw County, the same ugly trend appears to be true," Mike Garfield, staff coordinator for the Ecology Center, said of the location of environmental hazards.

"The state of Michigan suffers an enormous pollution legacy," he asserted.

Garfield and Mullins pointed to the prominence of environmental contamination in Ypsilanti.

A large housing complex, which houses primarily low-income and African American citizens, has been plagued with serious sewer back-ups and flooding problems. The complex also is adjacent to several sources of environmental contamination.

"It's a common perception that environmentalists care only about whales," Garfield said. "I hope this work will lead kindred organizations to explore similar collaborations."