



The Tonawanda Coke facility on River Road, Monday, July 23, 2018. (Derek Gee/Buffalo News)

Tonawanda Coke shutdown starts Sunday – two days early

By [Aaron Besecker](#) | Published October 14, 2018 | Updated October 14, 2018

Tonawanda Coke's shutdown started Sunday, officials said, two days ahead of schedule. "The shutdown process started today," the state Department of Environmental Conservation said in a statement sent by email Sunday afternoon, "under rigorous DEC oversight." The Town of Tonawanda business, which employs between 75 and 100 workers and has repeatedly been cited for air pollution violations, initially had told authorities it would start the closure process on Tuesday.

The shutdown of the River Road coking plant should be completed by Friday, Town of Tonawanda Supervisor Joseph H. Emminger said he was told by state officials. When asked the reason for the earlier start, a DEC official said that question needed to be posed to Tonawanda Coke. A company spokesman could not immediately be reached for comment Sunday afternoon.

Tonawanda Coke has been the subject of intense scrutiny from regulators for months but activities affecting its fate have accelerated quickly in recent days. This whirlwind situation – with the company's closure initially coming to light on Friday in a document filed in federal court – comes amid a push by state regulators to revoke the company's air permit. An administrative hearing on the matter scheduled for last Wednesday was adjourned.

The DEC in July cited the company for violating its air quality permits almost 120 times between May 18 and July 6 and releasing emissions that exceeded regulatory standards for opacity. Last month, a federal judge ruled Tonawanda Coke violated the terms of its probation from a 2013 criminal conviction for violating the Clean Air Act but allowed the plant to remain open.

Under the plans revealed in court papers Friday, citing an Environmental Protection Agency official, the company had initially planned to charge its last coke oven at 8 a.m. Tuesday and inform employees the facility was closing.

The company was "in such bad financial straits that they had payroll only for one week," EPA environmental engineer Harish Patel said in the court papers.

Representatives of the DEC are overseeing the shutdown procedures, which over the next few days will include the start of purging and flaring of coke oven gas from the plant's battery and piping system, according to regulators. A combination of nitrogen and steam will be used and the battery ovens also will be emptied of coke. Flames will be visible coming from the plant, the DEC said. "DEC's onsite inspectors will ensure workers and the surrounding community are protected and coordinate with state and local emergency responders if any incidents occur," the agency said in its statement.

Some in the community have pushed for years for the company to close based on environmental and health concerns. In addition to concerns about air pollution, the company's closure also raises questions about possible threats to human health due to contamination at the site.

Representatives from the state Labor Department also were at the site Sunday to help workers by providing information about job placement services, as well as unemployment and medical benefits. The agency said it will open its local career centers at 7:30 a.m. Monday. Two information sessions for workers will be held at 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. Thursday at the United Steelworkers hall, 810 Sheridan Drive, Town of Tonawanda. Targeted career fairs for Tonawanda Coke employees will be announced in the coming days, with all employees to be contacted by mail, the agency said.