

Done 10/6/95 — OK: for clips
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Belleville News-Democrat

Wednesday, September 27, 1995 Page 3B

Neighbors, industry solve pollution woes

By Mike Fitzgerald

Belleville News-Democrat

COLLINSVILLE — In 1988, Monsanto Corp. leaders knew they faced a big problem at their Sauget plant.

The year before, the plant discharged 4 million pounds of pollutants. Monsanto's top executives knew they were within their legal rights, but they also knew that a potential public relations disaster loomed.

So Monsanto began looking for ways to cut Sauget's pollution releases. The chemical giant also took a step in a radically new direction. It set up one of the first community advisory panels. For the first time, East St. Louis residents had Monsanto's ear.

The partnership clicked. Over the next seven years, the plant's emissions dropped by 90 percent, while the advisory board provided a model for other community advisory boards.

Monsanto's success story provided the springboard Tuesday for

a public discussion among environmental activists, industry leaders and government regulators. Held at the Gateway Convention Center, the "Workshop on Good Neighbor Dialogues" drew more than 80 participants. The Mississippi River Gateway Initiative and the St. Louis Regional Commerce and Growth Association sponsored the event.

The event's participants said it gave them a rare chance to drop the adversarial stances that often keep them apart.

"I see this as an opportunity for people to sit down and talk about what they're doing," said Stephanie Green, an East St. Louis resident and a member of the Midwest Environmental Training Institute.

The event's speakers offered plenty of tips on how other businesses and community groups can work together.

Keith Miller, Monsanto's general supervisor of environmental

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safety and health, emphasized that a company must follow up its promises to the community with action. "You must say what you are going to do, then do it," Miller said.

Jo Haberman, an activist from Minneapolis, told the audience that information is a key resource in dealing with industrial polluters. "I cannot overemphasize the importance of unbiased technical assistance," said Haberman, a leader of Citizens for A Better Environment.

A few audience members, however, cited reasons for concern.

Pennie Livingston, an assistant state's attorney for St. Clair County, noted that earlier this year the Illinois General Assembly passed a law that limits to \$500,000 what an individual may receive in punitive damages. This limit could do little to deter big polluters, Livingston said.