

The Atlanta Public Safety Training Center

6/22/21

Overview

The Atlanta Public Safety Training Center is a career training and educational center designed to provide operational, cultural and management training to the sworn law enforcement officers of the Atlanta Police Department and Atlanta Fire/Rescue.

The City has identified 150 acres of a 380-acre parcel of land it has owned for 100 years in unincorporated DeKalb County as the Institute's campus. The parcel is the original site of the Police and Fire departments' training centers and has been in continual use for outdoor tactical training for Atlanta's public safety agencies for more than 50 years.

The campus is being designed holistically to help our public safety officers embrace an enlightened approach to 21st century law enforcement. It will accommodate classroom training for cadets and mid-career officers, house the Police and Fire academies (currently housed in ill-equipped, sub-standard facilities), conduct in-depth education to secure police embrace of citizens' civil and human rights, utilize practical teaching methods to ensure that officers are trained to effectively manage and use the state-of-the-art technology that defines modern policing.

The campus will house an administrative/classroom building, an auditorium, a stable and pastureland for the Mounted Patrol, a kennel for K-9 unit, newly re-staged outdoor firing range and ordnance explosives testing area, an Emergency Vehicle Operations track to enable driver training for fire engines, ambulances and patrol cars, a mock city for firefighter training, fitness facility for joint use by police and fire/rescue officers, the City's first crime lab, a tech center to test and pilot new technology, as well as an urban farm, walking trails, greenspace, parkland open to the public.

The Institute is designed to bring the police, fire/rescue and citizens together. Only tactical training facilities will be sequestered. The public will have access to some 100 acres of the site and the Institute will regularly host public meetings to encourage citizen/police dialogue.

The Need

The current police academy is in an old, decaying former school building, marked by a leaky roof, often inoperable plumbing, and broken toilets. The fire academy was literally condemned a year ago and Atlanta firefighters must go to Douglasville for training.

Tactical training for each department is located in separate facilities which haven't been upgraded in decades. The South's premier police and fire departments have sub-standard and outdated training facilities, marked by unfixable decay.

Our citizens deserve first-rate public safety professionals whose ongoing training reflect the high standards we expect them to comport themselves throughout their careers.

Staff morale, officers' own expectations of meeting daily operational excellence and a motivating sense of professionalism struggle in the face of the current sorry state of our City's public safety training facilities.

The Impact & Opportunity

Upgrading the City's public safety infrastructure is expensive. The decay of the existing police and fire academies, coupled with the City's ownership of long-dormant acreage in unincorporated DeKalb County, and the willingness of the business and philanthropic community to pay roughly half the cost of this much-needed facility will save the City's taxpayers some \$40 million.

The land has gone unused for 40 years, except for ongoing tactical training by APD and Atlanta Fire/Rescue. It is located outside the City limits, whose closest border is some 600 yards from residential housing in an area zoned for industrial use.

The violent crime surge in Atlanta underscores the urgency of our City's need to make this investment.

Fighting crime and making Atlanta a safe city demands short-term actions as well as long-term strategic investments. The Institute for Social Justice and Public Safety Training will pay immediate dividends in uplifting officer morale, stemming attrition, sparking recruitment, and lifting the professionalism of those sworn to ensure our safety.

Practically speaking, it will unify our public safety agencies, encourage collaboration, immediately change the trajectory of rank-and-file attitudes who will recognize and appreciate the investment being made by our city in ensuring that they can provide the safety and security that citizens expect.

Responsibly Meeting Environmental and Legacy Challenges

Environmental groups claim that building the Institute on the site of the former Honor Farm would desecrate sacred land, destroy acres of forest, and disrupt a bucolic setting designated as greenspace for all citizens to enjoy.

The reality is that the 150-acre parcel we've identified is marked by little tree cover, largely invasive species of plants and trees which have sprouted over a 20-year period.

According to an independent study by Brookwood Tree Consulting, an ASCA Registered Consulting Arborist, the property shows signs of "high disturbance and clearing within the past 20 years, consistent with agricultural use."

Aerial photographs going back to 1990 show little or no tree cover. The parcel on which we plan to build the Institute accommodated cropland for the Honor Farm. It was devoid of forest and hardwood trees.

According to the arborist report, "Overall, species composition is skewed with early succession and invasive species such as Loblolly Pine, Boxelder, Chinese privet, Callery pear, Tree of Heaven, Chinaberry and Kudzu. These trees are generally considered lower value as they prioritize rapid growth over long-term sustainability and viability. Additionally, many of the invasive species have significant ecological impact as they out compete desirable native species.

"...it is worth noting reiterating that this regrowth is very new across the site (within the past two decades) and should not be described as mature. The two areas that can be described as maturing/mature are located at the extreme northeast corner of the site and in the drainage from the lower pond. The concept plan impact in these areas is minimal or avoided altogether."

The Atlanta Police Foundation has committed to work with the Nature Conservancy to replace any trees that must be removed during construction. We have pledged to replace any hardwood tree that is destroyed with 10 replacement high value trees, to ensure that the land is properly reforested.

Of the 150 acres, only 50 will be developed. The remaining acreage will house pastureland for the Mounted Patrol, greenspace, parks, walking trails, and existing forestland.

Importantly, the existing 380 acres owned by the City has been currently cordoned off from public use for some 40 years, since the demise of the Honor Farm. Our development will open nearly 100 acres of greenspace and forest area for public access use.

Some community activists have cited the Honor Farm as a place of significant historical import. Our plans include installing a permanent exhibit to commemorate the Honor Farm, including those whose ill-treatment further underscores APD's reinvigorated commitment to inculcating respect for the civil and human rights of the citizens they protect.

Why Key Road Site and Why Now

The City of Atlanta owns the property. It has lain dormant, except for police and fire tactical training usage, for 40 years. No other parcel of City-owned property is geographically large enough to accommodate Atlanta's public safety infrastructure needs for the next 50 years.

Even if such a parcel of land could be identified, assembling it for development would take decades and be a financially irresponsible burden to City taxpayers.

The Atlanta Police Foundation is committed to the responsible development, will adhere to environmental standards and work with certified landscape architects and arborists to ensure care is taken to protect and preserve greenspace and tree canopy.

Fighting crime, training our first responders and ensuring that appropriate resources are in place to do so effectively and efficiently is a strategic decision of the first order.

This is the time when civic, neighborhood and business leadership can step up to repair Atlanta's decayed public safety infrastructure. Our City's safety and our ability to ensure we sustain a well-trained and highly motivated corps of police and fire/rescue officers hangs in the balance.

We can create a safer city, ensure public access to previously unavailable greenspace, protect our tree canopy, encourage greater community/police interaction and understanding – and do so responsibly and affordably. Our interests, our needs, and the means to achieve important public safety goals are in alignment.

Let's take advantage of this unique opportunity to give our citizens the comprehensive approach to public safety they deserve.

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