

PUBLIC SAFETY TRAINING CENTER

Q&A

Revised 9/19/22

History of the PSTC property

Q: How long has the site been owned by the City of Atlanta?

A: The City of Atlanta purchased the property in DeKalb County in 1918 for the purpose of constructing a Prison Farm that would house people convicted of non-violent crimes. At the time, the concept was regarded as “progressive,” enabling those convicted of non-violent crimes to work the land, produce their own vegetables and help provide for their own sustenance.

Q: When was the Prison Farm closed?

A: In 1995.

Q: How much land does the City own on this site.

A: The City owns 380 acres on the site, of which 85 has been designated for use as the Public Safety Training Center.

Q: Why is the PSTC being built outside the City limits?

A: The City sought to locate the PSTC within easy access to downtown Atlanta and Public Safety Headquarters. Since Atlanta has owned this property for more than a century and it has been unused since the closing of the Prison Farm, the City recommended that this taxpayer-owned asset should again be put into service for our citizens.

Q: But why is it in DeKalb County, as opposed to the City of Atlanta?

A: The property was largely rural, affordable, and located close to the City when it was purchased early in the 20th Century. The issue of location and ownership is comparable to that of Hartsfield-Jackson Airport, which is City-owned property located outside of the City limits.

Q: What other use has this 380 acres had over the past century?

A: APD and AFR training centers were on the property until the mid-1990s, when parts of their training program were moved to what were supposed to be “temporary facilities” until a new Public Safety Training Center could be constructed. Even today, APD and AFR use the property to conduct firearms training, explosives deactivation training, and training on containing and extinguishing fires.

In addition to police and fire training, however, various parts of the 380-acre tract have served as the Prison Farm, pastureland for the farm, prison buildings, and even a burial site for animals from the Atlanta Zoo. Since the prison farm was closed, the site has been used as a dumping ground for tires, mattresses, furniture, and construction material.

Q: Are there grave sites on the property? There are rumors that graves from inmates on the Prison Farm, slave burial grounds from prior to the Civil War, or even Native American burial grounds on the site.

A: No. There is no evidence of any human burial sites on the 380-acre City-owned property. A thorough and extensive soil and environmental study, and a study of the historical ruins on the 85-acres on which the Public Safety Training Center will be constructed found no evidence of burial grounds for human beings or zoo animals.

Q: How will you protect important archeological ruins or historic preservation artifacts on the site?

A: We conducted an archeological and historic preservation study of the 85-acre site. Outside experts found no ruins or artifacts of historic value. It is our intention to work with community leaders to determine whether and how to acknowledge the history of the site.

How the PSTC Came to Be

Q: How did the idea and planning for a new PSTC come about?

A: The concept of a state-of-the-art training center for police, fire and emergency first responders has always been on a list of priority needs articulated by APD and City officials with responsibility for public safety. In 2015, APF was asked by APD leaders to flesh out what such a center might look like, what facilities it might include and what it might cost.

Q: How did APF proceed?

A: We met with APD Command staff and AFR leaders, consulted with a group of volunteer architects, engineers and designers, and began the process of drafting preliminary designs for such a facility.

Q: Did you initially target the Key Road/Constitution Avenue site?

A: No. Initially, we examined what facilities such a Center should house, then we began a preliminary exploration of City-owned property that could accommodate a Training Center that could meet the City's public safety needs for the next 40 years. Only then did the site of the former Prison Farm emerge.

Q: Did you always envisage a PSTC of 85 acres?

A: We did not have an actual acreage number in mind, but when we understood the availability of the City's 380 acres, we thought that it might accommodate our needs for adequate space, affordability, and close proximity to downtown Atlanta and Public Safety Headquarters.

Q: Why 85 acres?

A: As our plans came together, we identified 150 acres of the 380, but City Council asked us to condense the site. Through smart and efficient land planning, we were able to reduce the site to 85 acres.

Q: Were you aware of the 2017 Resolution by City Council approving the “City Design Plan” that called for this 380-acre tract to become greenspace and part of a larger effort to create an environmentally renewed South River Forest Basin?

A: The City Design Plan was not well-known, however we quickly became aware that some environmentalists had come to embrace this aspirational concept. It is important, however, to know that this 2017 resolution was not binding. It was neither prescriptive, nor prohibitive about this 380-acre tract, whose future use remained subject to binding decisions by City Council and the Mayor, which as of then had not been made.

Q: How did the planning proceed and when did the mayor and City Council get involved in reviewing and approving the plans?

A: Over a period of five years, the planning evolved from concepts to specifics. Numerous meetings were held with APD and AFR, experts were consulted, and the planning team made site visits to other Public Safety Training Centers across the country.

Q: Who authorized APF to convene and lead this effort?

A: APF was created by Mayor Shirley Franklin as the sole authorized non-profit to raise money, conduct research, and collaborate with the City and APD on public safety initiatives. APF meets regularly with City officials and APD’s Command Staff who share their resource, training and operational needs, and asks APF to develop conceptual programs to address them. We convene interested parties such as APD and City officials, public safety experts, civic and business leaders to bring their knowledge, expertise and resources to help the City address these issues. Our work on the PSTC emerged from this dynamic which has been ongoing since APF was formed in 2004.

Q: When did City Council approve the Key Road site?

A: Final approval occurred in Oct. 2021. But the process was a long one and underwent considerable public comment and debate.

APF developed the PSTC plan over a period of years. The PSTC plan was presented to numerous civic groups, including Atlanta Rotary Club, Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, and at the APF Crime is Toast breakfast with 1,000 civic leaders in attendance. Over several years, the plan was refined every few months in meetings with APD and AFR leadership. In addition, members of the City Council Public Safety Committee and the mayor’s staff were briefed periodically.

The plan was formally presented to Council in Winter 2021. Mayor Bottoms created a Committee to review prospective sites. The Key Road site was selected as the most viable, affordable, and accessible. Site Committee members included representatives from APD and AFR Command Staffs, senior City officials, APF and architects and designers.

By May 2021, after numerous public meetings of the Finance Committee and the Public Safety Committee, a proposal from those Committees was submitted to Council that on behalf of the City, APF would manage the design and construction of a new Public Safety Training Center for APD and AFR on the Key Road site.

As part of that legislation, the lease of the 85-acre tract would be transferred to APF for the period of design and construction and 50 years of operation. In turn, APF agreed to build the PSTC, and raise \$60 million from the private and philanthropic community to pay two-thirds of the cost of construction. The City would provide an estimated \$1 million payment over a 30-year period. That \$30 million payment is roughly the existing maintenance and operational costs of APD and AFR's "temporary" training facilities.

A final vote was taken by Council in October 2021, approving the plan by an 11-4 vote. Mayor Bottoms signed the legislation. Mayor Dickens voted for the plan while a City Council Member and, as Mayor, confirmed his ongoing support.

Q: Was the City Design Plan and the concerns of environmentalists and DeKalb residents adjacent to the property even considered by APF, City Council and the mayors?

A: Very much so. Council established a Community Stakeholders Advisory Committee (CSAC) composed of leaders of the 13 surrounding neighborhoods. They meet monthly and offer recommendations to the design and construction team – all of which have been incorporated into the final design.

The Council mandated that the PSTC adhere to all Federal, State and local environmental regulations, which APF and the City readily agreed to. The final construction will be LEED-certified.

APF agreed to numerous actions consistent with sound environmental practice, including:

- Conducting a tree survey on the site (completed) and agreeing to replace any hardwood tree disturbed during construction with 100 new hardwood plantings
- Conducting soil and water surveys (completed) to ensure that the site met all standards and did not require mitigation to meet environmental standards
- Conducting an archeological and historical preservation review (completed) to ensure that construction would in no way endanger or destroy significant archeological or historic relics or structures on the site
- Meeting all Federal, State and local rules, regulations and permitting approvals

Q: Does APF own the property and will APF control it for the next 30 years?

A: No. The City of Atlanta owns the property and will continue to own it. APF is merely the lessee. Subject to the terms of the lease, APF will manage the design and construction of the PSTC, then turn it back to APD/AFR and the City for them to operate the Center according to their training needs. APF will retain responsibility for maintenance and upkeep but the actual training at the PSTC Center will be directed and managed by APD and AFR.

Misinformation about the PSTC

Q: Is APF clear-cutting the property?

A: No. The 85-acre PSTC property has only 3 specimen trees that will be impacted by the development. All efforts are being made to minimize the impact on these 3 specimen trees. As a former Prison Farm, most of this land has been clear-cut several times over the past century. It is a fallacy that there is an old-growth forest on this 85-acre parcel.

Q: In proposing a training center, selecting the site, and promulgating the PSTC isn't APF exercising authority it doesn't have?

A: Not at all. The concept of the PSTC stemmed from the stated needs for such a facility from the Chief of Police, Fire Chief, their respective Command Staffs and City officials going back to the days when Kasim Reed was mayor. APF merely followed the directive to craft a proposed solution to a problem identified by APD and AFR. Authority resides with City Council and the Mayor, who advocated for and ultimately approved the PSTC plan.

Q: Is APF working with the movie studios on adjacent property in the area?

A: No.

Q: Will APF or the City make money renting out the PSTC to other law enforcement agencies outside of Atlanta?

A: While we envision that agencies from other jurisdictions will want to rent the facilities from time to time, any monies realized will go toward maintaining the facilities. The project was never envisioned as a money-making venture. Any monies will be reinvested into the PSTC.

Q: Isn't the 85-acres overkill, vastly larger than any other such training center in the nation?

A: No. There are many larger police and fire training centers across the country, including those in Charlotte, Milwaukee and Las Vegas. In terms of costs, ours is dwarfed by the costs of those in New York and Chicago which are 1-1/2 to 6 times more expensive.

Q: Won't this just encourage police overreach and aggression?

A: Just the opposite: Atlanta will finally have training facilities worthy and appropriate to training a 21st Century police force. Our conception is for a training center that is publicly accessible and designed to encourage police/citizen interaction to engender trust within our community.

Q: What about the persistent opposition of committed environmentalists?

A: Though we understand, we disagree with the position of environmentalists who believe that their priority trumps all others. Our elected officials, however, made a different choice: to meet the proximate needs of our citizens to reduce crime and improve the performance of our law enforcement agencies at an affordable cost using existing taxpayer assets.

Q: Don't the police already get too much funding?

A: No. APD and AFR training facilities have been starved for resources for 30-plus years. Our training facilities simply are inadequate for the challenges faced by a 21st-century urban law enforcement agency. The PSTC will catapult APD and AFR to the first ranks of career-long training that our citizens demand of modern police and fire professionals.

Q: Isn't this going to promote a militarization of police, particularly against people of color?

A: Absolutely not. In a series of meetings between the Chief of Police (conducted in August 2022) with NPU's in the City with predominantly Black populations, citizens wanted more police protection, more surveillance of their neighborhoods, and greater police visibility to combat crime.

Contrary to the complaints of a small group of people who want to "defund the police," citizens see police presence as a protection against crime, and as sentinels for public safety.

Q: Aren't claims of violent protests against the PSTC overblown?

A: Unfortunately, not. There have been more than four dozen acts of terrorism and violent protests including the destruction of automobiles, tractors, bulldozers, and other construction equipment, as well as physical intimidation of work crews, police officers, executives from construction companies, and the storming of offices and graffiti painting of walls, cars of private enterprises. Nearly 50 people have been arrested for trespassing and throwing Molotov cocktails at police officers and construction workers.

Those engaging in violence and ultimately arrested, -- a small, persistent fringe group of people, most of whom claim residence out-of-state -- have routinely resorted to violence and intimidation of police and construction personnel.

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