

Statement on the application to rezone the site of the historical Virginia School for the Deaf, Blind, and Multi-Disabled to industrial land use

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The proposal being discussed today is to rezone about 65 acres of land in the southwestern-most corner of Hampton, the site of the former Virginia School for the Deaf, Blind, and Multi-disabled.

In considering this proposal, I hope you will take into account a few historical, socio-economic, and environmental factors. The school, originally named the Virginia State School for Colored Deaf and Blind Children, was a segregated school serving multi-disabled African American children beginning in 1909. It operated for exactly 100 years until it was closed in 2009. The site is located in formerly segregated and redlined neighborhoods, neighborhoods that are today predominantly populated by African American families. According to the 2020 census, more than 5,000 people live within about a half mile of this site. That population is, on average, 90% African American, and in many of the census tracts immediately surrounding this site, 35% or more of families live below the Federal poverty line.

These communities have also long borne the brunt of deep environmental injustice. While the site is bordered to the south and east with residential neighborhoods, areas immediately to the north and west are occupied by a variety of industrial land uses. Interstate 664 was built less than 500 meters from the school, and today there are 15 EPA-tracked Toxic Release Inventory sites within 1 mile of this site spewing oftentimes carcinogenic toxins into the air, ground, and water. According to the EPA, the neighborhoods surrounding this site are at or above the 90th percentile statewide for hazardous waste proximity, diesel particulate matter, lead paint exposure, traffic proximity, and air toxins cancer risk. According to the USDA, most of these neighborhoods are food deserts, and nearly all classify as medically underserved communities. Perhaps not surprisingly, according to the CDC, these neighborhoods have Asthma rates above the 90th percentile nationwide and life expectancy in the communities surrounding this site is about 7 years lower than the statewide average of 77 years.

So it's here, situated among predominantly Black neighborhoods that have long suffered disproportionate environmental and health inequalities, that this proposal would rezone the site of a historical school for disabled African American children to industrial land use. Doing this will only serve to continue the environmental racism that has been wrought on these communities and other communities of color all over this nation. If we are to be committed to the project of racial justice, we have to stop allowing this kind of historical erasure and environmental racism to go on. NOT approving this proposal would be a good place to start.

Thank you.