

**Council Member Adam Searing: Statement on moving forward with the proposal to build  
Chapel Hill town offices on at 828 Martin Luther King Junior Boulevard.**

**March 8, 2023**

In 1977, this Council used our eminent domain powers and acquired the 828 Martin Luther King site from its longtime owners -- I am sure those members had no idea the amount of trouble they were buying and what a headache it would be for us today! This site contains tons of dumped trash, dumped construction and demolition debris, dirt, and tons of hazardous coal ash produced by the University of North Carolina's still operating coal-fired plant downtown. While our decision for the moment to not build housing for children and families here without removing the hazardous coal ash is the right one, I believe moving forward with housing our town employees on this site *without* completely removing the hazardous coal ash is also inadvisable for the following reasons:

1. We have received an unanimously-supported petition from our town Environmental Stewardship Advisory Board asking that all coal ash be removed from this site before we build housing or house employees on the site. This petition references the well-known adverse health effects of exposure to coal ash and details a 2022 independent scientific analysis of the site by Dr. Avner Vengosh of the Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment finding 19 toxic metals at the site at levels 3-4 times higher than recommended for safe exposure by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.
2. The University of North Carolina in 2010 wished to construct a warehouse near their coal-fired plant downtown. As UNC began excavation for the project, they discovered coal ash dumped at the site. UNC stopped construction, completely removed the coal ash at the building site and sent it to a lined landfill, then resumed construction. We should do no less here.
3. We need to avoid another construction debacle like we are dealing with our downtown parking garage. There, problems with the building site's soil and bedrock mean a \$9 million cost overrun for taxpayers. On the 828 Martin Luther King site a short walk to the site's hillside reveals the tons of exposed garbage, ancient demolition debris, and exposed coal ash that underlies our proposed building site. In addition to any future potential liability the town may suffer from illnesses caused by coal ash exposure, we are inviting future construction problems by building on this site.
4. This site is no way a formal landfill or safe place to store coal ash. Without removal of the ash, it is at risk of leaching into Bolin Creek, downstream federal wetlands and Jordan Lake, a major water supply source. It also poses a risk of airborne exposure to nearby residents.

I am happy to support building town offices, housing, or other public amenities on this site. However, we have a responsibility to our community, our taxpayers and our employees to remove the hazardous coal ash before we do so.

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Searing