

Cochran, Patricia (DCOZ)

From: Bardin, Sara (DCOZ)
Sent: Wednesday, January 8, 2025 10:04 AM
To: DCOZ - ZC Submissions (DCOZ)
Subject: Fw: Subject: Op-Ed Submission: Shrinking Jail Sites, Not Expanding

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Sara Bardin
Director

Office of Zoning | District of Columbia Government
www.dcoz.dc.gov | sara.bardin@dc.gov

441 4th Street, NW | Suite 200-S | Washington, DC 20001
(202) 727-5372 (office) | (202) 727-6072 (fax)

From: DC Ernest <ejohnsonrealty2@gmail.com>
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DC Jail Reform Discussion:

The development of a new DC jail presents an urgent opportunity to address two critical issues in our community: closing the wealth gap and reducing the incarcerated population. Serious consideration must be given to the potential reopening of portions of Lorton Reformatory and utilizing 100 acres of land in Poolesville, Maryland, as part of a holistic strategy to reform incarceration practices and enhance economic equity in the region.

The proposed \$900 million DC jail project, with \$468 million in initial funding approved by the mayor and city council, has sparked mixed reactions. As detailed in a Washington Post article by Jenny Gathright (Jan. 6, 2025), the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts and other oversight entities have expressed harsh criticism of the initial design, underscoring the need for community input and accountability in this process. Despite this, US Magistrate Judge Zia Faruqui highlighted the thoughtful and compassionate intentions behind the project during a November 2024 Zoom meeting.

However, 90% of DC residents remain largely unaware of this project. Community engagement must become a cornerstone of this effort. The 2027–2037 construction timeline provides a unique window for discussions during upcoming election cycles about integrating local entrepreneurs, small businesses, and nonprofits into the design and

operations. These steps can ensure that the jail serves as more than a detention facility but as a center for rehabilitation and social equity.

What happens inside the jail is as critical as the building itself. In 2024 alone, seven deaths at the jail, including four from fentanyl overdoses, underscored the dire need for systemic changes in care, oversight, and rehabilitation programs. This project must address these failures, aiming to reduce recidivism, improve conditions, and provide opportunities for incarcerated individuals to reintegrate into society.

Now is the time to rethink incarceration in DC. A forward-looking approach that includes broader land-use strategies, economic empowerment, and transparent planning will not only reshape the city's correctional landscape but also advance equity and justice for all residents.

Ernest E. Johnson served as the chief negotiator during the 1972 Lorton work stoppage and the DC Jail hostage crisis, where Department of Corrections Director Kenneth Hardy and 11 guards were taken hostage. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Maryland and is currently pursuing a master's degree in government at Harvard University.

Ernest Johnson
1451-Parkwood Place NW
202-882-9790 office
202-255-6928 mobile

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