



Date: December 30, 2025
To: Community Stakeholder Group
CC: Keith Chadwell, Deputy City Manager
From: Wade Walcutt, Director *WAW*
Subject: Resident Requests Concerning Durham's Contaminated Parks

Happy Holidays, and best wishes for a strong and hopeful 2026 for the Bull City!

Thank you for reaching out and for your continued engagement in the civic process. I truly appreciate the time, care, and thought reflected in the considerations you've shared as we work together to reopen and improve your parks in a way that is safe, timely, and reasonable for everyone. We look forward to meeting with you in person soon.

In the meantime, I want to confirm that your requests have been received and are being given careful attention and respectful consideration. Below, you will find responses to many of the points you raised. Some items have been deferred to our partner departments within the City of Durham, as they are best positioned to address those specific topics, and we will continue coordinating closely with them. You'll see I copied your requests and points, then responded in **green** below.

We are also planning to convene in-person and/or hybrid meetings in January to review the most recent DEQ study findings, discuss what they mean, and talk together about potential paths forward. Additional details on scheduling will be shared soon.

Thank you again for your engagement and your commitment to your parks and your community. I wouldn't want to do this any other way, and I'm confident our parks will be better for it.

Community Requests and the City's Response for moving forward together:

1. Alternative Recreation

Neighbors living near the contaminated parks need alternative recreation while the parks are closed. As you know best, parks provide a space for positive recreation, giving young people a place to go. Leadership from the Department of Parks and Recreation offered the creation of alternative, nearby recreation sites as a viable option while parks remain contaminated. If it is necessary to do this in stages, it is important that the City begins with the parks that are most contaminated. The money is in hand, the need is there, and we are years away from parks fully reopening. We need to see action on this front, and it dovetails with the 15-minute city that City Council advocates for.

- a. The City agrees with the concern that residents living near impacted parks need access to alternative recreational opportunities while portions of those parks remain closed. Durham Parks and Recreation (DPR) currently operates 61 parks citywide that remain open and available to all residents, and we continue to encourage their use.

At this time, the City is awaiting additional information from the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) that will inform us on how to safely and reasonably move forward. We're hopeful this may allow for targeted improvements or the creation of new, accessible recreation amenities within the boundaries of impacted parks, where appropriate and safe. We will also continue to look for opportunities to invest in other neighborhood parks or City owned properties to improve and/or address any unreasonable gaps in parks and recreation amenities caused by these issues. DPR does not have data that categorizes impacted parks by relative levels of contamination (e.g., "most" versus "least" contaminated).

As more detailed guidance becomes available from DEQ, the City will evaluate feasible opportunities to expand access to safe recreation, including interim solutions, consistent with public health standards and City / Community priorities.

2. Community Engagement Meeting Series

Following the final testing results expected from the Department of Environmental Quality in the winter of 2025, we understand that DPR has plans to share DEQ's final results with the public in Spring 2026. In addition, we urge you to host a series of in-person community meetings to review a full range of remediation alternatives and to make concrete plans with the guidance of community members for alternative recreation.

- a. Yes. This approach is consistent with DPR's previous communications. Following receipt of DEQ's final testing results and a full understanding of the data, the City will share those findings publicly as soon as possible. DPR is hopeful that with this data and DEQ's input, we'll be able to make plans and take action toward improvement. We remain committed to continued public engagement as part of that process.

We also believe a meaningful discussion is necessary with the City Council members regarding Duke's actions/attitudes toward our parks and communities to develop a more equitable approach going forward—our parks are a treasured part of our communities and not simply a convenient resource to be colonized and exploited for personal and/or institutional advantage. Parks are a 'commons', they are a shared resource, and going forward we'd like to see a shared governance agreement, or the like, for our city parks/resources that would guide community engagement/agreement when research is proposed by a research institution anywhere within the City's jurisdiction.

- a. Regarding broader concerns about research activities in City parks, the City agrees with the underlying sentiment. Since the initial Duke study, the City has implemented a formal process to review and vet any requests by external entities to

use City parks or resources. When approvals are granted, those entities are now subject to specific requirements governing community engagement, transparency, and post-research responsibilities. This process is intended to better protect City resources and ensure accountability going forward.

3. Bond in Next Budget Cycle

We need a much, much greater investment towards remediation, as the full extent of contamination is greater than originally estimated. We urge you to make an ambitious budget request for the CIP for the 2025-26 budget and begin planning for a bond for the 2026-7 budget cycle, based on the updated DEQ costing and community input about acceptability of remediation options.

While the 2022 DEQ remediation costing came in at \$11 million, DEQ acknowledged in May 2025 that this falls far short of what will be needed based on contamination test results that have emerged since 2022. We believe that at least some of the parks will require more intensive, long-term solutions beyond what cap and cover can provide and urge a range of available options to be fully costed by DEQ and publicly deliberated.

- a. DPR requests that another City department or partner take the lead in responding to this specific funding proposal. However, DPR agrees with the general assessment that additional funding will be required to address park improvements, regardless of the ultimate funding source.

Based on available data, it is reasonable to anticipate that remediation costs will exceed earlier estimates. At this time, DPR continues to support DEQ's risk-based remedy of cap-and-cover, potentially supplemented by additional protective measures, as the safest and most effective approach. That said, DPR remains open to reviewing alternative remediation options as additional data, cost analyses, and community input become available, with public health remaining the primary consideration.

4. Addition of 1 Full-Time Position to Steward Parks Remediation

Please consider the creation of a new, full-time position to coordinate the remediation process. The role could:

- Serve as a liaison between DEQ, public health, impacted communities, and the Durham public
- Provide expertise—public health, environmental science, or related technical background—to complement the existing expertise of DPR.
- Build a case for a bond proposal request and seek out additional funding sources to bolster existing funds.
 - a. DPR would not recommend establishing this position within the department at this time. Determination of the need for, and placement of a dedicated remediation coordination role would be more appropriately evaluated by other City departments or the City Manager's Office, given the cross-departmental nature of this work.

5. Additional Concerns

Our group would like to meet to discuss additional topics as well, including:

- How contaminated soil is managed: how can we ensure it is managed transparently and to the highest ethical standard? The case of Warren County looms large in our minds.
- Re-engagement of the stakeholder working group to have a standing monthly meeting, with alternating meetings in person beginning in early 2026.

- a. DPR acknowledges these concerns and affirms its commitment to transparency, accountability, and sustained community engagement. DPR has taken accountability, ownership, and responsibility for how and where it fell short with its communication since we became aware of this issue in 2022. Since then, our actions have consistently aligned with our communications in person and in writing on multiple platforms.

We have created and provided direct access with DEQ, City officials, contracted experts, health experts, County Health, while also welcoming multiple community members, groups, neighborhood associations, and non-profit organizations to collaboratively tackle this multi-layered issue with the intent to protect public health, acknowledge the past, and move forward together. DPR has made technical reports and findings publicly available in full, while also providing plain-language summaries in both English and Spanish. Engagement efforts have included multiple in-person meetings and workshops, coordination with DEQ, City, and County health officials, contracted experts, and direct outreach to neighborhood associations, community groups, and nonprofit organizations. To reduce participation barriers, DPR has also provided childcare, language interpretation, and comprehensive communication methods to distribute meeting information.

DPR remains willing to continue these efforts, including the continuation of the stakeholder working group and ongoing communication with impacted communities.

- Plans for DEQ's updated remediation cost analysis: include pricing for at least three different remediation options. For option(s) that leave contamination in place, include costs for the maintenance of that land for 100 years. Also include the cost of soil incineration so stakeholders can deliberate the best course of action with knowledge of the full cost of all options.
 - a. DPR is not the appropriate entity to scope or require DEQ's cost modeling, including the evaluation of alternative remediation strategies or long-term maintenance costs. This request would need to be addressed by DEQ or other appropriate City or State partners