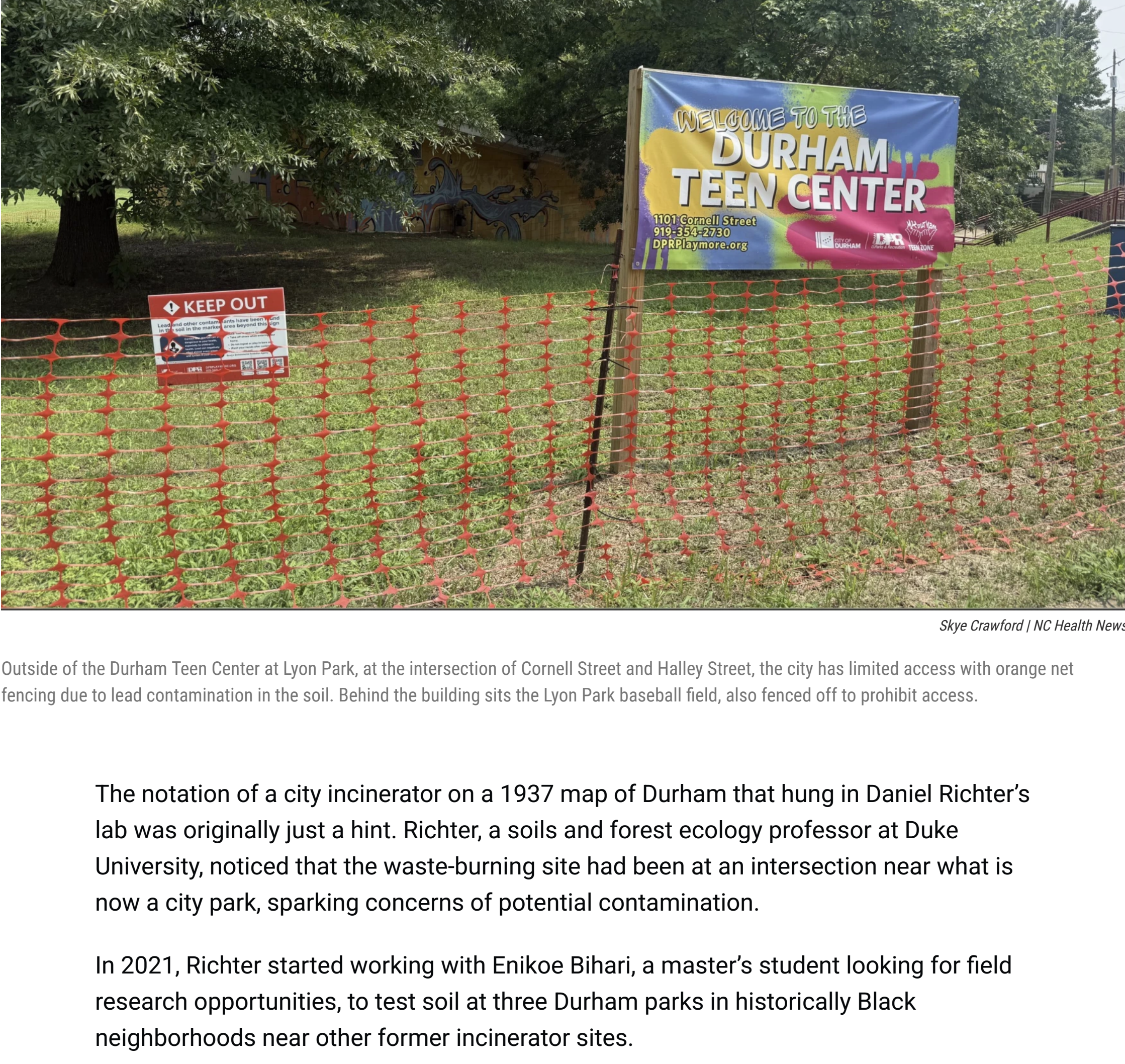


Environment

Remediation of former landfill sites still in limbo despite yearslong parks closures

WUNC News | By [Skye Crawford](#) | [NC Health News](#)
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Outside of the Durham Teen Center at Lyon Park, at the intersection of Cornell Street and Halley Street, the city has limited access with orange net fencing due to lead contamination in the soil. Behind the building sits the Lyon Park baseball field, also fenced off to prohibit access.

The notation of a city incinerator on a 1937 map of Durham that hung in Daniel Richter's lab was originally just a hint. Richter, a soils and forest ecology professor at Duke University, noticed that the waste-burning site had been at an intersection near what is now a city park, sparking concerns of potential contamination.

In 2021, Richter started working with Enikoe Bihari, a master's student looking for field research opportunities, to test soil at three Durham parks in historically Black neighborhoods near other former incinerator sites.

The researchers found high levels of lead, a neurotoxin that can cause chronic illness and is particularly [harmful to children's physical and mental development](#).

"At one of the parks we sampled, there was a riverbed and a ravine with a creek in it. We scraped the soil off the side of the ravine, and you could see the layers of debris," said Bihari, who completed her master's at Duke and is now a Ph.D. student at Columbia University in New York.

Richter and Bihari's findings led to further testing by city contractors, which ultimately forced sections of [five Durham city parks to close](#) in 2023. Since then, parks and playgrounds in [Zebulon](#), [Greensboro](#) and [Charlotte](#) have closed because of similar contamination, with no re-open date in sight.

These parks are part of the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality's Pre-Regulatory Landfill Program. The program was created in 2007 to find, record and monitor inactive hazardous substance or waste disposal sites that, prior to 1983, weren't regulated.

In July, the Office of the State Auditor released a [report assessing the performance of the program](#). They found that 534 of 688 these pre-regulatory landfill sites haven't been investigated or actively monitored.

Over 80 percent of the 688 sites are near residences, schools, daycare facilities and other community spaces.

"Without monitoring across these 688 sites, the State lacks reliable information to determine whether hazardous substances are present, whether they pose a risk to public health, or whether additional investigation or remediation is needed," the auditor's report says.

The report also says that limited funds and inaccessible private properties have stalled remediation and monitoring. It estimates that it would take 99 years to address all the sites in the program with current resources.

Confused communities

The NCDEQ report estimates that the state can only afford to remediate five to six sites per year. These financial limitations mean that city parks across North Carolina have been closed for years awaiting cleanup.

Ashley Daniels, program and organizing director at [Toxic Free NC](#) in Durham, said Durham residents haven't had full access to their parks for three summers. They're also worried about the health implications of the contamination.

In 2025, Toxic Free NC started working with community partners to host [Soil Screening, Health, Outreach, and Partnership](#) (soilSHOP) events in each of the five affected parks — East End Park, East Durham Park, Lyon Park, Northgate Park and Walatown Park.

"People have really wanted to know what their engagement with the parks could imply for their health, what it could imply for their private property if they are adjacent to the parks or really close to them, what it means for the water around the parks," Daniels said.

As part of the events, Durham residents and soilSHOP team members took soil samples from properties near the parks to test for contaminants. From participating neighbors' homes, the soilSHOP team found that 12 percent of lead samples in these areas were above the threshold of 200 parts per million set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Daniels said that while team members were out canvassing for the soilSHOP events in East Durham, they met one new resident who didn't know about the contamination. He lived close to the park, but the soilSHOP canvass was the first time he had heard of potential risks, Daniels said.

Sen. Sophia Chitlik (D-Durham), who represents all five of Durham's affected parks, said her constituents are asking for "the most basic information."

"People want interim resources. They want some level of clarity about what will happen and when it will happen," Chitlik said.

Chitlik said that while Durham Parks and Recreation is doing its best, the state doesn't have a plan to provide "extra support at scale."

The city installed orange net fencing around portions of the parks to limit access. Richter, a 40-year resident of Durham, said it's frustrating that children often step over this fencing and still play in some areas with contamination.

Wade Walcutt, director of Durham Parks and Recreation, told NC Health News they plan to improve the fencing to ensure that people aren't getting into unsafe areas. He also said they'll update signs with information about what is happening and why it is happening, in addition to scheduling more community update meetings.

Beyond Durham

Greensboro residents are waiting for similar information about Bingham Park.

Richter, whose research focuses on city soil issues throughout the U.S. and internationally, said contaminants in Greensboro's Bingham Park [were discovered more than 10 years ago](#) and have been "alienating" the community since.

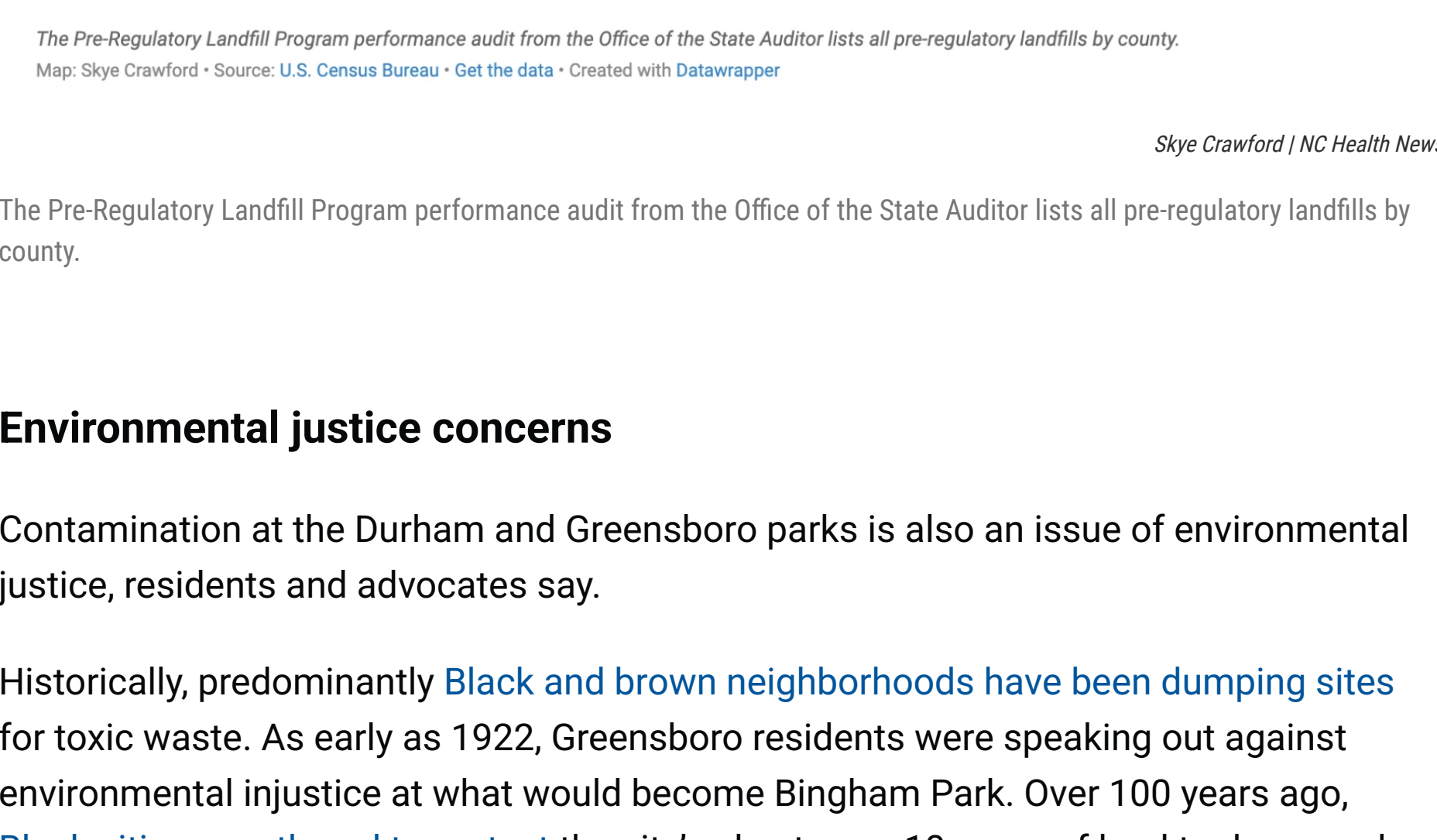
The park was fenced off but officially closed in spring 2024.

Reginald Hilliard Sloan III grew up playing and shooting basketball in Bingham Park. He said the park was being worked on for a while until recently, when neighborhood murmurs of a re-opening quieted.

"I remember on Facebook we was all waiting for the park to get done so we could start throwing cookouts and stuff out there," Sloan said. "As of right now, I haven't heard anything else about it."

From April 1 to June 30, the [Southern Environmental Law Center](#) solicited public comment from community members to send to NCDEQ and the City of Greensboro about the proposed Bingham Park Remedial Action Plan. Over 100 residents wrote variations of "Clean up the trash!!" and "Have a safe, clean park for the kids!"

"That's a lot of land," Sloan said. "It would be beautiful for the community."



Environmental justice concerns

Contamination at the Durham and Greensboro parks is also an issue of environmental justice, residents and advocates say.

Historically, predominantly [Black and brown neighborhoods have been dumping sites](#) for toxic waste. As early as 1922, Greensboro residents were speaking out against environmental injustice at what would become Bingham Park. Over 100 years ago, [Black citizens gathered to protest](#) the city's plan to use 10 acres of land to dump and burn toxic waste, according to the local Bingham Park Justice Project.

The same [1937 map of Durham](#) in Richter's office shows multiple city incinerators near racially segregated streets that were home to Black residents.

Chitlik described the situation in Durham's parks as a "visible wound" of neglect.

"We know that this will be a historical pattern, particularly in our Black communities across the state," Chitlik said. "We know that this is a classic environmental justice trope that we will see play out."

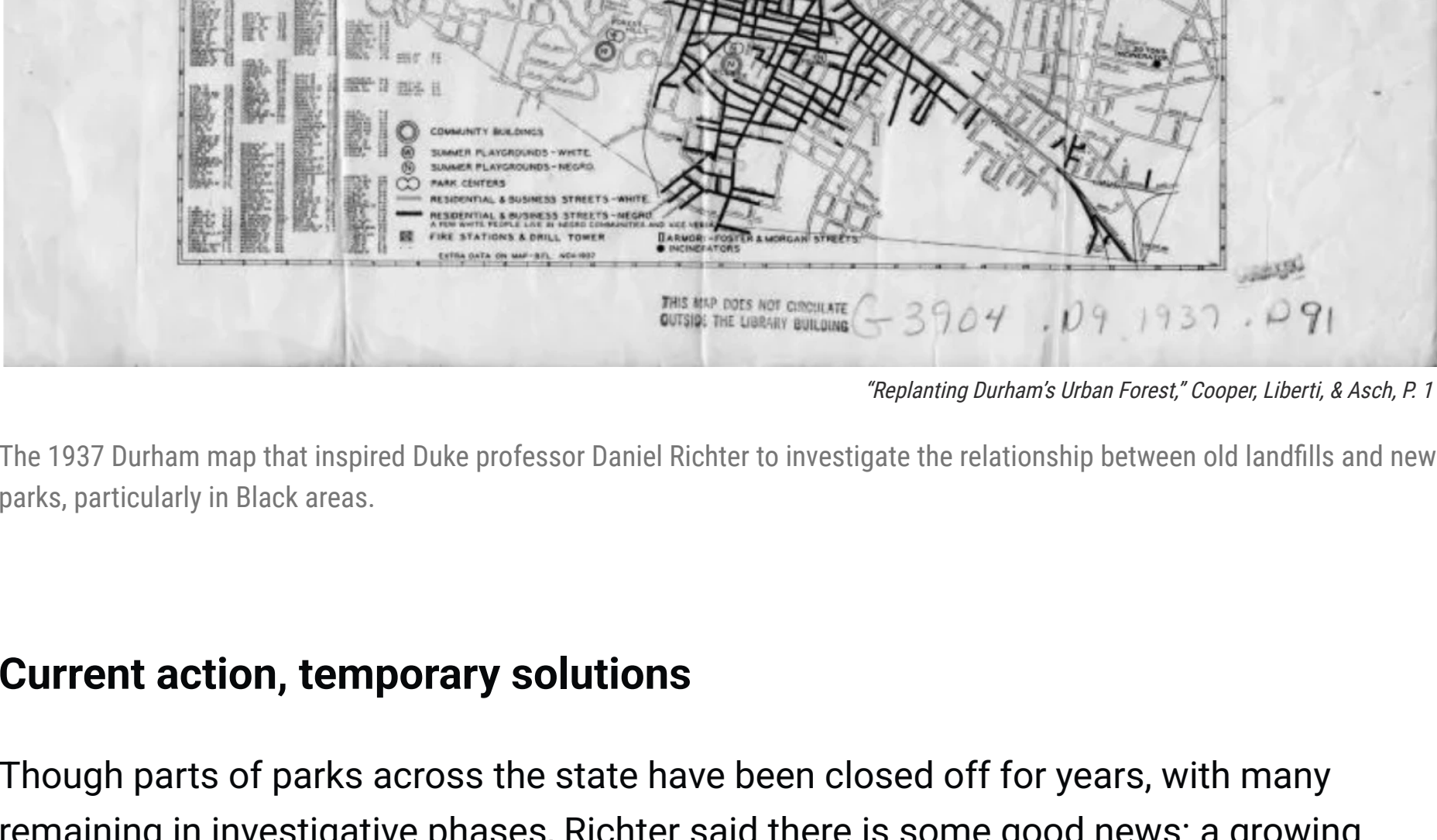
When landfills and incinerator sites like those in Durham were abandoned decades ago, neighborhoods celebrated when they were turned into parks, Richter said.

"Everybody seems to know about lead, but this is nothing less than a tragic situation of the local communities losing faith in their parks," Richter said.

Greensboro residents voiced this lost faith when they submitted comments about remediating Bingham Park.

"Fix it like you would if it was in Irving Park," one resident wrote, referring to a park in a predominantly white Greensboro neighborhood that was previously off limits for working-class communities of color.

"No one should be living in areas that can cause cancer and other diseases that prevail in neighborhoods of Black and brown people," another resident wrote.



The 1937 Durham map that inspired Duke professor Daniel Richter to investigate the relationship between old landfills and new parks, particularly in Black areas.

Current action, temporary solutions

Though parts of parks across the state have been closed off for years, with many remaining in investigative phases, Richter said there is some good news: a growing interest in "risk reduction" remediation methods. One of these is a "cap and cover" method, which would place a physical barrier over contaminated soil.

"It doesn't preclude ongoing investigations that are being done but reduces the exposure risk immediately with hundreds of truckloads of clean soil, for example," Richter said.

Kendall Wimberley, policy manager at Toxic Free NC, said this method may make sense for some old landfill sites, but other techniques may be needed in a park where communities want to maintain green space.

"We've been in a waiting game for a while, but the city [of Durham] recognizes the need for being thoughtful about what those options should look like," Wimberley said. "And maybe it looks a little bit different for each park based on what that is and what input from the community is."

The state auditor's report recommends that NCDEQ seek more funding and work with the General Assembly to modify legislation that would make it easier for staff to access high-risk pre-regulatory landfill sites that are on private property.

Chitlik said legislators have a strong working relationship with NCDEQ and have been collaborating. She is one of the primary sponsors for the [Safe Parks Act](#), a bill that would generate funds for remediating contaminated parks in the state.

"We've given them [NCDEQ] more responsibility and less resources. That's just not working," Chitlik said. "We really need to equip our state government, state agencies, with the resources that they need to be able to protect our communities."

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