

Synopsis of the Request for Expressions of Interest (RFEI) – Development and Preservation of the former Montgomery County Prison Site – 35 East Airy Street, Norristown, PA 19404

This synopsis is for informational purposes only. To access the full RFEI and related attachments, please visit the Bonfire Site at this link: [Montgomery County PA - RFEI for the Development and Preservation of the Former Montgomery County Prison Site](#)

Executive Summary

Montgomery County is releasing this Request for Expression of Interest (RFEI) as it seeks to receive proposals from highly qualified real estate developers or redevelopment teams to envision the future design of two county-owned lots at the corner of DeKalb and Airy Streets. These lots currently encompass the vacant Airy Street Prison (35 E Airy St.) and the adjacent 192-space county parking lot, totaling 2.8 acres for the entire tract. The purpose of the RFEI is to identify respondents who have a creative vision for solutions that are practical and sustainable, and demonstrated experience, along with the organizational and financial capacity to transform the site into an economically viable use while maintaining its historic architectural features. Ideal development teams will have extensive experience in the substantial rehabilitation and reuse of historic structures, as well as commercial development in Pennsylvania.

Opportunity

How the County will use this RFEI

Montgomery County intends to use responses and recommendations generated by this RFEI process to inform a plan for redevelopment on the site.

The county will enter into a Public-Private Partnership (P3) agreement with the selected redevelopment team to find a solution related to ownership and operations of portions of the project site. The county will provide the land and maintain ownership through the development process. The developer will provide the design and construction. Once the site is developed, ownership options include:

- The county maintains ownership of the parcel and has a lease with the developer over an extended period, such as a 99-year lease. This lease most likely could be renegotiated after 10 years.
- If two parcels are established, the county would maintain ownership of county facilities and any portions of preserved prison buildings or structures. Any remaining portions of the tract that include newly constructed buildings or amenities could be subdivided off for ownership by the Developer.
- As a third alternative, the county is open to any creative approach to the structure of an ownership/lease balance that would benefit both parties and still meet the goals of preservation and ownership of county facilities. This could be negotiated as part of the final contracts.

Project Goals

The county is open to expressions of interest for either the complete or partial preservation of the prison and reuse of the entire site, based on the provided preservation requirements and the development needs for both the county and Norristown. The main mission of this initiative is to create a transparent process that considers the county needs and public wishes to reach the best chance of success in balancing development with preservation goals. These are the goals that have framed our efforts:

- Maximize the opportunity for a developer to preserve the most architecturally and historically relevant areas of the prison.
- Utilize the entire tract (prison lot and parking lot area) as needed to facilitate the most opportunity for county/municipal uses and architectural preservation.
- Inspire investment and increased revenue for Norristown.
- Enhance public space and vibrancy of the area in conjunction with the new Justice Center campus.
- Encourage sustainability in design and process, community connections, and construction.
- Gain community support and meaningful participation with partners and community members through a transparent process.
- Limit the county's public funding toward the prison's preservation and recognize that substantial private developer funding will be needed to achieve these goals.

Additional considerations for development should include:

- Community outreach strategy
- Innovative solutions to historic preservation
- Innovative strategies related to partnerships and funding
- Consideration of resilient and sustainable design
- Responsiveness to county needs
- Responsiveness to community input

County Vision & Community Engagement Efforts

The county requested permits to demolish the prison building and prepare the site for redevelopment in August of 2023. Following public opposition, the county requested a stay for the permit application and an eventual removal of the application in April of 2024, allowing the county to explore alternative options for redevelopment and possible preservation that would limit the contribution of county funds. However, Montgomery County has committed to redevelopment efforts that are considerate of the historical and cultural significance of the prison alongside the desire to advance economic development and public policy goals of both Norristown and Montgomery County. To garner public input on the potential preservation and reuse of the prison, the county issued a survey through its online engagement platform, Engage Montco from June to August 2024. The survey, which yielded almost 700 responses, sought feedback on rehab/demolition and possible future uses through multiple choice and open-ended questions. Over half the respondents supported preserving the prison, with an additional 17 percent wanting to recognize the prison's history through education. Another 17 percent believed the prison should be demolished. Participants suggested a wide range of potential uses for the site,

including restaurants, retail, and residential uses. Many expressed the importance of incorporating an interpretive history component as part of the future use.

For a full analysis, see the Final Public Survey Summary on the Bonfire Site.

The Site

Site Location

The 2.8-acre development site is located at 35 E Airy Street in the Municipality of Norristown. There is vehicular access to the parcels on E Marshall St and E Airy Street.

Site History and Existing Uses

The former Montgomery County Prison, also known as Airy Street Prison was built in 1851, consisting of the entrance and original cell block (Phases I and II—see *Figure 1*). It was designed by Napoleon LeBrun, the renowned architect known for his designs of the Philadelphia Academy of Music and the Cathedral of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. The prison's Gothic-style architecture was heavily influenced by the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia.

The prison was expanded in subsequent years, with additions constructed in the 1890s and 1910s to house more cells and related facilities. It functioned as a prison until its closure in 1986. In 1984, the structure was included in the National Register of Historic Places as a contributing property within the Central Norristown Historic District. The prison's architecture remains highly regarded by community members, historians and advocacy groups locally and regionally as an iconic part of Norristown's built environment.

While the structure remains vacant, the former prison yard has recently been used for county vehicle and equipment storage. Currently, the condition of portions of the building are in disrepair, with some roof collapse and water damage. A tunnel exists between the basement of the prison and the courthouse which was used for prisoner movement in the past. This has been sealed off and must remain this way.

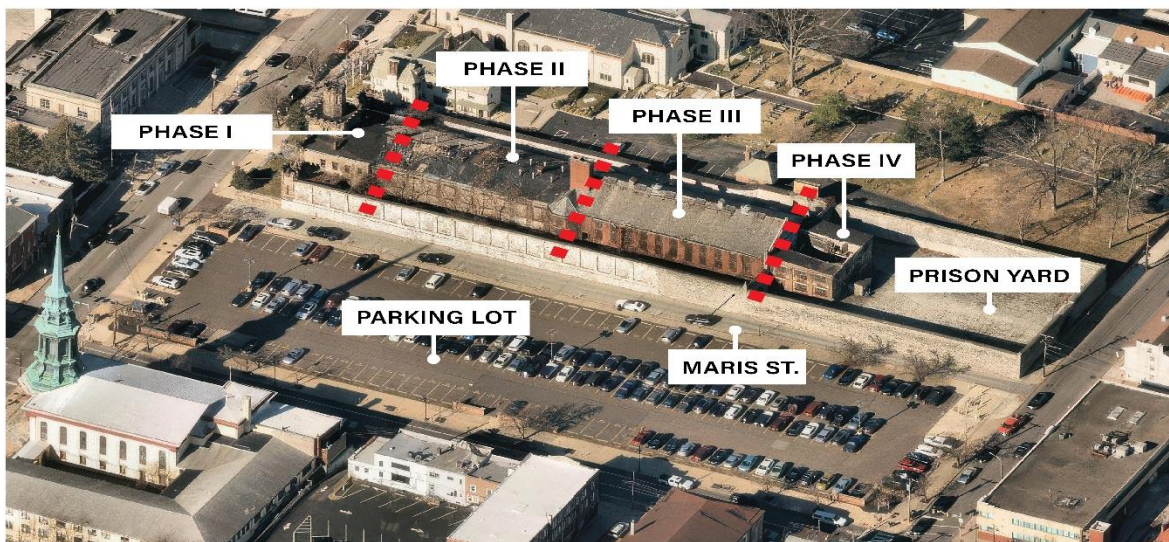


Figure 1: Redevelopment project footprint

The adjacent parking lot is currently utilized as Juror parking for the county, with vehicular access to both Airy Street and Marshall Street. This lot includes 192 parking spaces. Maris Street, which currently runs between the two parcels, includes an additional 13 metered spaces along it. Maris Street will be vacated as a tool to expand the site's footprint and utilization. The entire footprint of the combined parcels as shown in *Figure 2* is 2.8 acres.



Figure 2: Nearmap Imagery of site showing existing Airy Street Prison, Maris Street, and Adjacent parking lot.

Site Context

The site is located within the Town Center (TC) Zoning District (*Figure 3*) as well as the municipality's Local Historic District which is regulated by the Historic Architectural Review Board (HARB) (*Figure 4*). The final land development proposal should adhere to the requirements of the Town Center Zoning Districts and will also require a Certificate of Appropriateness from the HARB. The zoning codes for the Municipality of Norristown should be referenced prior to submission of any development proposal.

This area has seen an influx of redevelopment recently and other sites are slated for potential redevelopment in the near future. The County Justice Center located a block away is currently under construction with completion estimated for 2025, the Main and DeKalb multi-use project is planned to start construction this year, and there is potential for future redevelopment of the historic USPS office across the street from this project site. Additionally, many great improvements have happened the Centre Theater, the oldest continuing operating theater in Montgomery County which is associated with The Greater Norristown Society for the Arts and the Norristown Zoological Society. Also, a portion of the Norristown State Hospital is currently in design for a mixed-use development. Even though this site a few miles away, it could have an impact on the community overall.

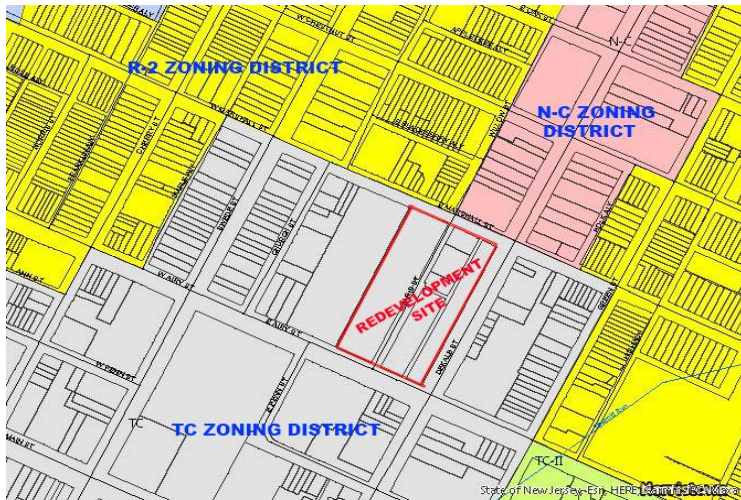


Figure 3: Zoning Map zoomed to proposed redevelopment site.

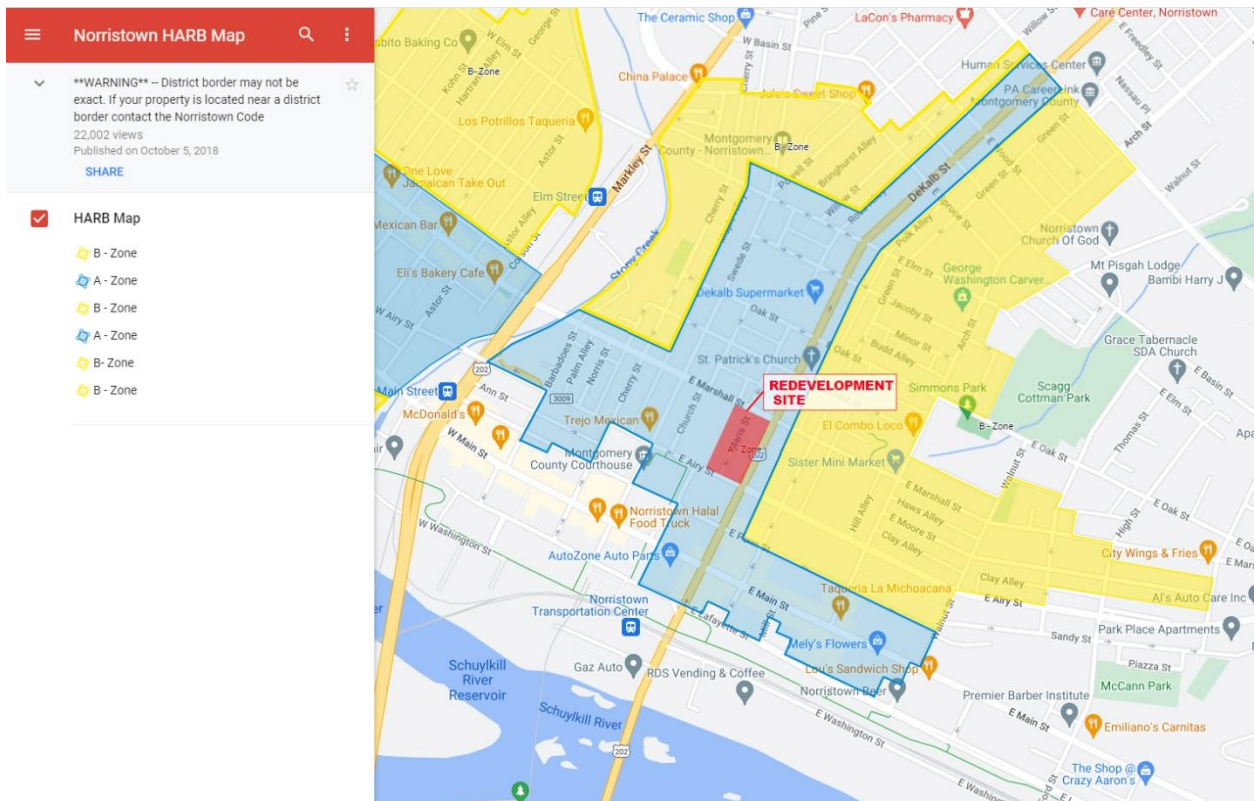


Figure 4: HARB Zone map zoomed to proposed redevelopment site.

Site Details

A detailed description can be found in the report listed below, however the following is a brief overview.

Phases I, II and III of the site (see figure 1) are currently covered in heavy vegetation growth along the side yards between the prison structure and stone walls, along with trash and other debris. The stone wall surrounds the prison on the east, west and north sides and consists of mortared stone masonry in a semi-course pattern. The north side of the prison (former prison yard) is paved with asphalt and leads to

the roll-up gate entrance onto Marshall Street. The exterior stone wall conditions range from poor to average.

Phase I and II of the site consist of the original two-story prison structure and many of its iconic architectural features. The Phase I portion is constructed of masonry with castellations, and a timber-framed roof supported by stone and brick masonry bearing walls. The interior consists of masonry arch construction in average condition. The stairwell leading to the second floor has since collapsed. Phase I also has historic wood doors, vintage hardware and other remnants from the prison era. Based on drone photos, the roof appears intact and in average to fair condition.

Phase II holds the original prison cells with a central hall running in between. The exterior is comprised of stone masonry. The interior walls are in average condition, the floor consists of masonry arch construction that is in average condition. Notable architectural features include a brick barrel vault along its central axis, as well as various metalwork that appears salvageable.

Phase III consists of the 1890s addition comprised of masonry-bearing walls. It houses a free-standing steel structure that holds three levels of prison cells above the first floor. Skylights and large windows allow for abundant natural light inside. Notable architectural elements include masonry jack arches and other ornamental brickwork. Some of the prison cells may be salvageable for educational purposes.

Phase IV is the most recent addition, completed in the 1920s. It consists of masonry brick walls with timber-framed rafters, beams and roof framing. The roof collapsed sometime before 2020 and is unsafe for access. The open roof has enabled water entry which has caused significant deterioration to this portion, and hastened the decay of the other phases. Phase IV is generally regarded as the least architecturally significant part of the structure.

Existing Ownership and Legal Structures

The county owns all of the subject parcels.

- A boundary and topographic survey was prepared by Gannett Fleming in June 2021 and is reflected on an Airy Street Prison Demolition plan set dated May 23, 2023, which is included in the attachments.
- A boundary survey is being completed for the adjoining parking lot parcels and Maris Street and will be available prior or any contracts.
- A title search for the entire site is being prepared and will be available prior to any contracts.
- The county is working with the Municipality of Norristown to vacate Maris street, which should be completed prior to any contracts

For a complete site description, see, the Conditions Assessment and Report, prepared by Colliers Engineering and Design, dated November 1, 2024, on the Bonfire Site.

Demographic Profile

The site is located in the 19401 zip code area, which has a total population of 42,908 residents. The racial makeup of the area is 41.2% White, 29.5% Black, 3.9% Asian, 2.1% Native American, .1% Native Hawaiian, 9.4% Other races and 13.8% Two or More races. Residents of Hispanic/Latino ancestry were 23.6% of the population. The median age of residents is 35.4 years. There are 16,495 households in the area, with an average household size of 2.53. The median household income is \$64,527. The majority of

area residents are renters, comprising 56.8%, while owners make up 43.2%. The unemployment rate is 6.2%;

Source: U.S. Census, 2022 5-Year American Community Survey (ACS)

Local Destinations, Connections, and Transportation:

35 E. Airy Street has a Walk Score of 86 according to Walkscore.com, considering it very walkable, with high scores for access to drinking and dining, groceries, shopping, errands, schools, culture and entertainment.

With a Transit and Bike Score of 53, the site is also considered bikeable and has good transit with many nearby public transit options, based on the Walkscore methodology. The site is adjacent and connects to a network of bikeable streets considered to be low-stress and comfortable for most adult riders by the County Transportation Planning division.

Transit options include stops directly adjacent to the parcels for:

- 98 Septa bus line, which runs along DeKalb Street and connects to the Plymouth Meeting Mall through Plymouth Township;
- The 96 Septa bus line, which shortly travels along E. Airy Street before connecting to Swede Street, where it extends north to connect to multiple Montgomery County destinations, including Montgomery County Community College, Montgomeryville Mall, terminating in Lansdale;
- The 97 Septa bus line, which travels along E. Airy Street and Main Street in Norristown, and continues with stops at the Metroplex Shopping Center, Conshohocken, and past the county line, ending in Chestnut Hill.

Within 500 feet of the parcels there are stops for:

- The 90 Septa bus line, connecting to Norristown State Hospital, Einstein Medical center on Germantown Pike, and to the Plymouth Meeting Mall.
- The 131 Septa bus line that runs down Marshall Street and connects to destinations in Valley Forge and Audubon.

The Norristown Transportation center is within 1000 feet of the parcels, connecting to Philadelphia via high speed and regional rail train service and additional bus service that connect to both Pottstown and Phoenixville.

There are many local destinations within a short distance from the redevelopment parcels, including the Centre Theatre and the Horizon Theater. There is also significant planned redevelopment in the area. This site is located adjacent to the Montgomery County Campus and the County Justice Center, which is currently under redevelopment, and is across the street from the Historic USPS office, built in 1934, and is planned to be sold for future redevelopment. Future commercial development in the area includes The Grand at Main and DeKalb Streets, a mixed-use redevelopment project with plans to begin construction in 2025 this year. Additional retail, service, and entertainment venues are located throughout the neighborhood.

County Requirements

County Uses may be integrated with private development across the entire tract or separate lots for county use and developer use may be established. With all proposals, the county will be looking for the following:

1. Preservation of the historic building and structures to the highest extent feasible
2. Construction of 40,000 SF office space for county use.
3. Structured parking with a minimum 350 and a maximum of 500 parking spaces for county use.



Figure 5: Minimum preservation area of the Prison Building as defined by Montgomery County.

Selection Criteria

1. Qualifications
 - a. Firm's level of experience with similar efforts. Provide (2) examples of past projects and evidence of firm and staff successes
2. Historic Preservation
 - a. Proposals that preserve more than the minimum could be scored more favorably.
3. County Facilities
 - a. Proposals that more completely address the county development needs in a creative fashion could be scored more favorably.
4. Other Design Elements
 - a. Development approach

- b. Combination and complement of uses
- c. Public/Private Open Space inclusion
- d. Downtown integration
5. Public/Private Partnership Strategy
6. MBE/DBE/WBE participation

Review and Selection Process

Responses will be shared with and be reviewed and evaluated by the county selection committee based on the requirements and selection criteria provided above. The county may, if they so choose, narrow down the list of proposals to a short list of finalists based on this evaluation. Each finalist, if any, may be interviewed by the county. Developers will be expected to make a presentation during such interview. Following the completion of any interviews and presentations, the county may select a development team(s) with which to enter into negotiations of a redevelopment contract for the sale and redevelopment of the Site. The county shall be the sole judge as to which, if any, proposals and Respondents best meet the selection criteria. The county's decision of whether and with which entity to enter into a redevelopment contract shall be final. The county reserves and hold at its discretion the following additional rights and options:

- To reject any and all responses received;
- To not select a developer from those submitting a response;
- To waive any submission requirements contained within this RFEI;
- To waive any irregularities in any submitted response; and
- To re-advertise this RFEI; postpone or cancel, at any time, this RFEI; and to issue or not issue subsequent RFEIs.

Post-Selection Process

1. The county will work with the selected Developer to negotiate the conditions of the Public-Private Partnership that benefit Montgomery County and the Developer and any other entities, such as financing partners.
2. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or other agreement will be prepared that sets non-binding terms, serving as a basis for the negotiation and execution of subsequent binding agreements.
3. Montgomery County and Developer will sign the Public-Private Partnership agreement.
4. The Developer will prepare a presentation of their proposal and present their concept at a public meeting.