

**Stop Cop City, Issues at the Heart of the Movement Volume I: The Right to Live
Sustainably,
An Environmental Discussion Notes**

Dr. Jacqueline Echols, Board President South River Watershed Alliance

- SRWA has been doing work in the South River and its tributaries in Southwest Atlanta and South Dekalb County since 1999
- Environmental degradation is the central issue that did not originate with Cop City, but has continued since it began 50+ years ago
- Following Dekalb County's consent decree with the EPA in 2010, South Dekalb has experienced "environmental injustice on steroids" and has escalated to environmental racism with Cop City construction
- Echols' mantra is "As the environment goes, so goes the community" as environmental issues invariably spill affect residents- SRWA's work over the decades exemplifies the interconnectedness of the community and the environment
- Environmental justice works to uphold the right of everyone to live in a safe and healthy environment
- A consent decree between a municipality or county and the EPA is essentially an agreement to stop pollution. In Dekalb's case, the consent decree addressed an old, leaking sewer system which had contaminated South River and its tributaries for years
 - While consent decrees pertaining to the Clean Water Act generally apply to an entire area, Echols discovered in 2019 that this consent decree did not apply to South Dekalb County, a predominantly Black community, and the area most impacted by the sewage leaks - only North Dekalb
 - SRWA [filed a lawsuit](#) to address the water contamination in South Dekalb, but lost in federal court
- In 2020 Dekalb County entered into an unprecedented land swap agreement with a private developer, who gained ownership of 40 acres of Intrinishment Creek Park
 - SRWA brought a lawsuit against Dekalb County, which is still ongoing
- Three principles that sets environmental racism apart from environmental justice
 - First pillar- Race based discrimination that affects environmental policy-making
 - Second pillar- Enforcement of regulation and laws relating to environmental racism
 - Third pillar- Targeting of communities of color for the sites of toxic and polluting industries, resulting in disproportionate harm
- Each of the above three principles are present in the construction of Cop City
 - Cop City Construction revokes the 2017 policy established by the Atlanta City Council designating the South River Forest as Park Land, taking back the environmental protections the land provided to communities in Southwest Dekalb and Southeast Atlanta
 - Cop City construction violates the Clean Water Act and the Georgia Water Quality Control Act- violating water quality standards set by Georgia's Environmental Protection Division

- Cop City was built in this area because other neighborhoods would not have tolerated it. Cop City will cause disproportionate harm to this community, burdening it with toxins and pollution, produced by a training facility so large that it meets the definition of “industry,” as laid out in the third pillar of environmental racism
- After speaking with Echols, the Mayor remains unwilling to view the construction of Cop City from an immediate community standpoint
- SRWA filed lawsuits against City of Atlanta based on the Clean Water Act, seeking a temporary injunction to halt construction of Cop City for 2-3 months, because the city’s goal is to build as quickly as possible to the point that construction is irreversible
- SRWA needs to prove no imminent harm to the facility will be brought by an injunction
- SRWA filed an administrative complaint with the EPA based on the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Title VI which addresses disproportionate impacts on communities of color as it relates to Cop City

Sam Barnes, Atlanta Community Press Collective

- Speed Run through history of the [Old Atlanta Prison Farm](#)
- The site of Cop City is originally stolen Mvskoke/Muscogee land which will not be discussed, but deserves equal recognition
- Regarding environmental justice/racism, there is a concept of “slow death” referring to the discrimination against a people to such an extent that the struggle of surviving under that discrimination becomes intrinsic part of their story
- The land has not been allowed to rest since it was occupied by white people and has consistently been used as a site on which people were traumatized- as a plantation, as a prison farm, and now as a militarized police training facility
- A 1928 topographical map of Atlanta produced by Emory and Georgia State University shows in Southeast Atlanta “City of Atlanta Dairy Farm”- triangle of land bounded by 3,4 roads, including the area where APD’s existing SWAT facility is, city landfill, city water treatment plant, and site of the historical Dairy Farm, which would become the Prison Dairy Farm
- Barnes second map highlights land that has been cleared for Cop City, and notes that while early criticism of the project by environmentalists resulted in APF reducing the square footage of the building and setting aside proposed park land, funding has not been earmarked for this land nor does a plan exist for it
- Stolen Muscogee land was purchased by the city of Atlanta from a family member of W.B. Key in 1911. W.B. Key enslaved 19 people on his farm, according to a 1860 census of people who were enslaved.
- APF has made errors refusing to acknowledge this land as a plantation in which people were enslaved, although it has recognized the prison farm, which is slavery in another form
- A prison farm is an open air prison that employs prison labor, and the Atlanta farm in particular was operated by people who were charged with low level crimes- traffic fines, public drunkenness, public disorder, and who could not afford to bail/bond out

- Dairy produced on the farm was used to feed people in other city jail, public school children, Grady hospital, that the city would have otherwise had to buy
- In 1946, the warden of the prison farm bragged about the labor costs that the free prison slave labor was saving the city- referring to the prison as a “good investment”
- In the late 1980’s the prison farm eventually shut down, around the same time the city was sued over conditions in solitary confinement cells- referred to as the “hole”
- Instead of addressing the issue of cruelty intrinsic in solitary confinement, the city was ordered to build new isolation cells, and the resulting contract was caught up in a pay for play scandal. It is unclear whether new cells were built, because the prison was shut down in the early 1990’s.
- Following the prison’s closure, the land sat for 20 years or so. In the 90’s and 2000’s there were a couple of attempts to do something with the land, but by and large a forest was allowed to grow, which Barnes illustrates using historical satellite imagery
- Barnes echoes Echols that it is no coincidence that police have chosen to raze 85 acres of that forest to build a militarized police training facility, tragically perpetuating the narrative of “slow death” on historically occupied land, on which the present-day community continues to bear the cost of systematic oppression

Ted Terry, Dekalb County Commissioner

- Like others, many Dekalb elected officials were surprised to find out about Cop City through a 2021 press conference by the Atlanta Mayor in 2021
- As a result of the announcement of this major development, area residents- who are also Commissioner Terry’s constituents- explored the option of a re-zoning process. However legal research and previous state Supreme court rulings revealed that a city jurisdiction (such as the City of Atlanta’s over unincorporated Dekalb) is not required to follow the zoning guidelines in another location where they own property, especially if it fulfills a public purpose.
- Residents also demanded a local citizen committee to be created, akin to a city NPU or county community council, for the purpose of providing themselves with input on the project
- Commissioner Terry appointed to the resulting oversight committee, CSAC, an environmental engineer, [Lily Ponitz](#), whose criticism of the project resulted in her [removal from the committee](#)
- Concerned citizens urged Dekalb Commissioners and CSAC to request a Phase II Environmental Review from the Dekalb County Permitting Department, but neither body would call for review
- With CSAC and the Dekalb commissioners unwilling to call for an environmental review, Commissioner Terry and SRWA challenged the land disturbance permit issued from Dekalb County to the Atlanta Police Foundation on environmental grounds, resulting in two ongoing court cases.
- Commissioner Terry echoes Barnes’ lament of loss of the forest that was in a period of recovery, asserting that many trees had been there for 80 years, 200 years, and that concern remains that future development will threaten the 3,000 acres of surrounding

forest. For the residents downstream from the South River Watershed that forest serves as a stormwater sponge to reduce flooding, a carbon sequestration sink, without which the soil quality will be diminished, along with the air quality in the city of Atlanta and Dekalb, if the forest continues to be destroyed

- Commissioner Terry has introduced resolutions to re-open Intrenchment Creek Park, and to sign-onto the larger Protect South River Forest Plan that would see county and city funding efforts to acquire land that would remain undeveloped in perpetuity
- Commissioner Terry urges relentless optimism given all of the efforts to Stop Cop City locally and globally, and expresses gratitude to activists in Atlanta for speaking up on behalf of unincorporated Dekalb residents, whom the city of Atlanta disenfranchised from the process
- Echoes Dr. Echols and Barnes, asserting that the community in unincorporated Dekalb has long been ignored- used as a construction dump, used as a landfill, and as a target for bad development
- Citizens of unincorporated Dekalb deserve equal treatment

Neil Sardana, Organizing Manager, Georgia Conservation Voters

- Sardana is stunned by the elite pressure to bring this project to bear despite the opposition of the residents of unincorporated Dekalb and City of Atlanta, and resulting suppression of that opposition
- Likewise stunned by those in power denying working class Black Americans access to beautiful green space, especially after a period of the land's recovery from such a traumatic history
- Presents slide illustrating the interconnectedness between the government, media, industry and police in the Cop City project
- APF is building Cop City under the guise of concerns over police violence, but in reality, they are adding fuel to the fire of the police problem
- The exclusion of community voices is where the disparity between what the city and the APF claim to be doing and what they are actually doing is most apparent
- Corporations are the main backers of the police foundation, because they have long-term vested interests in protecting profits, through exerting control and influence over the democratic process. This is happening with police foundations across the nation
- This corporate back militarization has chilling implications for future mass migrations that will occur due to climate change and other factors, as well as for democratic uprisings that are already experiencing brutal backlash from police
- Sardana examines conflicts of interests created by the corporate backing of police foundations using the example of Georgia Power, a major Cop City funder:
 - Georgia Power is one of the biggest polluters in the state
 - Georgia Power has invested millions of dollars in an attempt to negatively influence federal legislation preventing climate emergency
 - Georgia Power is likewise attempting to exert undue influence over Georgia Public Service Commission and Georgia Environmental Protection Division
- Why would corporations like Georgia Power want to invest so much in Cop City?

- Take the example of Juliette Georgia, location of a Georgia Power coal plant, formerly the largest coal plant in the entire nation and at one point largest point of carbon emissions in Western Hemisphere. The coal ash from the plant poisoned the drinking water and polluted the area, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of people and many contracting cancer
- The myth of public safety says that police hold murderers accountable, but corporations are given impunity, and their investment in police seems to beg the question:
- To what ends are the corporations funding police foundations looking for protections from public accountability?
- Norfolk Southern, the company responsible for the massive derailment disaster in East Palestine Ohio and subsequent environmental damage in the community, is another funder of Cop City
- Corporations' collective refusal of public accountability and their investment in police foundations, result in brutality against the public when victimized communities protest injustice, because the police are not taking the position of protecting the rights of those communities, police are taking the position of protecting their corporate funders
- People in Georgia taking a stand against this system have experienced extreme repression- domestic terrorism charges, racketeering charges, and the brutal murder of environmental activist Manuel "Tortugueta" Teran
- The people remain undeterred- the leaderless, grassroots Stop Cop City movement has continued to gain momentum, and 116,000 petition signatures gathered by the Stop Cop City referendum campaign over the summer, tied up in litigation with the city of Atlanta, will have its day in court in December