

Cop City model threatens forests in Pittsburgh



by Alice Smith

PITTSBURGH, PA – “No Cop City Anywhere! Defend the Forest Everywhere!” This is the rallying cry emerging out of Atlanta. Organizers on the frontline in the Weelaunee Forest urge us to understand that their fight is inseparable from the work to be done close to home. The health of one forest is linked with the health of the ecosystem and biome; the unchecked power of Atlanta’s paramilitary police force is linked with the power of policing across the nation. More literally, we must be aware that similar projects may be underway in our own backyards.

In Pittsburgh, this call has awakened many of us to the looming possibility of a massive police training facility being built here.

In 2021, the city acquired a large parcel of land from the federal government. This land, which sits on the bank of the Allegheny River just west of Highland Park, currently contains an abandoned VA hospital complex. Satellite images show that more than 90 acres of it are tree-covered, creating a forested buffer zone between development and the waterline. The city announced plans to use this land for “a state-of-the-art Public Safety Training Academy, a Public Safety Department and Emergency Management headquarters, a home for police K-9 and mounted units,” and more. The new center would train police from 13 surrounding counties – allowing cops across the region to share new crowd control and protest suppression tactics.

At the time of the transfer, city officials said that moving old public safety facilities from the valley below the proposed site would allow for new green infrastructure to alleviate annual flooding problems along a major thoroughfare and the site of a buried stream. The need to address stormwater flooding is dire; multiple people have already died in flooding on this street, and floods will only become more common and more severe as climate change continues. We badly need to invest in climate adaptation, mitigation, and resilience across our region. But we cannot make progress if fixing one known problem is bound up with an unrelated, massively expensive and multi-year project.

The current status of Pittsburgh’s Cop City project is unclear. Citizens hoped that a new mayor might have new priorities but he seems to remain committed to the project despite widespread community calls to defund the police and skyrocketing costs. Some early coverage included estimates of “north of \$100 million”, and late last year city council members said that the costs had risen significantly. Because of this, the mayoral administration is reportedly considering other sites for the training facility.

A change of site would not impact our opposition to this project. As both environmentalists and believers in a just world, we must oppose cop cities anywhere. Even if not a single tree were felled in the construction of such a training facility, it would still siphon funds away from social goods and expand the resources of police who surveil, intimidate, arrest, and murder with impunity.

It is important to understand that expanding police resources is a never-ending spiral. In 2016, a Pittsburgh police training center replaced Community College of Allegheny County’s Arts Center, with the explicit goal of “more police officers on city streets.” Even before that move was underway, then-mayor Bill Peduto was saying that it was insufficient and another training center would be needed. In 2023, even as city police have blatantly announced their intention to violate a city council ordinance and resume traffic stops that disproportionately target black drivers, the new administration has announced plans to dramatically increase police presence downtown and remains committed to constructing our own cop city.

A coalition of local activist groups has formed in solidarity with the Atlanta forest defenders and the Stop Cop City movement. Support can take many forms: raising awareness of their fight during the Week of Solidarity in February, joining them on the ground for the Week of Action in March, and helping to raise bail and legal funds for incarcerated protestors. One of our aims is to make the construction of a new cop city in Pittsburgh politically impossible. We have begun reaching out to both local politicians and to other local activists working to oppose the militarization of civilian police departments.

If you are in the area and have ideas or want to help, please reach out to stopcopcitypgh@proton.me. And if you live elsewhere, do some investigating into your own city or county budget to see whether they have similar plans.

No cop city anywhere; defend the forest everywhere!



photo courtesy StopCopCitySolidarity.org



Above: the map shows the former VA Hospital complex, surrounded by forests (highlighted in orange) that form a key habitat corridor along the Allegheny River. Image prepared by Alice Smith

Below: a banner drop in solidarity from a highway bridge photo courtesy StopCopCitySolidarity.org

