



The King Center and Partners Call on the City of Atlanta to Let the People Vote on the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center

Atlanta, GA., August 7, 2023- In his 1957 speech, 'Give Us the Ballot,' Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "In this juncture of our nation's history, there is an urgent need for dedicated and courageous leadership." We, as a city and nation, are at such a juncture. We are imploring that the Atlanta City Council be a part of a national cadre of dedicated, courageous leaders.

If the Beloved Community is indeed our shared goal, then the King Center joins the hundreds of community leaders and organizers in Atlanta— including students, civil rights attorneys, community advocates, academics, and environmental scientists—to insist that construction of the Public Safety Training Center be put to a democratic vote by residents of Atlanta.

There has been no shortage of debate about the City of Atlanta's decision to build a new, \$90M+ Public Safety Training Center. There has also been copious disagreement about where, how, and frankly, whether it should be built.

Since 2021, the City of Atlanta has made two major decisions concerning this issue:
(1) To lease 85+ acres of publicly owned green space in a historic Black neighborhood to a private foundation to build a training facility for police and firefighters.

(2) To designate at least \$31M, plus \$1.2M per year for thirty years of public dollars, to the Atlanta Police Foundation to fund it.

Supporters and dissenters of these decisions— including Mayor Andre Dickens and several City Council members— agree on one thing: the City of Atlanta's decision from the outset did not include sufficient, equitable, nor transparent public engagement.

The King Center considers this a misstep and a missed opportunity, as we believe city leadership should ensure a just, humane, and equitable path if we are sincerely committed to advancing and preserving the Beloved Community in our city.

Hundreds of people participated in the City's official vehicle of public comment at a recent City Council meeting. They overwhelmingly opposed the lease and the use of public funding for this project. In addition, nonviolent protests in opposition to the current construction plans have persisted— including an active call for a referendum by many grassroots leaders in Atlanta.

However, despite the ardent opposition shared during public comment and in protests, city leadership and most City Council members and Mayor Dickens insist that the majority of residents across districts are in favor of the Council's collective decision to use public funding for the project.

There is a straightforward and democratic way to address this tension: put it to a public vote! Place the people's referendum on the ballot.

In a time of crises in housing, health, poverty, and justice, if the City of Atlanta intends to use \$31M of public dollars, the responsible and democratic approach is to allow the public to vote on whether this is how their government should spend their money.

The system of democracy was designed so that every person, regardless of class, creed, or race, would have an objective and unchallenged opportunity to meaningfully participate in the building of their community. Everyone has a responsibility, and a right, to contribute their voice to discussions and decisions on city governance. The participation of the people must be welcome. Atlanta cannot be a city that closes its ears to its most vulnerable residents, who have been made so by historically discriminatory, destructive, and undemocratic policies and practices.

Atlanta, known as the bedrock of the Civil Rights Movement, should be the standard for how a city engages its residents in matters concerning the collective good, collaborative justice, and the cohesiveness of the city. We believe that if the Atlanta City Council agrees to put this issue to a public vote, the Council will provide the most democratic and peaceful option for the city of Atlanta. This is the best way forward for Atlanta's Beloved Community.

Bernice King, CEO, The King Center

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About The King Center

The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change (The King Center) is a 501(c)(3) organization established in 1968 by Mrs. Coretta Scott King. The King Center is the official living memorial and programmatic nonprofit organization committed to educating the world on the life, legacy, and teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The King Center serves to inspire new generations to carry forward his unfinished work, strengthen causes and empower change-makers who are continuing his efforts today. The King Center's premiere educational initiative, Nonviolence365®, is based on Dr. King's nonviolent philosophy and methodology. His teachings engage participants from various sectors of society, including emerging and next-generation leaders, in modules and exercises that enhance communication, leadership, interpersonal, and conflict reconciliation skills, as well as empower individuals to address injustice.

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