

FACT SHEET: Some basic facts and FAQs on the proposed "Churchill Creek" Project

The Borough of Churchill Planning Commission and Council will soon be voting on a proposal to develop the Churchill Crossings Site at 1310 Beulah Road (aka the former George Westinghouse Research and Technology Park). Its impact would be massive, and it would change Churchill forever.

The developer, Hillwood, has proposed a "Distribution Center", with the project name "Churchill Creek." The current proposal is for a 2.9 million square foot building that operates 24/7, 365 days per year. It's huge -- several football fields long, and about 100 feet high. The plans call for greatly reducing the greenspace on the site to make room for this building and parking areas. Massive amounts of earthmoving would be involved. A gigantic retaining wall with a sound barrier on top would be built along Beulah road, which, together, will be over 60 feet high. The retaining wall is to help create an artificial plateau upon which this gigantic facility is to be located. This alone would have a devastating impact on air quality, wildlife and the watershed. The facility, once in operation, would bring an unprecedented amount of heavy truck traffic, hundreds of 18-wheeler trucks per day, to a residential neighborhood that includes several schools and many group homes.

The other major physical change to the neighborhood is transforming the small lightly-used, gated path to the site on Greensburg Pike that is located directly across from the Woodland Hills School, into a large road to service heavy truck traffic from the site (hundreds of 18-wheeler trucks per day.) The students, many of whom live in environmental justice communities, would be subjected to additional air pollution, noise, and traffic hazards if this facility were to be built.

Q: What's on the site now?

A: The property is currently used for filming, and does generate tax revenues. According to the owners' website (filmatchurchill.com), it contains 80 acres of greenspace. One of the buildings has been completely remediated, and provides 250,000 square feet of mixed office space and 35' high ceilinged areas. Another building provides 150,000 square feet of office space and could be remediated if needed, according to the owners. This means it does not have to be demolished, either.

The buildings on the property were designed as part of a park with extensively landscaped grounds. The State Historical Protection Office has determined that some of the buildings, and the park itself, have historical significance, making them eligible to apply for listing in the National Register of Historical Places. There is also an historically significant Native American path (Raystown Path) running through the property.

The property contains a protected wetlands area. It is likely the habitat of an endangered and/or sensitive species. The property as a whole is ecologically significant to the surrounding communities, containing approximately 1400 mature trees, many over 70 years old. These make significant positive contributions to the watershed and airsheds of surrounding communities. The property also supports wildlife such as wild turkeys, owls, deer, and many species of birds and small mammals. It is located in close proximity to a number of schools.

According to the remediation expert hired by the current owners, environmental remediation of the site was estimated to be under 3 million dollars. About 2.5 million dollars of state funds has been earmarked for this purpose, for a suitable development.

The property is surrounded by residential homes and the Borough Building.

The roads have restrictive weight limits and are designed for a residential community, rather than for an industrial park or mega-retail or mega-warehouse site.

Q: Why is this project, which is so unlike the surrounding properties, being proposed in the Borough of Churchill, known as "a residential community"?

A: That's what we'd like to know! We do know this: in response to a request from Hillwood, a change to the zoning code was made by Borough Council in November 2020. To encourage the Borough to pass an ordinance making this change, Hillwood made misrepresentations about the property. In a letter sent to the Churchill Borough Council shortly before its vote on the change in mid-November 2020. Hillwood made the unsubstantiated claim that "All of the buildings on the Subject Property are beyond rehabilitation and must be demolished."

Q: Doesn't it take a massive project like this by someone with deep pockets to make developing the site worth the investment?

A: This claim has been made in an attempt to scare people into accepting this very damaging proposal. It may be true that a plan that involves as much destruction to the current site as Hillwood's plans call for *is* very costly. But there is no need for such costly destruction. As explained above, there are even state funds available for remediation of buildings currently on the site. Many residents advocate for preserving the trees and greenscape on the site, and the Borough's own zoning codes demand it. Many other possibilities that would be a benefit, rather than a burden, to Churchill, are possible, without the kind of destruction and hardship that Hillwood's proposal would bring. One idea put forward is to use some of the hardscape areas to build a community microgrid. Federal funds for community microgrids could be applied for.

Q: Isn't Churchill Borough in so much financial trouble that it needs the tax revenue from this project to survive?

A: No, Churchill Borough is not in that kind of financial trouble. Even despite unusual challenges due to road repairs in recent years, the Borough has a million dollars in the general fund, and expects a surplus in the coming year according to the 2021 budget. And, anyway, the tax revenue from this facility would need to exceed the costs to the Borough in increased road maintenance, infrastructure repairs, legal liability for stormwater system maintenance, increased emergency services, police services, and increased snow removal and road salting costs. In terms of required road maintenance costs, one tractor trailer truck is equivalent to several thousand cars. So, the more likely consequence is that this facility will be a drain on the Borough's finances. Hillwood did not present a cost-benefit analysis.

Q: What is going to be done to make up for the loss of greenspace?

A: Not much! Hillwood proposed to plant over 1000 saplings to make up for removing 1400 mature trees. But, at best, it would still take more than 30 years before they would have the kind of positive impact on air quality that the current mature trees provide.

Hillwood has not recognized, in either its presentations or in its air impact study, the value of the greenspace on the site (over 1400 trees; acres of wetlands and grassy areas), not even to the air quality of the surrounding community. Hillwood's arborist report says that 900+ trees are 'disease prone' to dismiss their value. This is misleading, for they are not diseased or in need of removal.

Even when pressed on the point that the effect that trees have on air quality can be quantitatively described (per EPA's "Planting Healthy Air: A Global Analysis of the Role of urban trees in addressing particulate matter pollution and extreme heat"), Hillwood refuses to include the impact of removing over a thousand trees and many acres of greenspace in its air impact study. *The Borough needs to be reminded of the community's commitment to clean air and greenspace.*

Q: Didn't the project show it has met requirements by getting approvals and permits, e.g., stormwater, sewage, the state historical preservation office, and traffic plans?

A: No, no, no, and no.

-- Hillwood's stormwater plan has not been approved by the County to date. Hillwood proposes to disturb much of the soil and many hundreds of trees, and to replace the existing natural stormwater flow control provided by trees and soil with underground metal tanks and/or pipes, using filtering devices that will require continual professional maintenance. Hence *residents are perfectly justified in asking how this dramatic alteration of the topography will affect the area during heavy rainfalls.*

-- While it may seem unbelievable, Hillwood has no plan for sanitary sewage, either. ALCOSAN has said it cannot accept the additional flows Hillwood requires and Hillwood's site plan has not left any room for an onsite sanitary wastewater facility. Hence *residents are justified in being concerned that Borough approval of the project is being rushed.*

-- So far, Hillwood has not given any indication of how it plans to respond to the State Historical Preservation Office's findings about the cultural value of the site. Hence *residents are justified in their concern over irreversible destruction to culturally significant properties, should Hillwood proceed with demolition.*

-- Hillwood does not have PennDOT approval for any of its proposed traffic plans to date. One thing we do know is that there will not be dedicated ramps directly from the highway to the facility. Residents will have to share the local roads (parts of Beulah Road, Greensburg Pike, and William Penn Highway) as well as the parkway ramps, with this massive influx of heavy trucks into our community. It is unclear how the current weight limits on roads can be met if this facility were to be built. *Residents are perfectly justified in saying this project does not belong in this residential community.*