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Panel:

“Promoting Economic and Community Redevelopment and Environmental Justice
in Revitalization and Reuse of contaminated Properties.”

Chairman Hon. Peter A. DeFazio,

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Good morning Chairman (Peter A.) DeFazio, and distinguished members of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. It is my honor and pleasure to present testimony at today's Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment for "Promoting Economic and Community Redevelopment and Environmental Justice in Revitalization and Reuse of contaminated Properties."

My name is Jerome Shabazz, and I am the founder and Executive Director of JASTECH Development Services, Inc, (JASTECH) and the Overbrook Environmental Education Center (Overbrook Center). I am also privileged to serve on the EPA's – National Environmental Justice Advisory Board, the PA Department of Environmental Protection's – Citizen's Advisory Council (CAC) and, the PA DEP's Environmental Justice Advisory Board (EJAB). (*JASTECH is an acronym for Juveniles Active in Science, Technology and Health*).

The purpose of my testimony today is two-fold: 1) **to share with this committee some of my organization's success with collaborative community partnerships that improved infrastructure and health at the neighborhood-level, and 2) to discuss our ideas on what's needed to promote an equitable and sustainable system for continued infrastructure and economic improvement - particularly in our most vulnerable communities.**

Since our organization's founding in 1997, the mission was clear - promote environment and climate Justice; use environmental resources as a means to improve public health; establish green career options; and sponsor programs that protect and conserve the built & natural environments where our constituents live, work, and play. In 2002, JASTECH applied for and received technical support from the EPA to help establish the Overbrook Environmental Education Center (Overbrook Center). The Overbrook Center is a neighborhood-based center committed to removing barriers to public access of information to advance the quality-of-life for residences living in this urban setting. Our work was guided by three primary areas of service: (1) environmental stewardship, (2) non-formal environmental education (for all ages), and (3) the removal of derogatory impacts on community health. We were also committed to serious collaborative partnerships with government, academia, non-profits, citizen scientist and others, to secure resources for the neighborhood and to promote environmentally friendly behaviors that reduce pollution and contamination of our local waterways, land, and air.

Our mission began to materialize through public outreach and education efforts in the Overbrook community – in 2002, we embedded in the local life-science class at Overbrook High School at 59th and Lancaster in West Philadelphia. Working with the school's principal Yvonne Jones, we created project-based learning opportunities for students to "learn-by-doing" and encouraged them to take inventory of their neighborhood's environmental systems. This helps students to visualize strategies for the future. We also engaged their parents in environmental safety and awareness sessions, on topics such as green stormwater infrastructure (GSI), lead safety awareness and combined sewer overflows (CSO). Overbrook High school is locally known for its famous alumni such as, **basketball great, Wilt Chamberlain; Actor Will Smith; and Astronaut Guion "Guy" Bluford.**

The Overbrook neighborhood has a population of roughly 43,172 people, and its geography is an important part of this commentary – Overbrook is located in an environmental justice neighborhood in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The City of Philadelphia with a population of 1.5 million people, produced the *Health of Philadelphia Neighborhoods 2019* report, and ranks the Overbrook area as 38 out of 46 in terms of negative health outcomes in neighborhoods. An estimated 45% of residents have been diagnosed with hypertension, 43% have adult obesity, and 18% have diabetes. Hypertension, obesity, and diabetes are diseases that can be managed and prevented through diet and exercise. Greater than normal incidence of disease and adverse health conditions are identified in this community. According to the University of Pennsylvania’s Center of Excellence in Environmental Toxicology, the **‘aging housing stock, deteriorating infrastructure, and brownfields** also pose ongoing environmental health hazards in West Philadelphia¹. The adverse health impacts facing Overbrook and other West Philadelphia neighborhoods include asthma, lead poisoning, and chemical exposure from former industrial sites. Asthma rates in Philadelphia are 2-3 times higher than other counties in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

In Overbrook, 14% of residents have asthma, a rate that is significantly higher than 11% for Philadelphia. Cancer incidence and death rates for Pennsylvania are greater than the national averages, and the rate of cancer incidence among West Philadelphia residents is 5.6%, slightly higher than Philadelphia’s average rate of 4.9%. Over 89% of homes in Overbrook were built before 1978, the lead risk exposure is in the mid-to-high lead levels². In this area data shows that **4.7 – 6.8% of all children’s blood lead levels (BLL)** was higher than the Center Disease Control (CDC) designated “reference level” of > 5 µg/dL (Milgram per deciliter). Many of our health challenges are exacerbated in Overbrook by poor access to fresh food produce, programming that promotes healthy nutrition and safe open green space for physical activity.

Even the EPA’s EJ Screen tool’s, **regional environmental indicators** in air quality (PM 2.5), Ozone, NATA Diesel PM, NATA Cancer Risk, NATA Respiratory HI, Traffic Proximity, Lead Paint Indicator, and Superfund Proximity are at or above 75 population percentiles for this community. Overbrook is a disproportionately impacted, low income, high poverty neighborhood. The median income of \$37,768 is lower than Philadelphia’s median income of \$43,744. The unemployment rate (before the COVID-19 situation) for Overbrook (16.5%) was over double that for Philadelphia (7.7%). We expect the rate of unemployment has been strained even more through the COVID-19 situation. It is worth highlighting that a significant portion (31%) of the households in Overbrook have limited digital access which makes it difficult to access resources or search for employment. Over 26% of Overbrook residents must commute over an hour to work because of the limited employment opportunities available locally. **All of these health indicators are threats to sensitive populations and are in many ways reflective of conditions in the region.**

¹<http://ceet.upenn.edu/target-communities/target-communities-west-philadelphia/>

²http://media.inquirer.com/storage/special_projects/Philadelphia_lead_risk_map.html

According to The Pew Charitable Trusts, “2021 State of the City” report, Philadelphia is one of the “poorest” largest cities in the U.S, with **23.3 percent of our residents living in poverty**, we’re only surpassed by Detroit, Michigan with 37.9% of its residents living in poverty.

Social-economic conditions were not always the communities’ problem...

Historically, Overbrook was a vibrant community. In the 1940’s, the Overbrook neighborhood in the West District of Philadelphia was a bustling industrial and residential community. Situated close to the Pennsylvania’s Railroad’s ‘Main Line’ trains, the neighborhood appealed to middle class families who wanted easy access to Center City Philadelphia, but did not want to live there. Lancaster Avenue, the commercial corridor running through the neighborhood, was part of the Lincoln Highway (Route #30) and is one of Philadelphia’s 165 state highways. This route was the first highway in the country and ran east to west from New York to San Francisco, passing through Philadelphia. The transportation options made Overbrook an ideal neighborhood for housing and commercial developments. Over time, the neighborhood became more racially diverse as African American families settled in West Philadelphia (963 acres total) during the Great Migration (1916 – 1970). Overbrook is a mixed-use zoned area where residential homes coexist with aging industrial infrastructure.

However, by the 1970’s things started to change as the economy took a downturn. Textile, metal manufacturing, and electronic production factories in Philadelphia started to shut down, taking with them much needed jobs. Unemployment and poverty increased. Those who were able, moved to the suburbs in search of new employment opportunities. African American residents were unable to do the same because of discriminatory housing and employment practices³. As factories shut down, stores closed, and buildings became desolate, the Overbrook neighborhood, like other neighborhoods in West Philadelphia, saw the rates of poverty and unemployment increase during this time. There is a 10-block stretch on Lancaster Avenue which has the largest sector of industrialized zoning (60%) in West Philadelphia. The neighborhoods have yet to recover from economic collapse. In the 1980’s, Lancaster Avenue was the commercial corridor address for retail shopping and a grocery store that was a hub for families in Overbrook and adjoining neighborhoods. The grocery store (an A&P supermarket) closed down in the 1980s and since then, there has not been another grocery store serving this community. The absence of grocery stores in the community has made this area a food desert where less than 5% of households are within a half mile from grocery stores. The Overbrook community is to this day battling to overcome the state of historic and systemic decay – due to bad policies and in some cases outright racism and injustice that set the stage for the decay of this community.

³<https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/african-american-migration/>

On top of these historic burdens, COVID-19 ravaged the city in other ways as well. According to The Pew foundation's – 2021 State of the City report, drug overdose deaths, already historically high, rose to record levels, with approximately 1,200 Philadelphians dying, up from 1,150 in 2019. Over 500 homicides were reported for the year, the most since 1990 and a 40% increase over the already high 2019 numbers. Experts attributed these trends, seen in varying degrees in other cities, at least in part to the social disruption and despair that 2020 brought: One factor appears clear, much of the violence the city reported was concentrated in neighborhoods with high rates of pandemic-related deaths and job losses. Unemployment more than tripled from 5.9% in February to 18% in June, averaging 12.2% for the year.

Our discussion today is about 5 points:

- Community-level Economics,
- Community Redevelopment,
- Environmental Justice
- Revitalization
- The Reuse of Contaminated Properties.

How did we make a difference

Our inspiration came from a student at Overbrook High School - *She asked, "Mr. Shabazz, why is there so much more trash and decay in my neighborhood?" – I answered, "we may have to become the solution that we seek - if you want to make a difference, we're here to help!"*- that was 16 years ago. With technical support from the EPA 15 years ago and a 2021 Brownfields Cleanup grant, the Overbrook Center is positioned to cleanup and repurpose 2 acres of brownfields on the Lancaster Avenue commercial corridor in West Philadelphia, three blocks from Overbrook High.

However, **the bigger point here is that - these properties are fence-lined and adjacent to 61 residential properties, where approximately 183 people had to coexist with this degradation, blight, and decay for over 50 years! Imagine the child who smelled, breathed, and witnessed this blight – how did these conditions shape their perspective on life and community? Think of the life cycle of a person, a young person who grew up with their whole sense of what's normal and acceptable as trash and noise-pollution, dust, and discarded waste in their back yard. This is a 'Fence-Line' community where only a fence divides neighbors from the hazard, and their worldview is one that co-exists with - not manages, pollution and waste.**

The two parcels that we're cleaning are located on the 6100 block of Lancaster Avenue. One parcel is a 1-acre property frontage that runs along Lancaster Avenue in a mixed-use area. The lot is rectangular and consists of a vacant building and fenced-in yard. A wooded area exists within the southwest fence line of the property, and there is a partially paved area within the lot. There were 3 buildings on the site: the largest was previously occupied by the A&P supermarket, and more recently, the Philadelphia Building Supply Company, which operated a building supply business providing items such as gravel, sand, stone, concrete, brick, and other building supplies.

Our environmental assessments for this parcel determined the presence of arsenic, lead, cadmium, chromium, copper, thallium, and vanadium associated with the building materials. Arsenic and lead were found in a storm gate, iron and lead in the heating oil tank area, and lead in the wooded area. Exposure to lead can cause anemia, neuropathy, chronic renal disease, reproductive impairment, and slow growth or development in children. Arsenic exposure can cause dermatitis, skin cancer, and lung cancer⁴. Evaluators have concluded that contaminants represent potential threats to human health related to the future use of this site.

The second parcel is commercial real estate in a mixed-use neighborhood. A vacant single-story garage exists on the property, and a large concrete slab. The lot was previously a filling station, motorcycle repair facility, auto repair shop and auto storage facility. The environmental assessment for this parcel concluded the presence of semi-volatile organic hydrocarbon-related compounds (SVOCs) in soil samples. We know that SVOC exposure can cause cancer and reproductive disorders, nervous system damage, and immune system disruption. Removal of contaminants is necessary to accommodate an urban farm and stormwater plan. Expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of the properties may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminants. These vacant buildings are an illustrative example of disinvestment in the community.

Gradual progress is not always cost prohibitive - For less than a \$500,000 investment, JASTECH has leveraged twice those resources to remove 30 tons of debris, installed a stormwater bioretention system that collects 70% of its stormwater on-site, installed an orchard and two high tunnel greenhouses.

The Overbrook section is seven blocks west of the Philadelphia Federal Opportunity Zone (PFOZ). Philadelphia has 82 of the 8,700 census tracts around the country designated as Opportunity Zones, and this cleanup project will support the city's Opportunity Zone goals to encourage dense mixed-use, mixed-income development, enhance the pedestrian environment on commercial corridors, and create a greater sense of place. The Overbrook Center's plan to establish an urban farm and fresh food market, will increase food access in West Philadelphia, and ultimately improve health outcomes for residents of Overbrook and the entire West Philadelphia district (including the West Philadelphia Opportunity Zone). The planned Farm, Center and Market will improve the pedestrian environment and nurture a positive sense of place for the community.

Today, our Overbrook Center is primed to expand its services to the community and support its mission even further through a radical remediation and redevelopment project using these neighboring brownfield sites. The US EPA defines a brownfield as a property, where the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1274229/>

potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant. It is estimated that there are more than 450,000 brownfields in the U.S. These longstanding brownfields in West Philadelphia, are just a small example of community redevelopment opportunity to clean-up and reinvest in properties that will increase local tax bases, facilitate job growth, utilize existing infrastructure, take development pressures off of undeveloped open land, and both improve and protect the environment, once remediated.

Our planned improvements will stimulate economic development in Overbrook, and the Opportunity Zone, through job creation and workforce development. Workers are needed to staff the urban farm, training center and fresh-food market. The approach to workforce development that will be employed, will focus on creating career pathways, recruiting, and hiring locally, providing training, and coaching to support professional growth for employees. Residents and businesses in and around the district will benefit from the economic growth and workforce development outcomes of this project. The opportunity zone will benefit from increased customer traffic and an increased tax base with rising employment.

The Overbrook Center has already leveraged existing resources and has secured a *Master Plan* for the site redevelopment. The first phase of the project called the “Overbrook Farmacy”, began this past summer with preliminary Blight Clean-up along Lancaster Avenue. This is an initiative supported by the Natures Conservancy and the PA Department of Community and Economic Development. These sites re-imagined by Viridian Landscape Studio, Meliora Design Engineers, SMP Architects and Cloud Gehshan Design, will be transformed into ecologically stable and healthy “Greenfields”.

The existing building, a former garage, on the second parcel will be remediated and reused as a workshop for storing farming materials, processing fresh produce, and conducting training and demonstrations for the community. To incorporate energy efficiency, the high tunnel-greenhouse in the urban farm will use a solar-powered generator for lighting and irrigation pumps. The entire 2-acre campus will be transformed into a green-space that: increases access to healthy food; nature-play; multigenerational climate and environmental education; workforce development and employment - all the while improving individual and environmental health outcomes for residents of this Overbrook community. Our Philly style “Green New Deal”, underscores how much sustainability can inform tangible solutions to issues plaguing this community and others like it across Philadelphia.

Collective Learning through Demonstration and Mitigation

These brownfields in Overbrook will also become a beacon of what Green Stormwater Infrastructure (GSI) best practices and intentional sustainable planning can achieve. The Overbrook Farmacy project will include the “Nature Works Building”, that will feature a green roof garden, creative training space, and will also be home to a “Climate Monitoring Lab” and “Science Shop” that will provide opportunities for involvement in community-based science.

Complimenting this, will be an “Underground Utility Infrastructure” interpretive exhibit that educate on the community’s water systems, the Delaware and Schuylkill River Watersheds, and stormwater inlets that show how litter and non-point source pollution (NPS) affects our waterways. This is to bring attention to infrastructure and utilities beneath our feet, that typically go unrecognized. The building will be encompassed by outdoor classrooms and green recreational spaces. Each component serves as an interactive approach to inform environmental issues, while offering solutions and restoring connections to nature. It's not all just aesthetics here, the physical site demonstrates what it’s like to have a living, functioning example of what climate mitigation and environmental justice looks like in your community. Particularly when it's influenced, by the people... for the people.

What’s in Store

This Overbrook Farmacy project will expand the Overbrook Center’s physical and organizational capacity to respond to community and climate needs in a variety of ways: Play + Learn + Grow. Our goal is to provide the necessary interventions that address the intersectional issues plaguing the Overbrook community and local environment, using this sustainability focused “Third Place”, as a model of sustainable community design. There are many moving parts to the project that will come together to address current community needs and the future impacts that climate change will have on Philadelphia, specifically in vulnerable communities like Overbrook.

The primary objective of this work is to eliminate contamination and exposure to environmental harm that this community is regularly exposed to. The second objective is to redesign this site to function with a healthy intersectional integrity that compliments Environment + Public Health + Community. An intentional and critical dynamic of our work purports that **“by repurposing how the former brownfield sites are being used, we are essentially, re-purposing the quality of people's lives.”** In a time where climate anxiety is at an all-time high, using sustainability to inform solutions to these community issues will prove to be not just promising but materially effective, an empowering development for residents of this community to bear witness to its success.

As part of this multi-acre site, at least 50% will remain open space. The ‘nature-play area’ will be a sensory rich green space built-up, in a restored woodland, with native plants, and a playground integrated into the landscape. It will also act as a ‘cooling center’ and provide splash grounds for residents to cool off in, during the summer’s increasingly brutal heat. The recreational aspect of our design pays serious attention to cultivating individual well-being, behavior, and community health. The Overbrook Center design supports recreation as re-creation, relaxation, and improved behavior health. This is especially beneficial for communities

like Overbrook. The International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health (2021) suggests that increased access to green spaces and recreation has the potential to reduce violent crimes and gun violence, two crises the city has been grappling with. This type of resilience hub has real potential to be adapted to create similar oasis across our city and country - community by community. The Overbrook Center understands that by providing a community with the resources and infrastructure it needs to empower itself, and improve its public health internally, it provides the social stability, and opportunity to effect corrosive intersectional issues for transforming itself.

Cultivating Community Health from the Inside Out

Our learning outcomes in this process, has demonstrated the need for multi-levels of community support. As we review our internal process in transforming the Overbrook Community from a community of “Brownfields” to “Greenfields”, we know that there was a tremendous amount of talent and support that enabled our work to succeed. We’ve learned that the concept of knowledge infrastructure touches on a significant point about the need for environmental knowledge and “**Community Capacity-Building Centers**”. One of the concepts that we are attempting to convey is the importance of creating new forms of knowledge infrastructure, defined as the networks of people (policy makers, researchers, industry representatives, community members, community leaders), who shape how decisions are made about environmental problems, so that these networks recognize and address power dynamics across different places and stakeholders. Especially in the case of regional or global environmental problems, it will be important to create knowledge infrastructures, that ensure that local communities don't lose interest or feel disconnected from the intersectional concerns related to Environment + Public Health + Community. Building knowledge infrastructures to delineate the values, relationships, and power dynamics among different actors that produce knowledge is essential.

One example that comes to mind in the context of brownfields redevelopment is the question of who has a say in how brownfields are redeveloped, and who benefits from their redevelopment. For instance, is the process of brownfield redevelopment based on a comprehensive neighborhood development plan that is community driven, versus a more site-by-site initiative led by developer interests (recognizing that there are many other types of scenarios in between these two as well). Non-profit and community-based organizations are also very challenged to participate in planning efforts, even when the planning effort is directly aligned with the mission and interests of their organization. Non-profit funding is often very limited, and often depends on grant funding tied to specific programmatic activities, and reporting metrics that may not anticipate the specific challenges related to planning efforts under

consideration. Non-profits are often expected to be the go-to organizations for community input across many local planning efforts, without being compensated for their expertise or time. In these cases, there needs to be an Equity Resource Partner, who can consider longer-term financial support over the life of the project, so non-profits can officially prioritize the effort among all the other demands on their staff time. Scope-based support will allow the non-profit to participate more deeply by taking the time to fully research the topics, build cross-sector relationships during the process, and conduct education and capacity building among their constituency.

The **Community Capacity-Building Center** concept has the ability to accommodate a range of structure mechanisms that provide equity supports, enabling community members and non-profits to engage in the planning and redevelopment process. Communities living near brownfields or industry centers, can suffer disproportionate environmental and health impacts from their geography, proximity to transportation, and related industrial operations. Disproportionate impacts on near-brownfields, or post-industrial communities are often the result of long-term policy and land use siting decisions across various levels of decision-making that placed some communities directly in harms-way. Without interventions or support, environmental impacts could be **negative** by adding to long-term cumulative burdens, or **positive** by providing benefits to the community that reduce or mitigate negative impacts and improve overall quality of life. Many vulnerable communities, despite being interested and motivated to engage with their area non-profits are often excluded and challenged to participate due to lack of resources and capacity to support their effective engagement.

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