

ISSUE BRIEF #6: THE FUTURE OF RIKERS SHOULD BE DETERMINED BY THE PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES HARMED BY ITS LEGACY

The bare minimum to start addressing Rikers Island's horrific legacy is to ensure, as the jails there are closed, that the island's future uses benefit and respond to the wishes of the people and communities that have been harmed through its long, painful history.

After hundreds of conversations with people who've been incarcerated on Rikers and had loved ones there, a consensus emerged: use the island for green infrastructure through the [Renewable Rikers Plan](#).¹ [The Rikers Public Memory Project](#) provides another vehicle to document and address the legacy of Rikers Island. Through this project, impacted people have shared a desire to see a marker or memorial at Rikers Island (which could co-exist easily with the Renewable Rikers Plan), but also want to see a much more active public reckoning with the history of Rikers Island, including mobile exhibits, school curricula, markers in highly visible places throughout New York City, and reparative investments in impacted communities.

By transferring Rikers Island from the control of the Department of Correction to the control of the Department of Environmental Protection for green infrastructure uses as outlined in three City Council bills currently under consideration (Intros 1591, 1592, and 1593), New York City has the opportunity to further solidify the end of the Rikers Island jail complex. Developing renewable energy and wastewater treatment infrastructure on Rikers Island will enable New York City to close noxious 'peaker plants' and aging wastewater treatment facilities that have [disproportionately burdened](#) communities of color. **Few things could make the end of the Rikers Island penal colony more definitive than actually transferring the land for a positive use.** It will likely take generations to repair the harm Rikers has done to Black, Brown, and poor New Yorkers, but we need to start somewhere, and we will not get another chance to use 400 acres for the benefit of communities that have borne the brunt of mass criminalization, environmental burdens, and disinvestment.

We have also heard impacted people emphasize over and over again that Rikers should not be redeveloped for affordable housing, mental health treatment centers, homeless shelters or 'services'. Rikers Island is and has been a site of torture and historical trauma. For more than 80 years, people the City doesn't want to deal with have been sent to that isolated and toxic island, and it's been a human rights disaster for 80 years. **People do not belong on Rikers.**

Though the Correction Officers union has stoked rumors of luxury development on Rikers [to undermine closure efforts](#),² there are a number of reasons that such development is impractical. The land that makes up Rikers Island is composed primarily of garbage. As it decomposes, the ground that buildings sit on shifts, causing cracks in the walls and ceilings of buildings, while also releasing [poisonous methane gas](#).³ There are also building height restrictions in place on Rikers Island because it is so close to LaGuardia Airport.⁴

The expansion of LaGuardia airport is another possible use that has been suggested for Rikers Island - but that plan would not address the legacy of the island nor create the benefits for impacted communities that Renewable Rikers would, and would not help to address (but would instead work against) critically important City and State goals for [reducing greenhouse gas emissions](#).



1 Includes Intros 1591, 1592, and 1593

2 Gartland, Michael. Rikers Island closure a "land grab" for developers: union head. NY Post. January 14,

3 Rakia, Raven. A sinking jail: The environmental disaster that is Rikers Island. Grist. March 15, 2016.

4 A More Just NYC. Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform. March 2017. p. 103