

Public Safety Training Facility – A Critical Need for our Region

Public Safety Training and Education Center

The first phase of a larger public safety training facility (police firearms range) has been developed and approved by the Albemarle County Planning Commission and funded by the Board of Supervisors. This plan develops a public safety training facility on a 169 acre parcel of land owned by Albemarle county near Keene Virginia. This parcel was previously utilized as a landfill. A firearms range is the first phase of the facility. Ultimately, the facility will be used to train our police, fire-rescue, jail and sheriff's departments on the critical skills they must maintain to keep our community safe. Future phases may include a burn building for firefighters, shared classroom spaces and space for advanced driver training. These investments will ensure our public safety employees have the correct level of training required to respond to critical incidents, lower the liability associated with high-risk incidents and help us to better protect our community.

Background

The Albemarle and Charlottesville police departments have been without a police firing range since the mid-1990's. If not for the generosity of the members of the Rivanna Rifle and Pistol Club (RRPC) over the last 17 years, both agencies would have been unable to meet the minimum firearms standards required of all police officers. The Albemarle County Police currently train with their firearms an average of only once a year and the majority of that training is just for re-qualification. The national average for police department firearms training is three times a year. Quite simply, the current level of training is not sufficient to keep our community and sworn officers safe.

Citizen Interaction and Input

As with any public project, a number of significant efforts were undertaken to insure that citizens who either owned property or lived near the proposed site understood the plan and had an opportunity to voice their concerns and offer suggestions.

In mid-January 2012, Chief Eggleston (the Albemarle County Fire Chief) and Col. Sellers sent a letter to each property owner within a ½ mile of the proposed range, providing a short overview of the County's plans for the landfill property. The following week, Col. Sellers, Chief Eggleston, Sheriff Harding, Sheriff Brown and law enforcement leaders from the City and the County personally made visits to neighboring homes to share more detailed information and gain input.

In an effort to be as transparent as possible and based upon the suggestion of a neighbor, the Albemarle County Police Department (ACPD) established a public website to allow the community to track the project. Since that time, ACPD has met with many neighbors, both collectively and individually throughout the summer and adjusted various design elements based upon feedback.

Col. Sellers also publically spoke about the new range and fielded questions during three town hall meetings in the southern part of Albemarle County in February and twice in March 2012. Supervisor Dumler and Supervisor Snow sponsored these town hall meetings. On April 4th, the plan went before the Planning Commission where residents had an opportunity to offer additional comment. Finally, senior ACPD officers spoke in community meetings in the southern part of the Albemarle County earlier the fall of 2012.

Concerns

Noise - Albemarle County is sensitive to the noise concerns and is working with the community to minimize noise through design, construction and operations. Based upon public input, noise levels will be further mitigated through the strategic scheduling of range operations. Training officials expect to use the range an average of 3 to 4 times a week during regular business hours and rarely on the weekends or holidays. Actual noise within a day will be intermittent as classroom training, safety briefings, gun cleaning and range cleanup occupies part of the day. Limited night shooting would be reserved for the late fall and winter months so that officers can be off the range by early evening.

Environmental – The County is taking a four-step approach to lead management and are following the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPAs) best practices for outside ranges. The four steps include; 1) careful design of earthen berms which best support reclamation and soil testing; 2) regularly scheduled soil testing, lead immobilization methods and carefully designed runoff controls; 3) professional lead removal and recycling; and 4) comprehensive record keeping and monitoring of the effectiveness of the program. Finally, the County is working with a professional environmental consultant to prepare an environmental stewardship plan for the facility's maintenance, operations and lead management.

Safety - Every precaution is being made during the design phase of this facility to ensure the utmost safety for the community. The range is designed to capture all bullets within designated impact areas. The berms are 45 to 50 feet wide and 20 feet high. Behind the berms, an existing hill exceeds the berm height. Berm eyebrows, will

be affixed near the top of the berms and provide the affect of additional height. The bullet impact areas contain no solid materials, which can cause ricochet.

Col. Seller's Comments - As Chief, one of my many responsibilities is to mitigate risk. In terms of local government liability, guns and driving rank near the top in terms of risk. An investment to ensure our public safety employees have the correct level of training will improve our readiness to respond to critical incidents, lower the liability associated with high-risk incidents and help us to better protect our community. I also have the responsibility to ensure that my men and women safely return home each day to their spouses, children and loved ones.

After my first year as Chief, I identified several priority issues requiring improvement and attention. The information gathered by my assessment was provided by our citizens (voiced in over 70 community meetings), by my officers, through my professional associations and knowledge of best practices in the field of law enforcement. Police training, especially as it relates to firearms use and critical decision making, was identified as a top priority. A police firearms range is one small step toward making your police department better prepared to handle deadly encounters and active shooter incidents such as were experienced at Virginia Tech, Aurora, Colorado and most recently, in Brookfield, Wisconsin. The City and County remain committed to working with the Keene community to ensure that this project is successful for all members of our community and the least impactful for the neighbors.