

Sheila McAllister

November 14, 2023

SUMMARY: Sheila McAllister was the Director of Planning for the City of Newport News at the time of this call. She answers questions about why Harbor Homes and Dickerson Court were demolished, and what those demolitions had to do with coal dust pollution. She describes the process of decisionmaking around changing the zoning for that area from residential to light industrial.

NOTE: The beginning of this interview cuts off McAllister's introduction of herself; her first name is Sheila.

[00:00:05] **Sheila McAllister:** McAllister, Director of Planning for City of Newport News.

[00:00:11] **Aaron Reaven:** Awesome. Thank you, Ms. McAllister. Um, so, um, with the zoning change that happened between 2018 and 2020, um, I just have, um, I just have one more question about that, which is, um, and I mean, what you said was that the public housing that was there was demolished due to the proximity to the coal terminal?

[00:00:40] **Sheila McAllister:** Now say that again, someone walked in my office.

[00:00:42] **Adrian:** Oh, that's okay. Um, I was just saying that, um, or, you know, could you, um, could you just, uh, like really quickly summarize what, um, what we just said or, um, that why, why was that public housing demolished on that side of Jefferson Avenue?

[00:01:01] **Sheila McAllister:** Well, it was old. It was old. It was, um, it could not be rebuilt. And because of the proximity to, I'm not gonna say the proximity to the coal yard, but people did not like being that close to the coal yard. And we didn't like people being that close to the coal yard and we didn't like that people being, being that close to the interstate. And because of that and because it was, that it had basically lived its useful life, it was an opportunity, to remove it.

[00:01:35] **Adrian:** Right. Okay. Um, and I just have kind of one particular question about how the coal dust was affecting um, was it-

[00:01:45] **Sheila McAllister:** I can't tell you how the coal dust was affecting people 'cause I really don't know.

[00:01:50] **Adrian:** Okay,

[00:01:50] **Sheila McAllister:** I just, I just know that, you know, when you look at that, the housing that was there, you also have to take into consideration that the housing was in a condition that it needed to be removed. And may it also may have had an impact on whatever, you know, health concerns, um, was going on too.

[00:02:15] You know, you have the old housing, you have, I mean, it didn't have central air, central -I, I don't know about heat, but I know it didn't have central air. You have, um, so people are gonna have their windows up and you have the, um, interstate and you get a lot of particles and things coming off the interstate, coming off breaks and all of that stuff. And then you have the industrial across the interstate.

[00:02:42] **Adrian:** Right. That all makes a lot of sense. Um, I was just trying to get a sense if there's any kind of documentation around, um, whether it was more of a air quality concern or like soil quality.

[00:02:57] **Sheila McAllister:** What, concern about what?

[00:02:59] **Adrian:** Um, about, about how all of the, um, uh, about like, like the specific measures around, um, what the contamination, um, was affecting. Like if it was mostly affecting air quality or soil quality?

[00:03:20] **Sheila McAllister:** Yeah, I'm not environment, I'm not an environmental scientist, so I really can't answer that question.

[00:03:27] I think that's, that may be something for the Health Department maybe.

[00:03:32] **Adrian:** Okay, thanks. Um, yeah, I was just wondering if you were aware of any, like, documentation that occurred as part of that, like, you know, the legal process of, um, changing the zoning there. Um,

[00:03:46] **Sheila McAllister:** Well, the legal process of changing the zoning was really a city that was basically the city of Newport News based on the fact that, um, there was a, a use that wanted to go there.

[00:04:04] **Adrian:** Oh, there was a, um, there, there was like, um, something that wanted to be cited there that needed different zonings.

[00:04:13] **Sheila McAllister:** Mm-hmm. Right.

[00:04:15] **Adrian:** I see. Okay. Um, and I, um, I've been, I've just been doing some interviews, um, with different folks, um, in the community, um, to try to understand the cold dust better. So, um, something that I've heard was that the zoning change had, uh, come from Housing and Urban Development. Is that true?

[00:04:39] **Sheila McAllister:** No, it is not true. The zoning change came from the city of Newport News. City Council approved the zoning change.

[00:04:47] **Adrian:** Oh, okay. Okay. Um, and, and so that was between 2018 and 2020?

[00:04:55] **Sheila McAllister:** Mm-hmm. Yep.

[00:04:57] **Adrian:** Um. [00:05:00] Great. Um, do you think that's something that I could search on, uh, the city's website for like, um, like meeting minutes where that was approved?

[00:05:11] **Sheila McAllister:** Yeah. City Council's website is probably all out there.

[00:05:15] **Adrian:** Okay. When it was approved, you don't, um, happen to, like, you don't happen to have like a more specific sense of like, what time of year that might have gone through City Council.

[00:05:30] **Sheila McAllister:** I mean, we have the files here. I, but they're not here in my office.

[00:05:35] **Adrian:** Oh, okay.

[00:05:37] **Sheila McAllister:** Um, but I know it was between 2018- it, I know it, it's probably, it was either 2019- probably 2019, somewhere in that area. Um.

[00:05:55] Uh, yeah, I'd have to look that up. And I don't have that in front of me right now.

[00:05:59] **Adrian:** Okay. Um, okay. Well if it, uh, if you look it up and you find out, um, I would, uh, I would really, you know, that would be super helpful to me. Um, I, um, and so the demolitions happened before the zoning change?

[00:06:20] **Sheila McAllister:** Yes.

[00:06:21] **Adrian:** Okay. When did those homes get demolished?

[00:06:30] **Sheila McAllister:** That was probably back in 2010? 8, 9, 10, 11 probably.

[00:06:41] **Adrian:** Okay.

[00:06:43] **Sheila McAllister:** Maybe 11 and 12, but that was back. That's been a while.

[00:06:50] **Adrian:** Okay. Got it.

[00:06:55] Um, okay, well, um...

[00:07:01] **Sheila McAllister:** You wanna know exactly when they were demolished, you need to call the Housing Authority.

[00:07:05] **Adrian:** The Housing Authority, okay.

[00:07:07] **Sheila McAllister:** Mm-hmm.

[00:07:09] **Adrian:** Okay.

[00:07:14] Um.

[00:07:19] Great. Okay. Well thank you so much. Um,

[00:07:22] **Sheila McAllister:** And so exactly what is this?

[00:07:24] Yeah of course,

[00:07:25] Who are you working with?

[00:07:26] **Adrian:** Of course. Um, so my project is, um, with the Repair Lab out of the University of Virginia.

[00:07:34] **Sheila McAllister:** Mm-hmm. .

[00:07:36] **Adrian:** And, um, I'm working in support of some local practitioners and residents who are interested in, um, making information about the coal dust more accessible to community members.

[00:07:49] **Sheila McAllister:** Uh huh.

[00:07:49] **Adrian:** Um, so I'm creating a podcast, like a audio documentary about the issue in both Newport News and Norfolk.

[00:07:59] **Sheila McAllister:** Hmm. Okay.

[00:08:00] **Adrian:** Um, yeah. And so the whole thing, um, will be out and published, um, in spring of next year.

[00:08:07] **Sheila McAllister:** Uhhuh.

[00:08:10] Well, okay. Well, please make sure you call the right people and get the facts and not just listen to what people may be telling you in the community.

[00:08:22] **Adrian:** Okay. Got it.

[00:08:23] **Sheila McAllister:** Okay.

[00:08:24] **Adrian:** Yeah. Um, yeah, that's actually what I'm trying to do with, with you on the phone right now. So thanks for, um, helping me understand.

[00:08:33] **Sheila McAllister:** Okay. Alright.

[00:08:35] **Adrian:** Um, alright. Great. Um, oh, um, just one more question actually before we go.

[00:08:42] **Sheila McAllister:** Uhhuh.

[00:08:43] **Adrian:** Um, so there are, um, am I correct in understanding there's also brownfields in that area?

[00:08:56] **Sheila McAllister:** Uh, what brownfields? In what area? In the area west of Jefferson Avenue?

[00:09:02] **Adrian:** Yes, ma'am.

[00:09:05] **Sheila McAllister:** Well, it used to be housing. I don't think there's brownfields there because people lived there.

[00:09:14] **Adrian:** Okay.

[00:09:15] **Sheila McAllister:** At some point, you know, I mean, I don't know, but I would think that if you have housing there that you would've had to house in.

[00:09:26] So what did the community say used to be there?

[00:09:29] **Adrian:** Oh, housing, housing.

[00:09:30] **Sheila McAllister:** To make it a brownfield. What was before the housing?

[00:09:35] **Adrian:** I don't know. Uh, I don't know what was before the housing. Um.

[00:09:44] **Sheila McAllister:** I don't think it was a brownfield site.

[00:09:46] **Adrian:** Okay.

[00:09:47] **Sheila McAllister:** Not, you know, based on the definition of brownfields.

[00:09:50] **Adrian:** Okay.

[00:09:53] **Sheila McAllister:** It was a redevelopment, it's a redevelopment site.

[00:09:59] **Adrian:** [00:10:00] Right. Yeah. That's, um, that's different. Yeah. Um.

[00:10:13] Okay. Yeah, I just, um, I had heard that, um, that area where the maritime training, um, the Virginia Peninsula Community College Maritime Training facility is going, um.

[00:10:28] **Sheila McAllister:** Uh-huh.

[00:10:29] **Adrian:** Was like adjacent to, or really nearby, um, an area that had been designated as a brownfield.

[00:10:41] **Sheila McAllister:** I am not aware of that.

[00:10:43] **Adrian:** Okay. Do you know who I could ask to get more information on that?

[00:10:48] **Sheila McAllister:** Uh, you could probably talk to someone in Development.

[00:10:51] **Adrian:** Okay.

[00:10:51] **Sheila McAllister:** Development or the Housing Authority. The property was owned by the Housing Authority and it was just, uh, recently transferred to Economic Development Authority, but either agency should be able to answer that question.

[00:11:07] **Adrian:** Okay. The Housing Authority.

[00:11:10] **Sheila McAllister:** Mm-hmm.

[00:11:11] **Adrian:** Okay. Okay. Well that makes sense.

[00:11:15] **Sheila McAllister:** Alright.

[00:11:16] **Adrian:** Alright, well that's my last question. Um, thank you so much. I really appreciate your time.

[00:11:21] **Sheila McAllister:** Okay, no problem.

[00:11:22] **Adrian:** Okay. Thank you. Bye.

[00:11:23] **Sheila McAllister:** Mm-hmm. Bye-bye.