

For Immediate Release
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Groundbreaking Report Provides Specific Recommendations for the Former Workhouse Jail and Land

St. Louis, Mo. – Six years after the launch of the Close the Workhouse campaign, a grassroots movement to shutter a hellish St. Louis jail, a report has reached the Mayor’s desk with recommendations for the building and the surrounding 30 acres. The report compiles findings made by the City’s Re-envisioning the Workhouse Committee, a participatory initiative endorsed and funded by the City for the purpose of learning from St. Louis residents about desired and appropriate uses for the space. The 18-month re-envisioning process was supported by a consulting team hired by the City of St. Louis and made up of Colloqate, BlackArc, Public Design Bureau, and Whitney Benns and Sam Strauss.

A copy of the report is available [here](#).

Following the campaign’s sustained advocacy, Mayor Tishaura Jones emptied the jail within her first months in office, and the facility has remained empty since June 2022. In 2023, the Re-envisioning the Workhouse Committee reached nearly 2,500 St. Louis residents through door-to-door canvassing, paper and online surveys, community meetings, and texts and phone calls. The website, *aftertheworkhouse.com* has provided updates throughout the process. In an attempt to begin acknowledging the significant harm the Workhouse has caused generations of poor and Black St. Louis residents, the process prioritized hearing from those most directly impacted by the Workhouse and neighborhoods in the surrounding area.

The report states that the City of St. Louis will use this feedback, visioning, and documentation as recommendations to inform future decisions about how to move forward with the site, and provides both on-site and off-site proposals. While many community members called for supportive services like affordable housing, youth recreation, community centers with education and childcare, shelters, and job and business training support, the Re-envisioning the Workhouse Committee had to reconcile these desires with feasibility considerations for the unique site in an industrial location along Hall Street in the North Riverfront neighborhood.

“Re-envisioning the Workhouse was and is always supposed to be for our communities,” said Diedre Wortham, a member of the Committee and Close the Workhouse campaign. “All we need is a chance. Will you give us this?”

The Committee ultimately calls for a **small memorial at the Workhouse** to honor those who suffered or died and the communities that have been harmed by the jail, and recommends four uses for the site, potentially in combination with each other: **(1) Animal Shelter, (2) Solar Energy, (3) Prairie Site, and/or (4) Industrial Use.** As the report explains, there is no single use that satisfies all priorities that were identified through the engagement process, but these options speak to a wide range of identified needs, including jobs, green energy transition, and community healing.

The report also proposes that the process of transitioning to these uses begin with a participatory demolition, noting that this can be “a moment of emotional significance in which physical participation will allow reflection, celebration, and healing.” This demolition would focus especially on the guard towers, bars, visitation booths, and other elements of the structure designed purely for carceral purposes.

“The Workhouse is a living breathing monument to racism and white supremacy right here in St Louis and until it is torn down and reparations are made, there will be no healing or closure for the thousands of survivors of the Workhouse,” said Inez Bordeaux, Deputy Director of Community Collaborations at ArchCity Defenders and a member of the Re-envisioning Committee.

In addition to revealing recommended uses for the Workhouse site, the report also explains in detail some uses for the site that the steering committee firmly opposes. Noting the environmental toxicity, physical isolation, and emotional trauma associated with the site, the report concludes that this is not a suitable location to temporarily house unhoused persons.

As one community member commented, “The city has been hiding away its ‘undesirable’ people on this site for years. If our homeless were moved here, the city would be continuing to sweep its problems under the rug, away from public view, and throwing away people on this unwanted site.” The report leaves a small carve-out for unhoused owners of pets, observing that there are no shelters or temporary housing for such individuals currently. But it otherwise emphasizes that sheltering people on the site would be disrespectful and ineffective, despite the significant community need for transitional and affordable permanent housing.

Finally, the report includes an off-site proposal for a Memorial Resource Hub. The steering committee identifies this as a crucial need because of the limitations of the Workhouse site and its unsuitability for much-needed human services. Key elements of the Memorial Resource Hub include a resource center, a health clinic that includes rehabilitation and mental health, youth programs, job support, and spaces for rest and healing. The steering committee also recommends that this hub should include transitional housing.

“This was a meaningful process to get to this point of having a Memorial Resource Hub. It would be dedicated to the people who have lost their lives, their sanity, and their way due to the destruction and abuse the Workhouse caused. Not having a need met is what got some of us there in the first place. So, we would light up the dark by re-envisioning a sanctuary of services,”

said Jocelyn Garner, a member of the Re-envision the Workhouse Committee and Close the Workhouse campaign. “The Workhouse has taken so much so unjustly, I’m thinking, maybe it could give something back that would help heal our communities and our city.”

The release of the Re-envisioning the Workhouse report is a culminating moment after more than six years of organizing and advocacy by the Close the Workhouse campaign, which from its inception called for the closing and defunding of the Workhouse, reinvestment of Workhouse funding to meet non-carceral community needs, and a participatory process to determine what would replace the jail. The jail has now been empty for nearly two years, with a commitment to permanent closure by Mayor Jones. This report, spearheaded by directly impacted stakeholders, offers a roadmap for how to achieve the vision of community healing and reinvestment.

Following this release, the Close the Workhouse campaign is now announcing that it will focus its organizing efforts on three central demands moving forward:

1. Adopt the recommendations in the Reenvisioning the Workhouse report
2. Fund the Memorial Resource Hub
3. Reparations for Workhouse survivors

The campaign will soon announce further efforts to amplify these demands and encourages all St. Louisans to join this effort. The Close the Workhouse campaign is online at www.closestheworkhouse.org, on social media, and uses #closestheworkhouse.

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