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HACLA Commissioners Prioritize Health, Delay Demolition of Jordan Downs Buildings after Advocates Warn of Contamination

Los Angeles, April 28, 2016 — The Board of Commissioners for the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA) voted 5-1 Thursday to postpone demolition of four buildings at the Jordan Downs public housing community, prioritizing resident health over project schedules by ensuring the demolition process protects residents. There is evidence that the soil surrounding these four buildings contains elevated levels of lead, arsenic and other contaminants and that demolition could pose serious health risks to residents if these elements are not remediated. The Board heeded the call of advocates and residents with the Better Watts Initiative (BWI) to hold public comment so that the community could voice their concerns about contamination in and around their homes.

This initial demolition of public housing units would be the first in a massive redevelopment effort at Jordan Downs. The Better Watts Initiative believes residents deserve modern, safe, and healthy homes, but they also deserve to be fully informed about and protected from toxic exposure throughout the redevelopment process. The buildings proposed for demolition are located in an area that has been found to have elevated levels of lead and arsenic above the California Human Health Screening Levels (CHHSL). This was discovered when the Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) ordered HACLA to conduct limited “step out” testing in the community, and has been verified by advocates conducting their own independent soil testing. Using X-ray Fluorescence (XRF) technology, BWI analyzed over 250 sample areas in Watts, including 42 in the proposed demolition site at Jordan Downs. 23 of those samples indicated elevated levels of lead ranging between 81.89ppm to 293.76ppm. The CHHSL for lead is 80ppm. Two thirds of the 23 samples with elevated lead readings ranged between 105.25ppm to 293.76ppm. Lead is a toxic heavy metal and a dangerous neurotoxin.

To the disappointment of advocates and residents, in 2014 DTSC decided to ignore its original findings and issued a No-Further-Action (NFA) determination. Recently, it was revealed that the DTSC Senior Toxicologist who signed the NFA determination was the key figure implicated in a “racist emails” scandal within the Department, and that his conclusions may not be reliable in low-income communities of color. Through the advocacy of the Better Watts Initiative, DTSC has agreed to review the NFA determination.

On Thursday, after hearing testimony from the advocates, the HACLA Board of Commissioners chose to prioritize the health, safety, and well-being of the residents they serve by delaying the demolition proposal for 30 days, which will allow DTSC to complete its review of the NFA determination. Advocates and residents applaud this common-sense decision and plan to continue their demands for resident protection and agency accountability throughout the redevelopment process.

The Better Watts Initiative is a collaborative for environmental justice in Watts and works to: end the harm caused by the lack of local and state accountability; honor the needs of Watts residents by promoting affordable housing, job growth, clean and green spaces and community health assets and; inform people with information, analysis and resources of how the environment affects their health and well-being.

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