



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

December 24, 2025

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of War
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Hegseth,

I write to you with grave concerns regarding a proposed development abutting Naval Weapons Station (NWS) Earle, which violates the current land use agreement with the Township of Colts Neck and presents a national security threat, and I request your immediate consideration to provide clarity on the necessity of set-backs to ensure safety, to articulate the value of this installation, and defend the need for a thoroughly vetted and adhered to land use compact to halt encroachment on the Navy's mission.

The properties which are to be developed fall within the 2-mile zone and the 3000-foot perimeter outlined in the 2017 Joint Land Use Study developed in partnership between NWS, Monmouth County, and local communities to protect the installation's mission from encroachment, incompatible development, and most importantly, to mitigate risk to best protect all those who live and work at Earle and to protect local populations while the Navy fulfills its critical mission.

Any encroachment on the 3000-foot perimeter creates serious vulnerabilities. It is a reckless invitation to those wishing to harm our defense capabilities and our national security.

As you are aware, Colts Neck Township hosts the majority of NWS Earle in New Jersey's 4th Congressional District, which I represent. Over the years, the community-military cooperation and support has been outstanding.

The Navy Munitions Command (NAVMC) Detachment at NWS Earle is the primary ordnance provider for the Atlantic Fleet, handling the storage, maintenance, and delivery of munitions of all types to the Navy, including the Atlantic Submarine Fleet. This is a critical Naval facility whose mission cannot be done in any other location due to the significant storage and infrastructure requirements and proximity of Earle to deep water in the Atlantic Ocean.

At present, developers are seeking to force the town to rezone properties in close proximity to NWS Earle where munitions are stored and maintained, and near the rail line which transports the munitions to the fleet. The compulsory rezoning would call for high density housing at a height which gives line-of-sight from private property to the munition storage bays and the rail sidings where the munitions are loaded.

Regrettably, this is not the first time that the safety and national security priorities at Earle have been jeopardized by those wishing to make money on housing at the base or within the critically established safety perimeter.

Twice, I have led the fight to prioritize and elevate the critical national security missions at Earle over other interests. Each time we won—in 2010 against the public expansion of the Laurelwood units on the base and in 2017 against privatization of other units. In both instances, those dangerous encroachment proposals were rejected when we demonstrated how vulnerable our military facilities are when we do not carefully and diligently abide by the protective buffers set in place.

I have included two letters with this correspondence that NWS Earle has provided to local parties in compliance with its duties under the Joint Land Use Study to assess potential risks to public health and safety, which outline the installations objection to encroachment.

The high-density housing proposed is fundamentally incompatible NWS Earle's munitions mission. The land is currently zoned for agricultural usage and single-family residential development, as this is deemed more compatible with the mission charged to Earle.

I note, NWS Earle was established after the fire of the SS *El Estero*, a munitions ship which caught fire at its dock at Caven Point Pier during WWII.¹ Had the ship not been successfully towed from the pier and sunk, 5000 tons of ammunition would have leveled a portion of Bayonne and the New York waterfront. Immediately after this incident, NWS Earle's predecessor was established in Monmouth County, chosen for its proximity to fleet operations and the area's comparatively lower density of development.

Mr. Secretary, in your ongoing efforts to properly orient the Department of War to its mission of protecting and defending America, I respectfully request the Navy to forthrightly defend the current land use agreement with Monmouth County and maintain a posture to readily assist the Township of Colts Neck to defend the 3000-foot exclusionary zone in any instances of proposed development that do not comport with NWS Earle's current and future mission.

I respectfully request to meet with you and any other officials you designate as quickly as possible to address and resolve this critical threat to service personnel and mission at NWS Earle.

Sincerely,



CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH
Member of Congress

CC: Vice Admiral Scott Gray, Commander, Navy Installations Command

¹ <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2016/october/coast-guards-world-war-ii-crucible>