

## **2006 JUDICIAL DECISION**

In 2006, a decision from the Superior Court of New Jersey quietly affirmed what many already suspected about a stretch of land along Keyport's waterfront: *the Aeromarine property was deeply troubled, environmentally compromised, and in need of intervention.*

At the time, the ruling was framed as a practical step forward, giving the borough the authority to guide redevelopment and, ideally, transform a long-neglected site into something productive again.

Two decades later, that same property returned to public attention under far more urgent circumstances. What was once a legal and planning issue evolved into something more personal and unsettling for residents—a growing concern that the site's past may still be shaping the present.

To understand how things reached this point, it helps to step back. The Aeromarine site was never just a landfill. In the early 20th century, it was part of Keyport's industrial and maritime identity, tied to aviation manufacturing and waterfront activity. Over time, as industrial uses declined, the land took on a different role. By the 1960s, it had become a landfill operating without the environmental controls standard today. Waste had accumulated over the years, and when the site was finally shut down in 1979, it was already clear that closure would not be the end of the story.

The 2006 court decision reflected that reality. The judge pointed to extensive evidence of deterioration—contamination risks, abandoned structures, and conditions considered harmful to the surrounding community. The designation of the area as “in need of redevelopment” gave the borough broad powers to reshape its future. Implicit in that decision was an understanding that the site's problems were serious, longstanding, and unlikely to be resolved without coordinated action.

What followed, however, was not a straightforward path to cleanup. Over the years, environmental concerns persisted. Inspections dating back decades identified violations, while later reports described deficiencies in the landfill's condition and the movement of contaminants into nearby soil and waterways. Planning documents repeatedly acknowledged the site's limitations, whether by restricting development density, calling for remediation, or exploring alternative uses such as solar energy, as full cleanup appeared financially daunting.

For a long time, these issues remained largely in the background—part of the town's ongoing planning challenges, but not always at the center of public attention. That changed in 2026.

This spring, reports of a possible cancer cluster near the site brought a new level of urgency. Residents began raising concerns about the number of diagnoses in a relatively small area, particularly near First Street. While no official link has been established, the reports have prompted health investigations and drawn the attention of state and federal officials. At the same time, other developments—unpaid environmental penalties approaching \$900,000 and prior findings of hazardous materials along the shoreline—have added to a sense that long-standing problems may not have been fully addressed.

The conversation in Keyport has shifted as a result. What once centered on zoning, redevelopment plans, and economic feasibility now revolves around accountability and public health. Residents

are asking not just what the site could become, but also what it has already been—and whether earlier warnings should have prompted stronger action.

Seen in this light, the 2006 ruling takes on a different weight. It did not create the problem, but it formally recognized its seriousness. It affirmed that the Aeromarine property was not simply underutilized land, but a site with conditions significant enough to justify extraordinary measures. The expectation, at least in principle, was that those measures would lead to meaningful change.

Today, that expectation remains unresolved. Cleanup, redevelopment, enforcement, and investigation are all still in motion, with no single outcome yet defined. What is clear is that the Aeromarine site has become more than a planning issue. It is now a focal point for questions about environmental legacy, institutional responsibility, and how communities reckon with the long-term consequences of past land use.

Whether this moment leads to lasting resolution—or becomes another chapter in a longer history—will depend on what happens next.