

# Locals object to \$396m monkey breeding centre on their doorstep

Residents fear river pollution at the 200-acre facility planned in a quiet community in Georgia for up to 30,000 macaques — double the human population

new

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The plan to build a research facility in Bainbridge has been met by fierce opposition from residents who are concerned about the waste the site will produce

Residents of a small city in the US state of Georgia have launched a legal battle to halt construction of a sprawling monkey breeding facility that would house up to 30,000 macaques for animal testing.

Last year the company, Safer Human Medicine, received approval from city council leaders to build the 200-acre research facility in Bainbridge — where the population of 14,000 is less than half that of the monkeys set to be housed there. The \$396 million project is billed as a solution to the shortage of long-tailed macaques needed in medical research, as well as a boost for the local economy.

But the plan has been met by fierce opposition from residents of the quiet community concerned about the waste the facility will produce — and the possibility of disease-carrying primate escapees.

**STOP  
MONKEY  
FARM!!**



Locals are challenging the farm in court

STAND UP BAINBRIDGE GA! A CALL TO ACTION

Local farmers and ranchers have joined efforts with the animal rights group Peta to challenge the farm in court. They warn that at full capacity, the facility will produce 440,000 gallons of waste every day, or “enough monkey saliva, faeces, urine and blood to fill an Olympic-size pool”.

The future of the facility is being considered by the Georgia court of appeals, which will decide whether to overturn the validation for a bond that the city council of Bainbridge, in Decatur County, promised to Safer Human Medicine. The court heard arguments last week from Safer Human Medicine and Decatur County’s district attorney.

Lisa DaSilva, a resident of Bainbridge, said she was concerned about the smell, noise and risk of pollution of the Flint River, which runs through the town and is a key part of the city’s growing economy. “They’re threatening our environment, our personal health, the welfare of our animals, our precious river, which is our crown jewel,” DaSilva said. “It brings tourism and we’re terrified they’re going to pollute it.”

DaSilva is one of four plaintiffs suing Bainbridge and Decatur County officials in a separate case. Their lawsuit alleges the Decatur County Board of Commissioners gave Safer Human Medicine multimillion-dollar tax breaks in a “sweetheart deal” to build the breeding centre.



Most residents are concerned about pollution of the Flint River

They claim that local officials and Safer Human Medicine plotted to keep the deal out of the spotlight before secretly approving it in December while residents were busy with Christmas. The Decatur County Board of Commissioners has acknowledged that it did not properly inform residents about meetings that were supposed to be held publicly.

DaSilva said: “This whole thing was shrouded in secrecy. They knew the residents would be up in arms about it. After we found out, very quickly, the public rallied and started filling all these government meetings. They would be standing room only.”

A spokesman for Safer Human Medicine told The Times that the company had followed “all appropriate laws regarding our engagement with local officials,” and that the “facts of this project still stand, and our decision to move forward stands with them”.

If the appeals court allows Safer Human Medicine to carry on with the project, the Bainbridge facility would become the largest monkey breeding farm in the United States. At present, the largest breeding centre, located in Texas, cages up to 11,000.



Land cleared for the proposed facility

PETA

Amy Meyer, manager of primate experimentation campaigns at Peta, said: “This monkey facility that Safer Human Medicine is planning to bring to Bainbridge is truly unprecedented in this country. The [breeding] places that already exist have not been able to properly deal with their wastewater. If you’re focusing on the ecosystem side of things, it really is terrifying what will happen when you’re building a facility that’s even more massive.”

Lawyers for Safer Human Medicine have argued that monkey research is critical to developing life-saving human medications, such as the HIV and Covid vaccines.

Safer Human Medicine said in an open letter to residents: “Primates have been used to support research that has led to the development of therapies for diseases such as cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and many others. We all depend on these critical primates to save the lives of our loved ones and ourselves.”

DaSilva, who has attended several town hall meetings with Safer Human Medicine executives and residents, said she believed the company was unprepared to deal with the facility’s impact on the local ecosystem. Safer Human Medicine’s links to Envigo, a laboratory animal sourcer, have exacerbated those concerns.

Jim Harkness, chief executive of Safer Human Medicine, previously served as Envigo’s chief operating officer. This month, the Department of Justice announced Envigo would pay \$35 million in fines after pleading guilty to violations of the Animal Welfare Act and the Clean Water Act. The pleas were related to mistreatment and neglect of thousands of beagles bred for laboratory testing in Virginia.

Meyer said: “This was because they were not properly maintaining the wastewater treatment plant. And it led to large amounts of insufficiently treated wastewater pouring into a local waterway there. Harkness couldn’t ensure the [proper care of about 5,000 beagles](#) on any given day or adequately contain the beagles.”

When asked about Harkness’s tenure at Envigo, the Safer Human Medicine spokesman said: “It is important to recognise that Envigo was operating during

unprecedented circumstances brought on by the pandemic.” Harkness was not indicted directly in the Department of Justice prosecution.

Safer Human Medicine has maintained that the waste will not create an “environmental hazard or risk”, and that the water will be sent to a municipal treatment facility before it is released to the Flint River. But locals are not convinced. DaSilva said: “I have no confidence at all that they’re going to do the right thing here.”

Residents also worry that the primates could escape and spread diseases across local farms. Safer Human Medicine has said that it will source the monkeys from unspecified purpose-bred colonies in Asia, adding that the “risk of these animals carrying any disease is extremely low given the continuous screening practices”.

The US Centers for Disease Control lists herpes B and tuberculosis among the possible viruses that can be transferred between monkeys and humans.

DaSilva said: “We’re a community of agriculture and ranchers. We have cows and we’re farmers. I’ve actually heard a farmer say, ‘It must be a cold day in hell. I’m siding with Peta.’”

After the widespread opposition, local officials have backtracked on their support of the company. Decatur County commissioners rescinded their vote approving tax



incentives for Safer Human Medicine, and the company has since filed a lawsuit against the commissioners.

The city council said in a statement to residents: “After hearing from you, we realise that the economic benefits of this project are not worth the divisiveness the project has caused within our community.”

DaSilva moved back to Bainbridge in 2020 to care for her ailing mother. She and her husband sold their home in Tampa Bay, Florida, and invested the profits in repairing her mother’s timber farm. Soon afterwards, their son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren also chose the quiet stream of the Flint River and the town’s serene sunsets.

DaSilva said: “I always told my family, ‘Tattoo the co-ordinates of Grammy’s house on your body somewhere. And if the world goes to hell in a handbasket, find your way to Grammy’s. We can all sustain life here.’” Of potentially having the massive monkey farm in her town’s backyard, she added: “This is not what we signed up for.”

The Georgia court of appeals is expected to make a ruling in the coming months.

Whatever the decision is, locals do not expect Safer Human Medicine to leave town without a fight.