

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

September 12, 2024

President Joe Biden
Office of the President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Vice President Kamala Harris
Office of the Vice President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Mr. Jeff Zients
Chief of Staff
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave
Washington, DC 20500

Mr. Bruce Reed
Deputy Chief of Staff
The White House
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Washington, DC 20500

Ms. Natalie Quillian
Deputy Chief of Staff
The White House
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Ms. Annie Tomasini
Deputy Chief of Staff
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave
Washington, DC 20500

Ms. Lorraine Voles
Chief of Staff
Office of the Vice President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave
Washington, DC 20500

Mr. Tom Perez
Director
Office of Intergovernmental Affairs
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden, Vice President Harris, Mr. Zients, Mr. Reed, Ms. Quillian, Ms. Tomasini, Ms. Voles, and Mr. Perez:

The House Committee on Natural Resources (Committee) continues to investigate¹ the Biden-Harris administration's decision to house migrants on National Park Service (NPS) land at Floyd Bennett Field (FBF), a portion of Gateway National Recreation Area.² As you are aware, Vice President Harris was appointed by President Biden as the "White House's point person on immigration issues" in March of 2021.³ Over the past year, the Committee has conducted a lengthy investigation on administration's decision to lease FBF as a migrant camp, a decision

¹ For example, the Committee has sent numerous letters with requests for documents and information to the U.S. Department of the Interior, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and the White House, hosted information briefings, coordinated a site visit to FBF, conducted three transcribed interviews, and issued a subpoena during the course of our investigation.

² See National Park Service, *Lease Between U.S. Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service and the City of New York for the Premises known as Portions of Floyd Bennett Field, in the Jamaica Bay Unit of Gateway National Recreation Area*, DEPT. OF THE INTERIOR (Sep. 15, 2023), <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/foia/upload/FINAL-Lease-Floyd-Bennet-Field-09-15-2023-2.pdf>.

³ See Eugene Daniels, *Biden Makes Harris the Point Person on Immigration Issues Among Border Surge*, Politico (March 24, 2021), <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/03/24/kamala-harris-immigration-border-surge-477810>

spanning multiple federal agencies, all of which point directly back to the involvement of the White House as key in the decision.

On April 19, 2024, the Committee sent a letter⁴ (Committee Letter) to Mr. Perez requesting information about the role he and the White House played in leasing FBF to the City of New York (NYC) and transforming FBF into a migrant camp. The response we received was objectionable at best as it attempted to paint the administration's immigration policies in a positive light, eschew responsibility for the border crisis, and erroneously claim that the executive agencies of the administration have been fully cooperating with the Committee's inquiry with responsive document productions. In reality, the Committee has fought tooth and nail to squeeze minimal information from the administration. Information the Committee's investigation uncovered solidifies the integral role the White House played in turning FBF into a migrant tent city.

Since the Committee began investigating the FBF migrant camp and the lease that enabled it, indications that the White House was involved were apparent.⁵ As outlined in our Committee Letter, Governor Hochul's Office and NYC repeatedly called for White House action.⁶ On August 10, 2023, Mr. Perez traveled to New York to work with officials from NYC and New York State (NYS) in an attempt to address the worsening migrant crisis.⁷ At this time, Mr. Perez and New York officials discussed how the Biden-Harris Administration could assist New York in housing the increasing number of migrants, including using NPS land to house migrants.⁸ Mr. Perez also met with NYC Mayor Eric Adams, as well as his Chief of Staff, Ms. Camille Joseph Varlack, to discuss locations for a migrant shelter on Federal land and other avenues of receiving federal support.⁹

Governor Hochul made clear that her August meeting with Mr. Perez followed "months" of communication between her office and the White House related to New York's migrant crisis.¹⁰

⁴ See Letter from Rep. Bruce Westerman, Chairman, H. Comm. on Natural Resources, et al., to Tom Perez, Director of the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs (Apr. 19, 2024),

https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/2024_04_18_hnr_letter_to_white_house_on_perez_fbf.pdf.

⁵ See, e.g., *Statement From Governor Hochul on Meeting With Tom Perez, Senior Advisor and Assistant to President Biden*, NEW YORK STATE (Aug. 10, 2023), <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/statement-governor-hochul-meeting-tom-perez-senior-advisor-and-assistant-president-biden>; Dan Rivoli, *Biden advisor meets with mayor about help with migrants in New York*, SPECTRUM NEWS NY1 (Aug. 10, 2023), <https://ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/politics/2023/08/10/biden-advisor-meets-with-mayor-about-help-with-migrants-in-new-york>.

⁶ See *Governor Kathy Hochul, Governor Hochul Urges President Biden to Mobilize Federal Government to Provide Shelter for Asylum Seekers Arriving in New York City*, NEW YORK STATE (May 12, 2023), <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-urges-president-biden-mobilize-federal-government-provide-shelter-asylum>.

⁷ See Chris Smith, *The Political Wrangling Behind the Tragic Images of Migrants Stranded in Manhattan*, VANITY FAIR (Aug. 10, 2023), <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2023/08/political-wrangling-tragic-images-of-migrants-stranded-in-manhattan-eric-adams-biden>.

⁸ See *Statement From Governor Hochul on Meeting With Tom Perez, Senior Advisor and Assistant to President Biden*, NEW YORK STATE (Aug. 10, 2023), <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/statement-governor-hochul-meeting-tom-perez-senior-advisor-and-assistant-president-biden>

⁹ See Dan Rivoli, *Biden advisor meets with mayor about help with migrants in New York*, SPECTRUM NEWS NY1 (Aug. 10, 2023), <https://ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/politics/2023/08/10/biden-advisor-meets-with-mayor-about-help-with-migrants-in-new-york>.

¹⁰ *Id.*

The Governor's office also later stated that they coordinated at least one visit to Floyd Bennett Field with federal officials to assess the site's suitability for housing migrants.¹¹

Following these meetings, in August of 2023, the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) and NPS agreed to lease Floyd Bennett Field to NYC for use as a migrant camp.¹² Governor Hochul specifically described the coordination between federal entities and New York as a "significant development" because she had been working with the Biden-Harris administration for "many many many months" to house migrants at Floyd Bennett Field despite DOI and NPS initially stating that "they do not allow for use of shelter on any of their properties."¹³

In September 2023, Mr. Perez again visited New York, as the Biden-Harris administration was "trying hard . . . to project the message that they are delivering much-needed help" to address the migrant crisis the administration had created.¹⁴ Reports indicate that Mr. Perez then met with business leaders and Democratic donors concerned with the administration's lackluster response to the migrant crisis.¹⁵ Shortly thereafter, on September 15, 2023, the Biden-Harris administration and NYC executed the FBF Lease.¹⁶

On September 18, 2023, Committee Chairman Bruce Westerman, Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee Chairman Paul Gosar, Representative Nicole Malliotakis, Congressional staff, and local NYC elected officials visited Floyd Bennett Field.¹⁷ During this visit, NPS staff acknowledged previous site visits by high-level Biden-Harris administration officials to assess the suitability of federal lands near NYC for establishing a migrant encampment. On September 22, 2023, Mr. Perez once again traveled to New York for a meeting with Governor Hochul and her staff to discuss additional Federal assistance for the migrant crisis in New York.¹⁸

Despite the Biden-Harris White House's clear involvement, responses received by the Committee from the White House entirely eschew responsibility and attempt to redirect

¹¹ See Governor Hochul Updates New Yorkers on State's Ongoing Efforts to Shelter and Support Asylum Seekers, NEW YORK STATE (Aug. 12, 2023), <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-updates-new-yorkers-states-ongoing-efforts-shelter-and-support-asylum-seekers#:~:text=Governor%20Hochul%20also%20announced%20the%20shelters%20in%20New%20York%20City.>

¹² Eyewitness News, *Floyd Bennett Field to be used to house asylum seekers in Brooklyn*, Hochul announces, ABC NEWS (Aug. 21, 2023), <https://abc7ny.com/nyc-migrants-asylum-seekers-floyd-bennett-field/13680120/>; Jon Campbell, *White House approves migrant shelter at Brooklyn's Floyd Bennett Field*, Gov. Hochul says, GOTHAMIST (Aug. 21, 2023), <https://gothamist.com/news/white-house-approves-migrant-shelter-at-brooklyns-floyd-bennett-field-gov-hochul-says>.

¹³ Eyewitness News, *Floyd Bennett Field to be used to house asylum seekers in Brooklyn*, Hochul announces, ABC NEWS (Aug. 21, 2023), <https://abc7ny.com/nyc-migrants-asylum-seekers-floyd-bennett-field/13680120/>.

¹⁴ Melissa Russo, *Biden team denies New York's right-to-shelter policy hurt city's case for aid*, NBC NEW YORK (Sep. 14, 2023), <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/investigations/migrant-crisis/biden-team-denies-new-yorks-right-to-shelter-hurt-its-case-for-aid/4680713/>.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ See National Park Service, *Lease Between U.S. Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service and the City of New York for the Premises known as Portions of Floyd Bennett Field, in the Jamaica Bay Unit of Gateway National Recreation Area*, DEPT. OF THE INTERIOR (Sep. 15, 2023), <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/foia/upload/FINAL-Lease-Floyd-Bennet-Field-09-15-2023-2.pdf>.

¹⁷ Press Release, *Westerman Visits NYC Migrant Processing Center, Condemns National Park Land*, H. COMM. ON NATURAL RESOURCES (Sep. 18, 2023), <https://naturalresources.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=414852>.

¹⁸ *Governor Hochul's Past Schedules—September 2023*, NEW YORK STATE (Sep. 2023), <https://www.governor.ny.gov/sites/default/files/2023-12/September2023.pdf>.

responsibility for the administration's actions to executive agencies like DOI, NPS, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as the key players in establishing the FBF migrant camp. Yet, information gathered points back at the White House.

On December 14, 2023, the Committee interviewed DOI official Shannon Estenoz, who stated, regarding the decision to lease FBF that, "it was DHS that was coordinating an interagency process, so we were participating as part of a Federal family, as asked by DHS."¹⁹ Accordingly, the Committee expanded its investigation to include the role of DHS in this decision process.

On June 27, 2024, the Committee interviewed DHS official Rebecca Sternhell. During the transcribed interview, Ms. Sternhell revealed conversations with the White House Chief of Staff's office about FBF. She indicated that Molly Ritner with the White House Deputy Chief of Staff's office provided DHS with a list of possible sites for an encampment in NYC.²⁰ During the interview, Ms. Sternhell described a site visit to NYC to assess potential site visits for migrant camps in NYC on federal properties.²¹ Interestingly, each of the sites was dismissed other than Floyd Bennett Field, which her team never actually took the time to assess in person. In addition, during the interview, Ms. Sternhell acknowledged she was unaware that the site at Floyd Bennett Field lacked running water or electricity, qualities that were cause for excluding other sites due to lacking adequate standards for an encampment.²²

After months of being stonewalled in its requests for information, on August 9, 2024, the Committee served DHS a subpoena for documents and information related to the establishment of the migrant camp at FBF. In response, DHS produced an August 21, 2023, email that, in response to a social media post related to the FBF lease, stated: "We'll be directing to WH for any incoming on this."²³ In another document provided to the Committee as a portion of the subpoenaed documents, a transcript from an August 30, 2023 White House Press Briefing notes White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre confirmed that the Biden-Harris White House was hosting Gov. Hochul to discuss "migration" and they would be meeting with "members of the President's team."²⁴ During the same briefing, Ms. Jean-Pierre noted "the administration [had] identified a number of sites across New York State for housing. Additionally, the Department of the Interior is negotiating a lease of Floyd Bennett Field with the city and the state, so that conversation continues to happen."²⁵

Accordingly, it is clear that despite the White House's refusal to acknowledge its role to the Committee, the Biden-Harris White House was instrumental in the transformation of FBF into a migrant camp. The Committee reiterates the requests from the Committee Letter below

¹⁹ Interview with Ms. Shannon Estenoz, Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, United States Department of the Interior, December 14, 2023, https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hii348550_2023.12.14_estenoz_ti.pdf.

²⁰ Interview with Ms. Rebecca Sternhell, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Department of Homeland Security, June 27, 2024, Washington, D.C. https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hii179550_2024.06.27_sternhell_ti.pdf.

²¹ Id.

²² Id.

²³ Production on file with the Committee.

²⁴ Email to Marsha Espinosa from White House Press Office (Aug. 30, 2023), https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploadedfiles/08.23.24_dhs_to_hnr_production_000446.pdf.

²⁵ Id.

and expect responses, in electronic format, as soon as possible but no later than September 26, 2024:

1. All documents and communications regarding the selection of Floyd Bennett Field as the site of a migrant encampment on Federal land.
2. All documents, communications, and travel logs regarding visits made by the President, Vice President, Office of the President, or Office of the Vice President to the state of New York or the New York City metropolitan area regarding site locations for housing migrants on Federal land.
3. All documents and communications regarding the legality of housing migrants on Federal land.
4. All documents, communications, and travel logs regarding site visits made by the President, Vice President, or staff of the Office of the President, or Office of the Vice President to Floyd Bennett Field.
5. All calendar entries within the Office of the President and Office of the Vice President for meetings that involved or discussed the use of Floyd Bennett Field for a migrant encampment.
6. All documents and communications transmitted between the Office of the President, the Office of the Vice President and Camille Joseph Varlack, Chief of Staff to NYC Mayor Eric Adams regarding Floyd Bennett Field.
7. All documents and communications transmitted between the Office of the President and the Office of the Vice President regarding the Floyd Bennett Field Lease.
8. All documents and communications transmitted between the Office of the President, the Office of the Vice President, and the Department of Homeland Security regarding the Floyd Bennett Field Lease.
9. All documents and communications transmitted between the Office of the President, the Office of the Vice President, and the Department of the Interior, including the National Park Service, regarding the Floyd Bennett Field Lease.

The Committee is committed to ensuring proper oversight of our nation's public lands. Continued failure to comply with the Committee's requests will force us to use the compulsory process—including issuing a subpoena—to ensure transparency for the American people.

An attachment to this letter provides additional instructions for responding to the Committee on Natural Resources requests. Please contact the Majority staff for the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee at (202) 225-2761 or HNRR.Oversight@mail.house.gov with any questions. Under House Rule X, the Committee on Natural Resources has “general oversight” of any matter relating to its jurisdiction, including the management of national parks and Federal lands. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,



Bruce Westerman
Chairman
Committee on Natural Resources



Paul A. Gosar, D.D.S.
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations



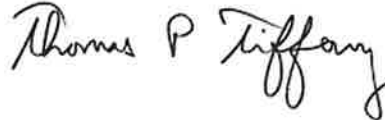
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Harriet M. Hageman
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Pete Stauber
Chairman
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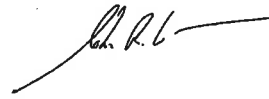
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Russ Fulcher
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Enclosure