A Case in Action

Background & Overview of the Neighborhood Planning Process in the Apalachee Ridge Estates Neighborhood

Submitted by:
Melody Benbow
Jennifer Price
March 8, 2001
Executive Summary
The planning process has been long accused of either utilizing rubber-stamp approaches to citizen involvement or incorporating no citizen involvement at all. Given the role of neighborhood and community planners as liaisons between the community and local government, it is difficult to gather how one can justify the absence of citizen involvement in the planning process. Perhaps this deficiency is due to the somewhat technical nature of the planning profession, and planners’ lack of faith in the citizens’ ability to grasp certain concepts. Additionally, citizens might be reluctant to give their input because of feelings of self-doubt in their own level of knowledge pertaining to governmental processes. Bad past experiences with the local government or other agencies and organizations geared towards “helping” their community might cause them to fear that these entities will not consider their positions on issues affecting their community. Stigmas such as these only hurt the planning process. Neighborhood and community planners can become so far removed from the citizens and residents that it is virtually impossible for them to develop plans and policies that accurately capture the citizen’s needs. As a consequence, critical concerns of residents and the entire community can go unnoticed. Because of this, it is imperative that the stakeholders of a neighborhood are involved in neighborhood planning efforts. Allowing residents to participate in neighborhood planning activities not only results in better, more favorable outcomes but it also serves as a mechanism for empowering those stakeholders.

The Tallahassee-Leon County Planning Department in Tallahassee, Florida is the lead agency involved in the City’s Neighborhood Planning Process, an aggressive and collaborative initiative that has been adopted to stabilize and revitalize Tallahassee’s neighborhoods in need. The Neighborhood Planning Process gives these neighborhoods the opportunity to develop a neighborhood plan that closely identifies the needs of the neighborhood and the strategies they can use to meet those needs. The process is collaborative in its approach and seeks to bring all affected parties to the table—residents, community organizations and institutions, and governmental entities. This creates an environment where the residents are working through the process with the guidance, expertise and assistance of the entire community.

Neighborhoods that are interested in participating in the Neighborhood Planning Process submit an application to the City. These neighborhoods are ranked based upon certain criteria and are chosen by staff. When a neighborhood is selected, it moves through the four phases of the process which are (1) selection and assessment, (2) neighborhood plan development, (3) implementation and monitoring, and (4) evaluation. The first neighborhood to be chosen for the Neighborhood Planning Process is the Apalachee Ridge Estates neighborhood, a predominately African American neighborhood in southern Tallahassee. Since planning efforts have begun in the neighborhood there has been in increasing amount of participation in neighborhood meetings. Apalachee Ridge is presently in the plan development phase, which is the most time consuming and engaging phase of the process.

This “case in progress” begins with a background sketch of the neighborhood. The paper further details the general flow of the Neighborhood Planning Process and identifies the
issues and stakeholders that are specific to the Apalachee Ridge case. There is a section that documents the major events that have transpired since the process has begun as a documentation of the progress of the Apalachee Ridge Estates Neighborhood. The “case in progress concludes with a summary as well as recommendations and suggested courses of action. There is an appendix that contains documents, charts and graphics that are either referenced in the text of this document.

Background
The Apalachee Ridge Estates neighborhood is located in the southeastern district of Leon County and is bound by Orange Avenue to the north, Millard Street to the south, Harwood Drive to the west, and Pontiac Street to the east (see Exhibit 1 in appendix). The neighborhood has 320 total housing units. Ninety five percent of the housing units are single-family units.

Neighborhood History and Demographics
The first homes were built in the 1950s starting in the northeastern corner and later developed into what is currently recognized as the neighborhood. A longtime resident describes the first residents of Apalachee Ridge as “ordinary middle class residents”. The residents were predominately white and worked as correctional officers, mechanics, medical assistants, teachers, students and airport workers. The neighborhood was considered a good place to live because of its proximity to employment, schools and housing affordability.

The neighborhood experienced a dramatic shift in its racial composition during the 1980s that accounts for its current demographic characteristics. During the 1970s the neighborhood was 93 percent white. The 1990 census figures reflect a predominately African American population of 72 percent. A significant portion of the population in Apalachee Ridge is comprised of young children and adolescents. According to a study conducted by Florida State University students, about 34 percent of the residents in the neighborhood are under the age of 18. Apalachee Ridge residents have a high level of educational attainment. The Florida State University survey reports approximately 40 percent of respondents have some college education. Apalachee Ridge has a high rate of homeownership—77 percent in 1999.

Apalachee Ridge has experienced a decline in crime since 1998. Apalachee Ridge has reduced instances of index crimes such as homicide, sex offenses, burglary and battery. There were other reductions in offenses such as criminal mischief and trespassing. Tallahassee Police Department produced a crime summary that indicates a 100 percent reduction in the number of homicides in the neighborhood between 1998 and 1999.

Zoning
The Apalachee Ridge Neighborhood is zoned for single-family detached residential units, allowing up to 4.84 dwelling units per acre and also permits community and recreation facilities. According to the urban area future land use map, the use will remain Residential Preservation. This will allow the area to maintain its suburban feel while ensuring that the area will remain stable and viable. In addition, this designation will
provide the Apalachee Ridge neighborhood protection from incompatible land uses and
dramatic increases in density. In addition to Residential Preservation, other zoning
designations allow for densities and development that is congruent with those allowed in
residential, commercial, office and rural land uses. Even still, over 80 percent of the land
is preserved for residential use, only.

The neighborhood remains a middle class neighborhood with high homeownership rates,
but is at a crossroads. There are issues related to the aging housing stock, high numbers
of youth with no structured activities, and its proximity to South City, one of the most
depressed neighborhoods in Tallahassee. A group of residents formed the Apalachee
Ridge Estates Neighborhood Association in 1998. This group has been striving to make
positive changes in the neighborhood since its inception.

The Neighborhood Planning Process
In 1999, an aggressive initiative to revitalize and stabilize many of the distressed
communities in the City of Tallahassee was adopted. The purpose of this initiative, the
Community Neighborhood Renaissance Partnership, is to empower neighborhood
residents to come together to plan for their neighborhood in order to determine its future.
The target area for the initiative is Tallahassee’s inner city neighborhoods, which are
currently facing decline in their physical and social infrastructure. Tallahassee City
Commissioner Steve Meisburg has championed the Neighborhood Planning Process and
has been one of the initiatives most visible supporters. After the City Commission agreed
to make Neighborhood Revitalization a target issue for their 2000-2001 agenda, the
Apalachee Ridge Estates Neighborhood was chosen as the first neighborhood to
participate in the process.

To manage and coordinate the process in Apalachee Ridge from beginning to completion,
key coordinators have been identified. The key coordinators of the Neighborhood
Planning Process are John Baker from the Tallahassee-Leon County Planning
Department, Debra Thomas from City’s Department of Neighborhood and Community
Services, Perry West, President of the Apalachee Ridges Estates Neighborhood
Association and chair of the Neighborhood Steering Committee, Rosa Ramos Morgan of
the Community Neighborhood Renaissance Partnership and possibly representatives from
other governmental agencies.

The Neighborhood Planning Process is divided into four phases (see Exhibit 2 in
appendix). Phase I includes the ranking and selection of the neighborhoods to participate
in the process. Neighborhoods interested in going through the Neighborhood Planning
Process will be selected annually through an application process. Selection will be based
upon the level of neighborhood organization, number or percentage of residents and
businesses desiring a plan and other factors. Selection is limited to no more than two
neighborhoods per year. Phase II focuses on the development of the neighborhood plan.
In this phase, the neighborhood issues and problems are identified, and the needs
identified by the residents are prioritized. In order to sustain continued neighborhood
interest and the interest of the community at large, it is recommended that the planning
phase begin within three months after the commencement of the planning program. The
production of the plan is the final result of this phase. The City Commission will adopt neighborhood plans by ordinance. Neighborhood plans will not be adopted as part of the comprehensive plan, but implementation may require a comprehensive plan amendment. Phase III is reserved for the implementation and monitoring of the process. Each goal and recommendation in the plan will have a time frame for completion. Primary parties responsible for implementation are identified and costs are projected when possible. And finally, Phase IV evaluates the entire Neighborhood Planning Process. Neighborhood plans will be re-evaluated on a yearly basis to ensure that the plan is accomplishing the goals set forth by the neighborhood. Necessary updates and revisions to the plan will be made accordingly and are approved by the Neighborhood Association.

Flow of Decision-Making
With many different players at the table in the Neighborhood Planning Process, it is important to clarify how decisions are made. The neighborhood association holds elections for officers to the Association Board. From this board, the Neighborhood Plan Steering Committee is established. Together members of the Apalachee Ridge Estates Neighborhood Association Board, the Community Neighborhood Renaissance Partnership, other community members, the City, and governmental entities make up the Neighborhood Planning Team. This team recommends the issues and contents of the neighborhood plan to the neighborhood planner. Further detail of these groups—the key players—can be found in the following section.

Key Players
As stated, the Neighborhood Planning Process is one that seeks the involvement of the residents, governmental entities, and the local community in the development of neighborhood planning objectives, policies and strategies. It is assumed, then that the final plan would be one that reflects and addresses the quality of life issues that are important to the neighbors and recommends courses of action that are within the limits of the local government. To make certain that this is so, it is imperative to identify the stakeholders—those individuals, groups, organizations and institutions in the community that may or will be impacted in some way by the implementation of the Neighborhood Planning Process. This group would vary from neighborhood to neighborhood so it is important that an assessment of parties’ interests be used.

In each Neighborhood Planning Process there will be three main stakeholder groups: the neighborhood residents, the Community Neighborhood Renaissance Partnership along with other community partners and governmental entities (see Exhibit 3 in appendix). The groups are a collection of agencies, organizations, institutions or residents, each with different roles and responsibilities to fulfill throughout the planning process. These roles and responsibilities are further detailed below.

The Neighborhood
The neighborhood residents are the ultimate decision-makers in the Neighborhood Planning Process. There should not be anything in the plan that has not been approved by the Association Board. However, the plan cannot commit other partners to actions they do not voluntarily agree to. The neighbors shape their shared destiny through
individual action, the neighborhood association activities, the block captains, the
Association Board and the Neighborhood Plan Steering Committee. The roles and
responsibilities of each are specifically outlined below.

The Neighborhood Association members will:
- Elect the Board and Officers
- Participate in planning activities and on Action Teams
- Recruit others to join the Association and participate in planning
- Approve final draft of plan
- Recommend and solicit adoption of final plan by partners

Neighborhood Block Captains will:
- Distribute flyers and notices and promote participation in activities
- Convey input from neighbors to the Board, Committees and Action Teams

The Neighborhood Association Board will:
- Elect/appoint a Neighborhood Plan Steering Committee
- Provide input and direction for the development of goals, objectives and strategies
to the Steering Committee members
- Promote and support participation in the planning process
- Take the lead in implementing neighborhood activities identified in the plan
- Monitor, evaluate and update the neighborhood plan as needed

The Neighborhood Steering Committee will:
- Participate in Planning Team meetings
- Recruit other neighbors to attend Team meetings and serve on Action Teams
- Seek resolution of differences between neighbors
- Review and refine plan drafts and recommend a final draft to the Neighborhood
  Association

Community Neighborhood Renaissance Partners & Other Community Partners
Since the Neighborhood Planning Process is one that depends upon participation from all
members in a community, the Apalachee Ridge neighborhood has established several
partnerships with local institutions and churches. Members of the Partnership are divided
into two groups: Institutional Partners and Covenant Partners. These Institutional and
partners include the City of Tallahassee, Leon County government, Leon County School
Board, Florida State University, Florida A & M University, Arvida, Tallahassee Area
Chamber of Commerce, United Way of the Big Bend, Incorporated, and local lending
institutions. The Covenant Partners are parishioners of churches in the Tallahassee-Leon
County area. This partnership pairs predominately African American congregations with
predominately white congregations with the shared vision of improving the
neighborhoods in Tallahassee.

These institutions are engaged in the process formally through the Community
Neighborhood Renaissance Partnership, a not-for-profit organization that is currently
pursuing 501(c)3 designation. The Community Neighborhood Renaissance Partnership
Administrator will coordinate the activities of the partnership. Another active participant
is the Coalition of Neighborhood Associations. Collectively, their duties are to:

- Provide technical support and professional expertise in the plan development process.
- Redirect existing programs and funding to meet the needs of the neighborhood whenever applicable and possible.
- Provide monetary and human resources to assist in implementing the neighborhood plan.
- Participate actively in the implementation, evaluation and maintenance of the neighborhood plan.

**Governmental Entities**

**City of Tallahassee**

The City partners include the City Commission, the Planning Commission, the Tallahassee-Leon County Planning Department, the Department of Neighborhood & Community Services, and all other City Departments. An assigned neighborhood planner will draft the neighborhood plan based upon the recommendations of the Neighborhood Planning Team. Collectively, the roles and responsibilities of the City agencies are to:

- Assist in the design and facilitation of the Neighborhood Planning Process.
- Provide technical support, professional expertise and, in some cases, financial resources to the Planning Team, Action Teams and other participants.
- Document the progress of the Neighborhood Planning Process.
- Adopt the Apalachee Ridge Neighborhood Plan and make commitments to implement those portions of the plan that are City responsibilities.
- Participate actively in the implementation, evaluation and maintenance of the neighborhood plan.

**Leon County, Leon County School Board and the State of Florida**

Other governmental entities involved in the process include Leon County, the Leon County School Board and the State of Florida. These entities will be represented by agency contacts whose duties will be to:

- Participate in Planning Team meetings.
- Coordinate technical support, professional expertise and, in some cases, provide financial resources to the Neighborhood Association.
- Make formal commitments to implement those portions of the neighborhood plan that are their entity’s responsibilities.
- Participate actively in the implementation, evaluation and maintenance of the neighborhood plan.

**The Process in Action**

Prior to beginning any planning initiative for neighborhood change it is important to assess the needs and assets of a community. Community assessments combine quantitative and qualitative data such as US Census data and community concerns and feelings. The combination of the two yields an accurate account of the climate of the neighborhood. The Apalachee Ridge Estates neighborhood has completed the assessment phase of the process through two such neighborhood assessments. The
A Case In Action

Apalachee Ridge Estates Neighborhood

Association, with the assistance of Florida State University students, hosted a neighborhood assessment kick-off event and began the assessment shortly thereafter. Two Master’s students—Winter Troxel and Gail D’Alessandro—from the Department of Urban and Regional Planning along with resident volunteers conducted a citizen survey for the Apalachee Ridge Neighborhood from November 1999 to February 2000. The purpose of the survey was to connect the needs identified by the Apalachee Ridge Residents to the comprehensive planning process and the resources that are offered by the local government.

Important issues and neighborhood strengths were identified. Key issues indicated in the survey included: traffic, property maintenance, recreation facilities, home ownership, and interest in education. The survey results were used to develop the seven major neighborhood concerns and were assigned priority in the order shown below.

1) Increased Home ownership and assistance for home repairs and renovations
2) Traffic safety and traffic calming
3) Improved/ Increased recreational activities and facilities
4) Improved Schools
5) The Wall and other infrastructure improvements
6) Community involvement
7) Economic Development

On November 4th, 2000 a Neighborhood Revitalization/Stabilization Plan kick-off meeting was held. This meeting brought together residents, Community Partners, and the governmental entities. At this meeting, three sub-committees were established to address the neighborhood issues. A second assessment was conducted in the neighborhood in January and February of 2001. This survey was administered by the Covenant Partners and was intended to further prioritize the seven aforementioned issues. In this survey the Covenant Partners went door-to-door and asked residents to identify the three top priorities from the list of seven issues that were previously identified. According to the survey, the top three priorities follow.

1) The Wall and other infrastructure improvements
2) Traffic safety and traffic calming
3) Increased Home ownership and assistance for home repairs and renovations

The three previous sub-committees were transformed into three Action Teams—Education, Community Facilities and Services and Housing and Economic Development—that will deal specifically with the three neighborhood priorities. Members of the Planning Team and any neighborhood resident or individual with an interest, skills or expertise in any given issue are invited to participate. The Action Teams develop citizen input and Planning Team recommendations into strategies to reach desired outcomes. Action Teams are encouraged to communicate and work together, as many issues and concerns might overlap or span across teams. The neighborhood has also received a commitment from the County Commission for the renovation of the
gateway into the neighborhood, a dilapidated wall on the northern border of Apalachee Ridge Estates.

In addition to the surveys, there have been several meetings, including facilitation workshops, Action Team meetings and regularly scheduled Neighborhood Association meetings (see Exhibit 4 in appendix). To assist in the facilitation of the meetings, workshops and Action Teams the Florida Conflict Resolution Consortium has joined the process as a community partner. The members of this facilitation team serve as team leaders and include Tom Taylor, Miaisha Mitchell and Hal Beardall. The Consortium provides training sessions for members of the Planning Team. Another important service the Consortium provides is tactics for resolving possible disputes among residents in the neighborhood or on Action Teams. Lastly, the Consortium provides assistance in planning and preparing meeting documents and materials, as well as summary reports for each team meeting. Along with the Consortium, there are other entities involved including trained volunteers from the Neighborhood Justice Center, residents from Apalachee Ridge Estates and the Community Neighborhood Renaissance Partnership.

Summary & Recommendations
The Neighborhood Planning Process is a new process in Tallahassee and will undoubtedly be improved upon with each neighborhood that is served. And though the Apalachee Ridge Estates Neighborhood has made many accomplishments along the way; still there remains a large amount of work to be accomplished. Below is a list of challenges that might be faced by the Apalachee Ridge Estates residents and by the Neighborhood Planning Process, as a whole. Some recommended courses of action are also provided. As there is always room for improvement the list is, by no means, exhaustive.

Challenges of the neighborhood planning process in general

☑ Challenge: The Large Size of the planning team
  o Recommendation: The planning team is composed of neighborhood residents, representatives from different governmental and community agencies, including the City, County, Florida A & M and Florida State University. This could be confusing and frustrating to those not accustomed to working in large groups. Since the size of the planning team will not likely be compromised, the presence of facilitators can assist in managing meetings and work sessions.

☑ Challenge: Keeping everyone informed
  o Recommendation: Information dissemination is crucial with large groups. In addition, it is often difficult to keep everyone abreast of what is going on and what has transpired in other meetings for various committees and boards. In addition to the reports that are compiled by the Florida Conflict Resolution Consortium the residents can keep each other informed through the neighborhood newsletter or by a website devoted to the planning process. Flyers can also be distributed by block captains to remind residents of meetings and neighborhood activities.
○ Challenge: Successful coordination of timelines and deadlines

□ Recommendation: Since many agencies are represented there are likely different timelines for obtaining certain funding and services. This disparity among agencies and groups can cause a miss-match in timelines. To account for this possible pitfall, the agency representatives can compile information into a database that gives specific information regarding the source of funding, the criteria for receiving the funding and their deadlines.

○ Challenge: Disparities in Power

□ Recommendation: Since there are many people at the table, there are varying levels of power and expertise. It is imperative that people’s skills and capabilities are not overshadowed by the skills and capabilities of others. In a collaborative process, it is understood that all people can make positive and useful contributions. To reiterate this fact, the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder should be administered in the beginning of the process and throughout the process as needed. It should be understood that the neighborhood residents have the ultimate decision-making power and that their needs are paramount.

○ Challenge: Representing all interests

□ Recommendation: With an effort as large and comprehensive as neighborhood planning, it might be difficult to include all major and minor stakeholders. Since everyone’s interests are important to the process, it is imperative to make a serious attempt to include all potentially affected parties. Completing a detailed stakeholder analysis might be helpful in filling in all of the gaps (see Exhibit 5 in appendix).

Challenges of planning process for Apalachee Ridge Neighborhood

○ Challenge: With outside people doing a large share of the neighborhood work, are neighborhood residents truly empowered?

□ Recommendation: To constantly build social organization and ownership, the neighbors should be given more responsibility. Having clear goals, roles and responsibilities would also be beneficial. When groups are informed and reminded of their responsibilities, it helps keep balance between residents and all of the helpers that are not from the neighborhood. Resident participation is the foundation of the neighborhood planning process. The neighborhood has the ultimate say in the approval of the neighborhood plan. Therefore it is imperative that the resident perspective is heard, especially since the resulting plan can have an impact on their quality of life.

□ Challenge: Generating and maintaining resident participation

○ Recommendation: Enthusiasm and optimism are critical factors needed to have the residents buy into the planning process and the resulting
neighborhood plan. The residents should have “victory marker” celebrations throughout the planning process to reflect neighborhood accomplishments. Developing a neighborhood motto or slogan could provide a boost to resident morale.

The Neighborhood Planning Process is an aggressive initiative for revitalizing and stabilizing inner city neighborhoods in Tallahassee. It is collaborative in nature and combines community-driven initiatives with collaborative approaches to planning, funding and oversight to develop neighborhood plans that address the specific needs of the residents. The process seeks to identify all major stakeholders in the community and incorporate them into a comprehensive, collaborative planning model that holistically works with the residents to address the needs of the community. In this process, social infrastructure is built, as neighborhood residents are equipped with skills for facilitation, communication, planning and leadership. This creates a sense of responsibility to and ownership of the residents’ community with the hopes of promoting long-term community involvement and change. The residents, Community Partners and the governmental entities are all committed to making certain that long-term community involvement and change are substantially uplifted and maintained in this pioneer neighborhood, Apalachee Ridge Estates.
APPENDIX

Exhibit 1: Map of the Apalachee Ridge Estates Neighborhood
Exhibit 2: Phases of the Neighborhood Planning Process
Exhibit 3: The Neighborhood Planning Team Diagram
Exhibit 4: Tentative Planning Schedule
Exhibit 5: Stakeholder Analysis
Exhibit 1: Neighborhood Map
Exhibit 2: Neighborhood Planning Process
Exhibit 3: Neighborhood Planning Team Diagram

Neighborhood Residents

- Neighborhood Association
  - Board of Directors
  - Neighborhood Steering Committee
  - Neighborhood Block Captains

CONA

Community

- Community Neighborhood Partnership
  - Institutional Partners
  - Faith Based Organizations (Covenant Partners)

Program Administration

Neighborhood Planning Team and Action Teams

Governmental Entities

- City of Tallahassee
  - City Commission
  - Planning Commission
  - Tallahassee-Leon County Planning Department
  - Dept. of Neighborhood & Community Services

- Leon County
  - County Commission
  - Planning Commission

- Leon County School Board

State Agencies

- Department of Community Affairs
- Enterprise FL.
Exhibit 4: Tentative Planning Schedule

Jan. 24  Meeting with department heads and planning team
Jan. 25  Community Neighborhood Renaissance Partners meeting

Feb. 13  Neighborhood Steering Committee meeting  
**Venue:** Faith Christian Family Center  **Time:** 6:30 pm to 8:00 pm

Feb. 17  Initial Consensus Decision Making/Facilitation training as part of Neighborhood Association meeting  
**Venue:** Faith Christian Family Center  **Time:** 10:00 am to 2:00 pm

Feb. 22  Education Action Team meeting –  **Venue:** Leonard Wesson Elementary School Cafeteria  **Time:** 6:30 pm

Feb. 27  2nd Consensus Decision Making/Facilitation training  **Venue:** TBA  **Time:** 6:30 to 9:00 pm

March 3  Neighborhood Planning Team Issues and Options Meeting

Various  Action Team Meetings (2-4 in March and April)
**Times**  City technical work to support Action Team Efforts  
Partners work on assignments from the Meeting  
Neighborhood Steering Committee addresses special problems  
Coordination and conflict resolution by Key Coordinators and planning team

April 20  Block Captains deliver invitations to neighbors

April 27  Block Captains deliver draft recommendations to neighbors  
Send to the Planning Team

May 5  Neighborhood Consensus Seeking Workshop

Various  Action team meetings to finalize draft strategies  
**Times**  City technical work to support Action Team Efforts  
Partners work on assignments from the meeting  
Neighborhood Steering Committee addresses special problems  
Coordination and conflict resolution by planning team

June 15  Complete draft Neighborhood Plan

June 23  Neighborhood Block Party and final draft review with priority ranking

July 7  Neighborhood Steering Committee incorporates final refinements and 
Presents the recommended draft to the Neighborhood Assn. Board

July  Adoption and/or commitment by City, other government entities, CNRP, etc.