The Tallahassee Comprehensive Human Services Center
A Case Study of the Site Selection Process
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On April 16, 2002, the Tallahassee Coalition for the Homeless held a community forum to discuss the Coalition's proposal to build a Comprehensive Human Services Center at a property on West Pensacola Street. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce the Center to the neighborhood and to meet the city’s requirements for public input in matters involving public funding. Tallahassee has approximately 2000 people without permanent shelter. 908 of them are considered chronically homeless. For over two years, the Tallahassee Coalition for the Homeless in partnership with the City of Tallahassee had been working to develop a Comprehensive Human Services Center to assist homeless individuals and families with the transition to self-sufficiency. The Center, which is being funded through a combination of federal money and Community Development Grants, will provide both housing and services. Upon entry to the center, residents will be assigned a case manager and undergo a comprehensive assessment to identify potential barriers towards self-sufficiency. The resident and case manager then develop a service plan describing the resident's unmet needs for supportive services, and outline the steps necessary to achieve self-sufficiency. On- and off-site services will offer residents health care, education and employment, child-care and family support, access to government and other programs and mental health and substance abuse services. Initially, the Center will house approximately 115 people. This will be a combination of men, women, and families with specific designated areas for each. It is anticipated that the average length of stay will be about 4 to 6 months. Based on other Centers in Florida, the Center is anticipating a 50 to 60% success rate. The individuals who are unable to achieve independent living will be assisted in finding appropriate living situations. This case study is designed to examine the process by which the Tallahassee Coalition for the Homeless engaged in the site selection process for the Tallahassee Comprehensive Human Services Center. In examining the Coalition's approach to site selection, I am trying to see if there was a relationship between the site selection process and neighborhood opposition to facility location.
The Tallahassee Comprehensive Human Services Center is based on a continuum-of-care concept that has been recognized as a potential national model for care of the homeless. Under continuum of care, the homeless are moved from the streets into a system that exposes them to an array of services, including case management, health care, and vocational training with the goal of making it possible for them to take positive steps to turn their lives around. Adult family members, children, and single adults receive shelter, case management, and other supportive services. Case managers link residents with a variety of opportunities, including transitional treatment housing, permanent supported housing for those with disabilities, and assistance programs to help locate and obtain affordable, safe housing. The Federal government requires such a plan before it will provide funds for programs designed to address homelessness (HUD, 2003). The Tallahassee Comprehensive Human Services Center is modeled after continuum care centers in Miami, Jacksonville and Orlando, Florida. The centers are designed to minimize their impact on the surrounding community by providing space within the center for residents to smoke and congregate. In 1998, the City of Tallahassee contacted the Coalition for the Homeless to facilitate the development of a continuum of care center in Tallahassee. The City and the Coalition assembled representatives from several of the city's faith based, business, social service, and student and neighborhood associations to assess the needs of the city's homeless population. A Steering Committee was formed to design the Comprehensive Service Center to address those needs. With the City's input, the Steering Committee established a Site Selection Committee. Every member of the Site Selection committee visited the ten locations that fit the Steering Committee's requirements for the Comprehensive Human Services Center. Out of the ten sites, an old Toyota Dealership on West Tennessee Street was chosen. It fit the Steering Committee’s requirements regarding size of property, cost, zoning, compatibility with the neighborhood and access to public transportation. Having found the site, the Coalition applied to receive the $800,000 in grant money the City of Tallahassee had promised for the Center. The remaining funding for the $2 million Comprehensive Service Center will come through the Department of Housing and Urban Development.
and other sources. To meet the City’s funding requirements for public comment on the proposed site, the Coalition held on a public meeting on Friday, January 4, 2002. The Tallahassee City Commission was set to vote on the $800,000 allocation to the Coalition for the Comprehensive Services Center on Wednesday, January 9, 2002. The proposed location for the Center was across the street from a KIA dealership. Unbeknownst to the Coalition, the owner of the KIA dealership had mailed out flyers to all the businesses and residents in the area informing them of the City and Coalition's plans to house a homeless shelter in their neighborhood. Approximately 100 people showed up to the meeting. The Coalition for the Homeless was unprepared for both the size and rancor of the group. Neighborhood opposition to the shelter was loud and acrimonious. The neighbors were concerned about a decrease in property values, an increase in crime and vagrancy, preservation of the neighborhood and the safety of children and families. The site for the Toyota Dealership was later abandoned after the Coalition was made aware of the environmental constraints on the property. The Boy Scouts of America contacted the City of Tallahassee about a property they owned on West Pensacola Street. The property sat on a 1.8-acre lot and it was adjacent to a 2.3-acre lot owned by the City. As the Steering Committee for the Center was entering into negotiations with the Boy Scouts of America for the property, the owner of a strip mall across the street from the proposed site became aware of the city's plans. He attended City Commission meetings and visited the office of the Coalition for the Homeless on several occasions to voice his opposition to the proposed Center. He created an alliance between his retail tenants and area residents to oppose the Center. Well aware of the impact neighborhood opposition can have on a public meeting, the Coalition for the Homeless contracted with the Florida Conflict Resolution Consortium to mediate the public meeting the Coalition would hold on April 16, 2002 to meet the city's funding requirements and to establish a relationship between the neighborhood and the Center. Representatives for the Coalition, the City of Tallahassee and the Steering Committee held weekly meetings with mediators from the Conflict Resolution Consortium to strategize for the April 16 meeting. The strategy revolved around the Coalition educating the public on the concept of a
continuum of care center versus a bed and a meal shelter. In the process, the Coalition would allay neighborhood concerns about safety, crime, loitering, vagrancy, substance abuse, panhandling and other social ills often attributed to homelessness.

The meeting on April 16, 2002 was held at the Tallahassee Senior Center. Food and beverages were served. Together, the Coalition, the City and the Consortium prepared a pamphlet that detailed their objectives in holding the meeting and outlined the agenda and guidelines under which the meeting would be conducted. The pamphlet included a timeline of the site selection process. It briefly mentioned the selection and subsequent abandonment of the West Tennessee site. The pamphlet contained a section on the Center’s commitment to the community. The Center would solicit community input and respond to community concerns. The fourth section of the pamphlet was a list of the community issues such as crime, safety and security, property values and facility design. The Coalition had listed the community's concerns or the Coalition's perception of the community's concerns and written out a response. A representative from the Steering Committee opened the meeting. He welcomed the attendees and explained the purpose of the meeting. He was followed by a representative from the Conflict Resolution Consortium who went over the agenda and the format. Representatives for the Center would address the attendees first to explain the Comprehensive Human Services Center Concept. Following the presentation, the facilitator would solicit input from the attendees to allow people to ask questions and voice their concerns. Despite the preparation and planning, the meeting ended up being bogged down by the same neighborhood issues over property and safety and threats to block the development that had characterized the public meeting on the West Tennessee site. Following the meeting, the Tallahassee Coalition for the Homeless did purchase the West Pensacola site. Plans are underway to build the Comprehensive Services Center.

NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) is a term used to describe citizen opposition to certain land uses near their homes or communities. Every community, regardless of size, wealth or density has
residents who object to the development of what they perceive to be undesirable land uses in their community. People who have faced NIMBY opposition say that there is no one way to respond to it and no guarantee that any given response will work. Opposition arguments tend to boil down to three concerns: property values, personal safety, and neighborhood amenity. Publicly expressed arguments aren’t the same as the underlying fears and suspicions that produce NIMBY attitudes (Homeless People's Network, 1998). Many people believe the best approach is preemptive. Developers need to gauge and identify possible sources of community opposition as early in the development process as possible to develop counter-strategies. Many advocates for the homeless recommend that developers approach their opposition early, make concessions and avoid large public meetings to air complaints. Even though public hearings are often required by local, state or federal regulations under the belief that community participation will make the process fair and informed, critics of such hearings argue that most hearings are held late in the process, often after the developer has invested substantially in site studies and made a decision. Advocates for the homeless and other social service providers argue that opponents to these services being housed in their community attend public hearings to incite their constituencies and not to offer suggestions to make the proposed development more acceptable.

The acronyms LULU’s (Locally Unwanted Land Uses) and NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) are often used interchangeably to describe land use disputes. In reality, they are perceived differently. The acronym LULU is used to describe land use disputes that often involve heavily industrial or environmentally damaging uses. Communities or neighborhoods are seen as taking on a burden. Opposition to the proposed development carries a degree of legitimacy. Siting issues involving social services such as street level drug treatment clinics, homeless shelters, halfway houses are often described as NIMBY disputes. Opponents to the proposed project are often viewed by the proponents as caring more about their property values than their fellow human beings. NIMBY opposition is often attributed to a few people. In terms of the Comprehensive Services Center, opposition to the purposed
site on Tennessee Street was attributed to the owner of a KIA Dealership and opposition to the West Pensacola site was attributed to the owner of a strip mall. The few are seen as inciting the masses.

The site selection process is often a victim to these assumptions. Locations are often picked without any neighborhood input because the input is perceived to be negative. By blaming the negativity on a few instigators in a neighborhood, the proponents of a project may be missing a larger issue. From the standpoint of the residents, an undesirable land use, whether it is for a homeless center or a solid waste facility, is a legitimate concern to people who will be impacted by the development (Susskind, 1984).

In the case of the Comprehensive Human Services Center, the Coalition attempted to counter neighborhood concerns about increased crime, loitering, etc. by addressing each issue on the surface. The Center would develop partnerships with law enforcement and social services to counter crime, loitering, etc. From the property owner’s perspective, the real question may be the effect the development will have on the neighborhood five, ten and even twenty years down the line. People invest in property to build equity whether it’s a Coalition for the Homeless building a Comprehensive Service Center or an individual or a family buying a house. For the most part, it’s a long-term investment. People use the equity they build in their home to invest in their children’s education or to finance their retirement. Opposition to a proposed facility isn't just based on real costs and benefits but perceived costs and benefits (Dornbush, 1990). Perceived costs may be the long-term effect of the facility on the neighborhood in terms of property values, character, and the siting of other services. Negotiated agreement revolves around separating the people from the problem (Fisher & Ury, 1983). Labeling neighborhood concerns about a proposed site selection as NIMBY opposition has the effect of making the opponents the problem.

The traditional siting process is often characterized as three phases: “decide, announce and defend.” In the decide phase, the developer scopes out locations and analyzes the data to determine site suitability for the proposed project. This phase involves little if any interaction with the portion of
the public who would be affected by the site decision or the local government. The developer makes no official announcement until a site has been selected. In the announce phase, the developer makes a public announcement of the selected site. In the defend phase, the developer begins applying for all required zoning variances, licensing and operating permits and lease and purchase agreements. At this point, legal requirements for public notice and an opportunity for public comment come into play. People who will be impacted by the development are given the impression that the decision has already been made. Critics of the traditional site selection process point out that it breeds conflict rather than consensus. People take very fixed positions. Neither side sees any gain in explaining the other side’s position so misinformation is often rampant. By providing only the information that is required, developers deprive the public of information they might use to form opinions about a project. (Dornbush, 1990) Furthermore, time is money. Many people believe developers pick sites where opposition to the project will be the weakest or least effective. The site selection process itself becomes suspect. In the case of the Comprehensive Service Center, neighborhood concern about the proposed facility brought up issues of neighborhood equity. Both of the proposed locations for the Center were on the City’s west side where property values are lower than in the north and northeast sections of the city. The process led to a perception that the west side was being singled out to take on a citywide burden. Opposition to facility siting is based on both real and perceived costs.

It is in the defend phase of the traditional siting process that formal public notification of the proposed facility is made. After choosing both the West Tennessee Street and West Pensacola Street sites, the Coalition held community forums to address community concerns and to garner community support. In regard to the West Pensacola site, the Coalition prepared a pamphlet that addressed issues ranging from impact of the proposed development on the community to concerns about crime and safety. The Coalition laid out their response to each neighborhood concern. From the Coalition's perspective, the neighborhood is an essential element of a Comprehensive Service Center. The
continuum of care concept is built on the idea of re-assimilating people into society. Comprehensive Service Centers look to the community to supply part time work or volunteer positions for their residents. In addressing their needs for a community partnership, the Coalition did engage in many of the principles of conflict management. In the pamphlet, the Coalition stated their goals for the public meeting were to provide a forum where each interest group can be heard by others, to present the concept of the Comprehensive Human Service Center to the community, to clarify community issues, to explore options for addressing community issues and providing needed services and to initiate a center-community partnership and develop a responsible way to involve the community in the center design and operation planning. The Coalition was attempting to establish a positive working relationship with the community. From the Coalition's perspective, the neighborhood opposition revolved around negative perceptions of the homeless problem. The Coalition's role was to help the homeless and to educate the public about the homeless population. The Coalition's strategy was to help the community see that it could be a part of the solution. The solution needs to be based on an understanding of the problem (Carpenter & Kennedy, 2001). If the success of a Comprehensive Human Services Center hinges on the strength of a community-center partnership, then proponents of the Center need to understand the difference between a partnership and an arranged marriage. The City of Tallahassee and the Coalition brought together members of the Tallahassee community when the Comprehensive Services Center was originally proposed. The Steering Committee and the Site Selection Committee were made up representatives of the larger Tallahassee community. Within every city, there are smaller communities. In the development of a community-based service, new stakeholders emerge at different stages of the process. Health care stakeholders may be thoroughly involved in the conceptualization stage of the project and less involved in the site selection as long as the proposed site meets certain criteria. The average citizen may be completely uninvolved in the issue and/or completely unaware of the problem until the site selection is announced and the citizen's own neighborhood is impacted by the development. "Representatives of affected stakeholder groups
should be identified and involved at each stage of the siting process. .... Those affected by siting decisions should have a meaningful chance to review the criteria for site selection (Susskind, 1984)"

Strong and active coalitions give communities many advantages. Coalitions such as the Tallahassee Coalition for the Homeless bring attention to issues that the public has a tendency to ignore. Coalitions bring people and resources together to address problems. Coalitions bring together people who can support each other in controversy. They are often built around the participatory decision making process. The Tallahassee Coalition for the Homeless engaged in consensus building in many of the early stages of the development of the Tallahassee Comprehensive Human Services Center. By relying on the decide-approach-defend model of site selection, the Coalition tried to build consensus for a decision after the fact. In decide-approach-defend, a particular location for a facility is chosen as if it’s the only location for the facility. An organization or an agency engages in a campaign to establish the legitimacy of the decision and the urgent need for action after the decision has been made. When the organization opens the process up for public participation, they often find neighborhood opposition galvanized against them. Since the opposition is often localized, it is seen as an inevitable consequence of the site selection process. Developers need to understand that there are degrees of participation. Participation in site design and construction of a facility is not the same as participation in site location. The stealth nature of site selection breeds mistrust. The people most impacted by a development assume there must be risks associated with the proposed development. Otherwise, the powers that be wouldn’t be trying to sneak it pass them. If there are risks or a downside to a proposed development, then those factors should be recognized. Consensus can be built around an understanding of the adverse effects of a proposed development. When the adverse effects are made part of the negotiation process, neighborhoods gain leverage in the site selection process.
REFERENCES


Background Information and Material provided by:

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2. Taylor, Thomas, Dr., Assistant Director, Florida Conflict Resolution Consortium.
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