

“Out of the Ashes”: The 2005 UNF Environmental Conflict Resolution Exercise

Vision and Goals

In April of this year, the U.S. Census Bureau announced new projections estimating that by 2011 Florida would surpass New York as the third most populous state in the nation. By 2030, the Bureau projects, the state will have added over 12 million new residents to the nearly 16 million recorded in the 2000 census. As Florida's human population continues to grow at this staggering pace, it will necessarily place ever-increasing pressures on the state's finite natural systems. Consequently, UNF alumni in a wide range of professions will find themselves involved more and more frequently in conflicts relating to (sub)urban planning, land development, wetlands and forest conservation, energy production, global warming, species endangerment, ecosystem restoration, water and waste management, air and water pollution, fish and wildlife management, and a host of other environmental challenges. Just as these problems transcend human-defined geographical borders, the solutions to them require ways of thinking and modes of communication that can reach across disciplinary, professional, and other sociocultural boundaries. The University of North Florida is poised to have a significant impact on the future of the environment in Florida by training UNF students to think and communicate in just these ways, in the process of teaching them to practice sound environmental conflict resolution skills. We are developing the multidisciplinary Environmental Conflict Resolution Exercise as a way of bringing this crucial educational process to life.

Our first E.C.R.E. will focus on an issue that hits very close to home. From the 1920s to the 1960s the city of Jacksonville disposed of household garbage by burning it in large incinerators located near poor, largely African-American neighborhoods. The ash from these incinerators fell on homes and schools, churches and parks. Much of it accumulated near the incinerators themselves. Unbeknownst to city officials, this method of handling garbage was laying the foundation for a future of environmental and public health controversies. The incinerator ash contained what the EPA now characterizes as unacceptable levels of lead, along with arsenic, cadmium, and other toxins associated with major health problems, particularly in children and senior citizens. In the last few years different environmental justice and church groups have mounted fiery protests over what they view as a legacy of environmental racism—of the deliberate targeting of African-American neighborhoods by white segregationist city leaders.

In September, 2005 the city announced that it had settled a class action lawsuit with more than 3,800 city residents who claimed that they had been exposed to the toxic ash. The amount of the settlement sounds vast: \$75 million dollars. But the settlement, although it prevents future lawsuits against the city by these homeowners, actually settles very little. What will become of the EPA's \$100 million plan to clean up the Forest Street, Brown's Dump, 5th and Cleveland, and Lonnie Miller Park sites? Instead of enriching lawyers and compensating private homeowners, how might the money have been used to benefit the whole community? What collaborative decision-making processes could have eliminated the need for this sort of litigation in the first place?

In our meeting on November 19 students will play the roles of stakeholders brought together by the city to discuss the possible futures of the 10.5 acre Forest Street incinerator site (active from the 1940s to the 1960s), located just about one mile west of Jacksonville's downtown area and directly adjacent to "The Big I," the massive new I-95/I-10 interchange which is currently under construction. We will imagine that, rather than going to lawyers and plaintiffs, **\$25 million** of the settlement money is to be spent on the Forest Street site and the surrounding North Riverside community according to the recommendations of this public policy group. These recommendations must be unanimous; the city will not accept goals and action plans with which any stakeholders (however small a minority they might represent) are not in agreement. Students will thus be required to use their best skills both of persuasion and of collaboration as they work to answer questions like these:

- How will the EPA's planned cleanup of the site unfold? How much of the settlement money would need to be earmarked for remediation? How fully can the site be remediated? In other words, what lingering forms of contamination (if any) will need to be accounted for?
- What does the best available scientific data say about the toxicity of the ash and its health impact on area residents? What precautions will need to be taken in dealing with it?
- How does each stakeholder's constituency envision the site five years from now? Ten? Fifty? What role could the site play in the revitalization of the North Riverside neighborhood or even of Jacksonville's downtown? Which projects would benefit the maximum number of stakeholders and their constituencies? What challenges might stakeholders face in winning the support of their constituencies for the policy group's recommendations?
- What might the policy group do to remediate the economically toxic effects of Jacksonville's racist past as represented in some of the problems facing North Riverside? What kinds of projects, for instance, could make an impact on violent crime, drug use, and prostitution in the area?
- What can be done to serve the nonhuman residents of North Riverside? What would the policy group recommend doing, for example, to restore fish populations in McCoy's Creek? What forms of green space might be developed with the interests not just of humans but of plants and animals in mind?
- What steps will the policy group take to avoid negatively impacting *future* generations the way *current* generations have been affected by the city's lack of foresight in the previous century? How can the site best be developed with an eye to sustainability and to what David Lambert calls "intergenerational equity"?

There are no simple answers to these questions. But in learning to ask them, and in working to articulate intelligent, feasible, community-minded solutions to the toxic ash problem, we believe that students will be better equipped to engage in the real-life processes of environmental conflict resolution that will play an increasingly important role in shaping the future of a growing state, in a growing country, on a small and fragile planet.

Agenda for November 19

(with special thanks to Janice Fleischer of FLASH Resolutions, Miami)

- 8:30-8:50 Participants register and find their places
- 9:00-9:20 Facilitators—Tom Patton and Marcia Tjoflat—introduce themselves and discuss 1) characteristics of public policy groups in the “real world”; 2) nature of the collaborative process; 3) facilitator roles; 4) expectations of student participants; 5) consensus rules; 6) meeting guidelines (get adoption)
- 9:20-10:00 Stakeholders have three minutes per role group to introduce themselves and describe 1) their jobs; 2) their constituencies; 3) their visions for the Forest Street site
- 10:00-10:05 Facilitators present overview of toxic ash problem and invite stakeholders to brainstorm ISSUES
- 10:05-10:25 Stakeholders generate ISSUES and try to group related issues in larger categories (Environmental, Social, Economic)
- 10:25-10:35 Facilitators help stakeholders identify points of common ground between issue groups and identify GOALS
- 10:30-10:45 Break, plus organization of small groups based on issue categories (Environmental, Social, Economic) and GOALS
- 10:45-11:15 Small groups draft ACTION PLANS based on group GOALS
- 11:15-11:45 Small groups present ACTION PLANS to full group; get adoption of plans
- 11:45-12:00 (Longer if necessary/possible): Debriefing and feedback