

SHELTERFORCE *The journal of affordable housing and community building*

SPRING 2013 » OCTOBER 15, 2013

The Whole City's Watching

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A legacy of racial strife hangs over Little Rock, Arkansas, the city internationally known for the 1957 Central High School Crisis, in which an angry mob threatened the Little Rock Nine, the first black students to enter the high school after desegregation became mandatory. They had to be escorted in and out by law enforcement, and eventually the U.S. Army, to ensure their safety.

Though we've come a long way, echoes of this history have continued to be felt in the behavior of the city government and big business toward communities of color in the city.

Little Rock city planners in the 1960s and '70s followed national trends by promoting urban renewal policies that uprooted several traditional African-American neighborhoods. In the 1980s, construction of the Wilbur D. Mills Freeway (I-630) through central and east Little Rock displaced hundreds of African-American and working-class white residents. A federal lawsuit filed by residents claimed that there had not been a sufficient environmental review of the project and won many concessions, such as a more generous relocation package for displaced residents, but did not prevent the completion of the freeway, which essentially became a barrier dividing the more affluent neighborhoods to the north from the working-class and mostly African-American neighborhoods to the south.

Fast forward to the summer of 2011, when the Little Rock City Board of Directors asked voters to approve a major increase in the city sales tax to fund, among other things, a technology park for scientific research. The city's Chamber of Commerce, the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS), the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR), and the city had been planning the tech park for six years.

A coalition of community groups, including the Arkansas Community Organizations (ACO), and faith leaders like the Rev. Wendell Griffen of New Millennium Church opposed the tax, saying it was too much of a burden on poor and working families and that it was going to fund several proposals, such as the technology park, that amounted to millions of dollars in corporate welfare. Supporters of the sales tax prevailed, however, outspending opponents by a margin of 20 to 1. The results highlighted the deep divide in Little Rock marked by the interstate, as precincts north of I-630 voted overwhelmingly for the tax, while precincts to the south voted against it.

But the problem with the tech park went deeper than the tax. As many learned only the weekend before the election, it would also destroy one of three predominantly African-American neighborhoods in Central Little Rock. The Rev. Griffen invited several community members to his church to hear a presentation he had put together on the technology park that was based on a study completed by the ANGLE Technology Group, commissioned by the Chamber of Commerce in 2009. The ANGLE Report gave detailed maps and descriptions of the neighborhoods slated for demolition. "No one in our community knew about these plans. I was in shock," said Donna Massey, a community leader and resident of one of the targeted neighborhoods.

Following the election, the park's sponsoring institutions—the City of Little Rock, UAMS, and UALR—hand picked the members of the new Little Rock Technology Park Authority (LRTPA), including the president of the regional Chamber of Commerce and the city's most powerful Realtor. State statute gave LRTPA the power of eminent domain. With so much power and funding in place, the authority quickly gained a reputation of being unstoppable. Was another wave of displacement inevitable?



Homeowner Donna Massey protests the taking of her home by eminent domain for the Little Rock Technology Park on May 16, 2012.

Not for Sale

The LRTPA made little effort to communicate with residents living in the park's proposed footprint as the project got underway. Public board meetings were largely inaccessible to residents as they took place during work hours, were poorly advertised, and were intimidating to attend. Instead, news spread through word of mouth as neighborhood, faith, and community leaders told neighbors and friends. An African-American woman living in one of the proposed sites said of the experience: "They don't look at what they are doing. They come and see an area that got a lot of poor people staying here and say 'Let's go in there and get that property.' They're preying on the most vulnerable. This takes me back to slavery—they just come in and take."

The "most vulnerable" and their allies decided they were going to fight back. In March 2012 the Forest Hills Neighborhood Association, an organization in one of the targeted communities, began to protest by putting "Not For Sale" signs in front of homes. Realizing that no single organization could successfully stop the chamber-backed LRTPA, ACO members approached the Forest Hills Neighborhood Association, New Millennium Church, Occupy Little Rock, and others to build the We Shall Not Be Moved (WSNBM) Coalition. The coalition intentionally sought out both residents of the neighborhoods and nonresidents, demonstrating the broader public's disapproval of the LRTPA's plan.

Pushing further, the coalition found allies within the sponsoring institutions. Students from both universities and public health faculty at UAMS who had relationships with ACO as a student service-learning site quickly became advocates. Faculty even designed a course in which students studied the health impact of displacement. Having advocates within the very institutions sponsoring the technology park provided a direct path to individuals with the power to influence the actions of the LRTPA.

The coalition also pursued city directors who opposed the LRTPA's plan to take residential neighborhoods. One, City Director Ken Richardson, introduced an ordinance to cut city funding for the LRTPA if it used eminent domain to take homes. Having the topic on the agenda of city board meetings helped keep the issue fresh among city officials and the public.

WSNBM members hit the streets early and often, visiting the targeted homes to inform residents of the proposed plan and invite them to WSNBM meetings. They found many people were uninformed or misinformed of the situation they found themselves in because the LRTPA never contacted residents directly. One resident shared the feeling that "this research center has drove me crazy. I'm two steps away from having a nervous breakdown, because I'm in the 'what if' zone." Coalition organizers encouraged affected residents to attend the LRTPA and city director meetings to speak about the impact the project would have on them. Flyers with headlines such as "The American Dream—Our Homes—At Risk" were distributed with written accounts of personal stories. Many residents spoke about how long they had lived in their homes and what made their home valuable to them. They often complained about how insensitive the members of the LRTPA were. The stories of the people being displaced—tales of raising families, planting gardens, building businesses in this neighborhood—humanized the people affected.

The coalition planned several months of targeted actions directed at the LRTPA and sponsors. There were letter-writing campaigns, online petitions, a phone blitz, two boisterous demonstrations at City Hall, protests in front of LRTPA meetings, and a press tour of potential nonresidential sites identified by WSNBM.

The coalition also fundraised to bring Dr. Mindy Fullilove, a psychiatrist and Columbia University faculty member recognized for her research on the harmful impact of urban renewal, to consult for three days. In a public lecture attended by over 100 people, including the mayor, Fullilove warned of the damage from neighborhood displacement.

Fullilove explained how policies resulting in displacement and forced relocation have devastating consequences. Beyond the loss of land, social networks are often fractured and rarely rebuilt, people are usually left poorer than before relocation, and individual health is weakened through increased stress, anxiety, and feelings of powerlessness. Historically, policies that displace people fall disproportionately upon minority and low-income communities. Planners justify their actions using common stereotypes that blame the people living in the neighborhoods for problems such as crime and blight and it is often assumed that those individuals will not have the will or power to advocate for themselves.

Publicity from these activities began to sway public opinion in favor of residents and against the LRTPA. When members of the coalition gathered signatures at polling places near the proposed site of the technology park on primary election day, many people said that they had heard about the campaign and eagerly signed the petitions. Little Rock city directors reported receiving a lot of email on the issue in May and June.

Most actions were aimed at City Hall since it was city government that would provide the initial (and so far the only) funding for the demolition of the neighborhoods and the first phase of construction. With the public now on their side and three directors facing reelection in the fall, coalition members believed they had an advantage. WSNBM members challenged those three incumbent city directors for their seats. Although unsuccessful, their presence made the technology park an election issue and forced the incumbents to make promises to prevent the LRTPA from taking the neighborhoods.

Public Pressure Made the Difference

In June 2012, LRTPA announced a new plan to consider alternative locations. Subsequently, the city board passed a measure directing the LRTPA to study nonresidential sites for a six-month period. When pressured, Dr. Mary Good, the LRTPA chair, stated several times that the residential neighborhoods were off the table from consideration.

The coalition also caught the attention of the Arkansas Public Law Center, a new public interest law organization. The Center researched a legal challenge to the LRTPA's power of eminent domain and committed to represent residents should LRTPA return to the neighborhoods.

While Richardson's ordinance would have more decisively prevented the LRTPA from taking residential neighborhoods, WSNBM demonstrated that public opinion could be as effective as legislation.

Successful media engagement and positive relationships with bloggers, columnists, and reporters assured constant coverage of the issue. Reporting of formal meetings coupled with information obtained through regular Freedom of Information Act requests kept the public informed. Direct quotes from LRTPA members toward the community—often demeaning, insensitive, and insulting—were constantly in print and published online. When students from the UAMS College of Public Health presented their study based on in-depth interviews with 15 residents in the area targeted by the park, for example, Dr. Mary Good batted it away by complaining that it “was a small sample,” without acknowledging the legitimate concerns of people threatened with losing their homes. Another LRTPA member told residents at a public meeting they were being “too emotional” when speaking about the possibility of being displaced.

Headlines like “If I had a hammer, I'd hammer the Tech Park Authority” demonized LRTPA members and caused the sponsors to demand a change of course. Both the chancellors of UAMS and UALR addressed the Technology Park Authority and urged them to respond to the concerns of residents. The public shame directed toward the LRTPA was so widespread that it was ultimately one of the greatest factors that kept the neighborhoods out of the LRTPA's grasp. Another resident describes the general opinion by saying “Legally, they are using their position and power to their advantage and not considering the community and residents. They're bending the law to benefit them. . . . lying, stealing, and taking.”

“City Hall and big business are used to making decisions behind closed doors,” says community leader Donna Massey. “We pushed the doors open and let people know that their tax dollars might be used to destroy neighborhoods and displace homeowners. We won the battle for public opinion.”

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Published by the **National Housing Institute**