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## **Common Cause: A Comparative Case Study of Three Alabama Communities Organizing Against Landfills**

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**ABSTRACT** This paper documents the organizational strategies of three Alabama community groups that have mobilized against the siting of municipal landfills. All three communities are predominately African-American, rural and lower-income. The framework of environmental justice is applied to understand common elements of the three communities' experiences. The primary focus, however, is on differences between the cases that brought forward markedly different strategies. The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the different approaches taken by each community, and to identify factors and strategies that were crucial to success or failure from the perspective of landfill opponents. Responsiveness of local political leaders and their willingness to make a decision to approve a landfill proposal only after open public debate was found to be important, as was the ability of landfill opponents to effectively solicit support not only from the immediately affected community but from the county as a whole. Organizational approaches that emphasized active participation and self-education were more successful than control over group activities being in the hands of a small number of individuals, no matter how well-meaning. The three case studies also allow for consideration of purely political approaches to oppose landfill siting compared to formal legal challenges to such proposals.

The environmental movement has existed in various forms for over one hundred years. A resurgence of this movement in the 1970s and 1980s occurred during a period of social ferment and reflected renewed interest among well-educated middle-class whites in protecting wilderness and "getting back to nature." This mainstream movement was national in scope, organized through groups like the Sierra Club, and promoted environmental change through a series of legislative efforts as well as the personal efforts of individuals by encouraging them to donate money to preservation causes or to recycle. Parallel to

this mainstream, predominately white middle-class movement, many low-income and/or communities of color began to organize independently on a local level against immediate environmental threats in their neighborhoods, without the support of an established network of other people in different communities facing similar environmental problems. Only after Love Canal became national news did people realize there were other communities facing similar problems (Szasz 1994). Many communities made contact with Love Canal community activist Lois Gibbs, requesting advice on how to organize their own communities. These requests inspired her to form the Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, now known as the Center for Health, Environment and Justice. This national group, along with a number of regional groups, has come to play an important role in serving the needs of community-level organizers. According to Szasz, this grassroots movement has had a significant impact. "In 1976, less than half of [landfill] facility operators had said that public opposition was a problem for them. By 1979, a GAO survey of government and industry officials found that 'virtually all of the disposal industry officials interviewed indicated that public opposition was a major problem' " (Szasz 1994: 71).

As local opposition to siting landfills and other potentially troublesome facilities increased, the slogan of "not in my backyard" came to be the rallying cry of relatively wealthy communities, which were more effective in mobilizing against such facilities than were poor, minority communities. As a result, "not in my back yard" was transformed into "put it in the black's yard," as many of these unwanted land uses came to be located in communities of color. As this pattern became clear, African-Americans and other communities of color, highly politicized from the Civil Rights movement, began to organize against environmental threats to their communities, and a grassroots environmental justice movement began to emerge.

This paper examines the process by which communities organize to fight local politicians, business interests, and even the media in order to defeat a landfill proposal in their community. Research was conducted in three demographically similar communities to identify community concerns related to landfill proposals. One community has already defeated the landfill proposal for their county, another is currently fighting their landfill proposal in court, and the outcome of the reopening of a landfill in the third community still remains to be seen. The focus of the research was on the different methods each

community employed to fight proposed landfills and to determine what methods are effective or ineffective in these struggles. The analysis of these strategies will contribute to our understanding of community organization and collective behavior. The fact that all three communities are predominately African-American will expand the discussion of environmental justice in Alabama. Finally, and ideally, analysis of differing organizational strategies should provide practical insight to residents of the communities studied, and to other communities likely to face similar challenges in the future.

### **Environmental Justice**

The environmental justice movement is the result of a convergence between the environmental and Civil Rights movements. Yet the beginning of this movement is difficult to pinpoint. Some studies have traced environmental injustices as far back as the 1920s. In *Unequal Protection*, Robert Bullard (1994) uncovered information about the city of Houston showing that from the early 1920s to the late 1970s, all five of that city's landfills and six of eight solid waste incinerators were located in mostly African-American neighborhoods. This was a clear case of disproportionate impact, considering African-Americans only represented 28 percent of the city's population (Bullard 1994).

The struggle for environmental justice first gained national attention late in 1982 in Warren County, North Carolina. In 1978 over 30,000 gallons of toxic waste containing polychlorinated biphenols (PCBs) were illegally dumped along the roads of North Carolina. The state's only option was to dig up the contaminated soil and find a place to dispose of it. North Carolina decided to locate the dump in the Shocco Township of Warren County, the third poorest county in the state, with a countywide African-American population of 64 percent, and a 75 percent African-American population in Shocco Township. The dump represented an environmental health hazard in that it was only 7 feet above the groundwater supply of the community, 43 feet too shallow to meet federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations (Newton 1996). Despite the obvious health problems the landfill would cause residents when the PCBs found their way into their drinking water, the landfill was approved. Concerned citizens of the county, with the help of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, organized a protest that culminated in community members lying on

the road to physically block trucks filled with contaminated soil from entering their town. A total of 523 people were arrested (Coyle 1992). And even though these dramatic actions did not stop the dump from opening, the protests gained national attention and created the impetus for other communities in similar situations to organize.

The Warren County protest, along with a request from U. S. Congressman Walter Fauntroy, spawned another important step in the environmental justice movement --- the 1983 study conducted by the U.S. General Accounting Office (Lee 1993). The GAO study had a relatively narrow scope, as it only looked at the southeastern part of the United States, and focused on the correlation between commercial hazardous waste landfills, minority communities, and income. One of the most relevant statistics it found was that, in three out of four areas studied, African-Americans were the majority population living near a hazardous waste landfill. Given that African-Americans only constitute roughly 20 percent of the population in the southeastern United States, this finding was the first in a series of reports suggesting a pattern of siting such facilities in minority communities exists (U.S. GAO 1983). Overall it was significant as the first study to provide data on how race and income correlate with environmental pollution. As such, the GAO report raised more questions than it answered, provoking further study in this area. Probably the most important question raised was why the sites selected were more likely to be in minority communities. An independent study, published in 1987 by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States* (Commission 1987), was inspired by these unanswered questions. Instead of just looking at the Southeast, it provided a more comprehensive examination of environmental injustice on a national scale. One important finding was that three out of every five black and Hispanic Americans lived in communities with an uncontrolled toxic waste site (Commission 1987). The report summarizes its findings:

The proportion of minority members in communities with commercial hazardous waste facilities is double that of communities without such facilities. Where two or more such facilities are found, the proportion of minority members is nearly triple that in otherwise comparable communities. In fact, the best predictor of where to find hazardous waste is to classify communities by race, not income or real estate values. (Commission 1987)

Even though this study provided more information about the extent of environmental injustice, research was still needed to find out why this disproportionate impact was occurring.

One significant step in answering the question of disproportionate impact was Robert Bullard's 1990 book *Dumping in Dixie* (Bullard 1990). This book fleshed out the earlier statistical reports by using five case studies to give a more in-depth look at African-American communities dealing with a range of environmental hazards. *Dumping in Dixie* was also the first sociological study to examine the new environmental activism gaining momentum in African-American communities. Bullard's approach to environmental justice combines the roles of an academic sociologist and activist, with his greater goal being the mobilization of communities against environmental threats. The environmental justice movement has grown as a social movement that retains its roots in community organization. Even though larger regional, national and international environmental justice groups have developed, the movement has maintained its commitment to and respect for local communities, primarily focusing on local needs. By struggling in their own communities, networking with other communities, and getting in touch with larger, established groups, effective strategies of resistance are emerging along with a general consensus that on a local level a significant need exists for more public access to the political process (Solheim, Faupel and Bailey 1997).

## **Methodology**

The three study communities, located in Tallapoosa, Macon and Lowndes counties, were selected because all were simultaneously engaged in community struggles against proposed landfills in 2000. Further, the three communities share a number of common demographic characteristics (Table 1), being predominantly poor, rural, and African-American. Data for this paper were collected from observations of public meetings, unstructured and semi-structured interviews with group and community members, and meetings of community environmental groups. Introductions were made by employing the classic snowball approach, followed up by phone calls and personal meetings. As this paper developed, relevant sections were shared with community members for feedback and critique. This input from community members has been integrated into the final draft. Additionally, as this paper was finalized, the results were shared with the communities

**Table 1. Demographic Profiles of Case Study Communities, 1990.**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Alabama</b>	<b>Tallapoosa</b>	<b>Macon</b>	<b>Lowndes</b>
Population	4,040,389	38,826	24,964	12,658
Black (%)	25.8	24.6	84.0	74.7
Median income per capita	\$14,903	\$10,878	\$7,534	\$6,848
Poverty (%)	18.3	16.0	34.5	38.6
Pop. within census tract	—	1,185	1,384	960
Black (%) within census tract	—	55.4	75.0	51.0

Census tract figures refer to site where proposed landfill is/was to be located.

involved in the study by mailing them copies of the paper, as well as posting the paper on the Internet so it is accessible to anyone interested.

I began this project during the summer of 2000 in Tallapoosa County, in the Ashurst Bar/Smith community, gradually meeting many members of the community, interviewing them in their homes, and going to their community meetings. During this period, I also visited the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) to research their files for comprehensive information on landfill locations in Tallapoosa County. That proved to be problematic, as I was told some of the files I requested did not exist. The files I did look through were in disarray, with few in chronological order, information from different towns mixed together, and some information blacked-out. Documents I did find indicated a countywide pattern of landfill siting in African-American communities.

More time was spent in the Ashurst Bar/Smith community than in the other two study communities, where landfill controversies emerged only after I had begun the Tallapoosa county fieldwork. In approaching this first community, I relied on establishing contact with local leaders through a network of environmental justice activists in Alabama. The community proved highly receptive to my proposed

study. My basic approach was to conduct open-ended semi-structured interviews with leaders of the community group opposed to landfill operations. Over a six-month period I also attended meetings and participated in a number of community activities. I conducted formal interviews with 22 community members but spoke with scores more.

As the summer of 2000 progressed, massive landfills were proposed in both Macon and Lowndes Counties. Because the three affected communities and counties were demographically similar, I decided to expand my study to include the other two sites. Contacts made in Alabama's network of environmental justice activists, but especially the assistance of people from the Ashurst Bar/Smith community, greatly facilitated my entry into these two new research locales. This was especially true with the Macon county group, as I was introduced to them by members of the Ashurst Bar/Smith community at a Macon county anti-landfill meeting. I also attended some of their community meetings, and conducted 16 personal interviews using the same semi-structured interview technique employed in the Ashurst Bar/Smith community.

Becoming involved with the Lowndes County group proved to be more challenging, but a local mayor involved in fighting their landfill proposal helped me gain access to local residents who were willing to talk with me. I made several trips to Lowndes County, conducting 14 interviews and meeting with many other individuals.

In addition to interviews and participant observation during meetings and rallies, I monitored local and state newspapers, which devoted considerable attention to the Macon and Lowndes County controversies, but relatively little attention to the landfill fight in Tallapoosa County's Ashurst Bar/Smith community.

## **Case Studies**

These three case studies are not identical in format because the communities themselves are so varied --- it would be difficult to describe their collective experiences while maintaining a consistent format. For example, the Lowndes County case study essentially is divided into two case studies, Burkville and Lowndesboro. Due to the unique social history and demographic elements of that county, two grassroots groups organized against the same landfill; I separated them to evaluate, compare and contrast the two organizing efforts.



## **Tallapoosa County**

Ashurst Bar/Smith is located in the very southern-most part of Tallapoosa County, some 35 miles away from the county seat of Dadeville. While not a huge distance, it is far enough away from most county residents to be politically peripheral. It is, however, just seven miles outside of the city of Tallassee in neighboring Elmore County. In 1978 the Barker Landfill opened in the Ashurst Bar/Smith community, and received household, industrial and inert wastes from 19 counties in Alabama. The landfill closed in September of 1993, but the owner, with the support of the Tallapoosa County Commission and the City of Tallassee, has submitted a landfill application to ADEM. Tallassee Mayor Bobby Payne encouraged the Tallapoosa County Commissioners to reopen the landfill because he estimated it would save the city at least \$50,000 a year, largely due to transportation costs. In addition, as the county previously received all tax revenue (estimated in 1991 to be up to \$500,000 annually) generated from the landfill when it was in operation, with none of the revenue specifically earmarked to go to residents of the Ashurst Bar/Smith community, Tallapoosa County could benefit economically if the landfill reopened.

It is significant that ADEM limits its permit review process to issues of landfill design, geology, and hydrology. Any concerns regarding public acceptance are considered by ADEM to be outside its mandate. ADEM assumes approval by a county commission constitutes local acceptance, even though the local process is fraught with problems (Solheim et al. 1997). In this particular case, the geographic isolation of the Ashurst Bar/Smith community within Tallapoosa County contributed to their political marginalization. The County Commissioners, and most residents of Tallapoosa County, had little reason to pay attention to concerns of a relatively small number of people living near the county border.

The Tallassee Waste Disposal Center, as the Barker Landfill is now called, takes up 117.7 acres of the southern-most census block of the county. This area, which includes the Ashurst Bar/Smith community, has a total population of 1,185, most of whom are African-American. Data presented in Table 1 are based on census block reports, and show that 55 percent of residents in that block are African-American. However, due to residual segregated housing patterns, African-Americans make up 98 percent of those who live in the actual neighborhood where the landfill is located. This area is densely populated, with

houses right across the street from the landfill entrance, and a Head Start children's education center down the road.

When the landfill previously was in operation, under the same ownership, it was continuously plagued by problems that impacted the health, safety and quality-of-life for residents. Most of these problems were documented and recognized by ADEM. However, no action was taken to correct the problems, impose fines, or shut down the landfill, despite ADEM having repeatedly classified it as substandard. According to ADEM files, in 1983 the landfill operators repeatedly failed to submit required groundwater monitoring reports. In 1986, the site was described as a serious fire hazard, with no on-site security. In 1988, it was noted that the operator had disposed of waste outside the approved landfill area, and there were repeated citations for inadequate cover of trash, resulting in a significant number of areas that had exposed waste, erosion, water contamination, and problems with dogs uncovering waste for food. Also, there were no daily volume records kept, making it impossible to determine if the landfill exceeded the legal dumping limit of 450 cubic yards of waste a day. Despite this long history of problems, ADEM never withdrew the landfill's permit. The decision to close the landfill in 1993 was a business decision, just as was the decision to reopen the facility. Political leaders of Tallapoosa County and the City of Tallassee decided it was in their best interests to reopen this landfill over objections of local residents. ADEM appears willing to follow the lead of county-level officials and ignore past failings of this landfill operator.

Citizens from the Ashurst Bar/Smith community organized in June of 1991, after county officials approved landfill expansion and citizens requested a hearing. The group lay dormant after the landfill closed in 1993, but was reorganized into a 10-member steering committee in 1999 when County Commissioners approved a proposal to reopen the landfill. The members of the steering committee are mostly middle-aged, African-American women. Two members are retirees, four work in nearby Tallassee, and the other members commute to larger towns to work. One member lives 25 miles away, but has family ties to the community. The group describes its strategy in opposing the reopening of the landfill as direct action, which they define as public demonstrations, letters to the editor, fundraisers, and making legal, environmental and political contacts. For the most part, these strategies have been ineffective. For example, I attended a community fundraiser for the group, where they held a fish fry and raffle. The fundraiser was held

in front of a church, a few miles up the road from their neighborhood. The spot was picked because of greater traffic flow, but no banner or sign was displayed to identify the group, and they brought no handouts or literature to give people to inform them of their cause. Most patrons of the fundraiser thought that it was a church group. While the group did make some money, they missed an opportunity to educate local residents about their cause. Moreover, by having the fundraiser in a different area, they missed a chance to get other residents in their neighborhood involved. They also have had only two protests, both in 1999, at the Tallassee City Hall and the Dadeville County Courthouse, with few participants. They have submitted a total of six or seven letters-to-the-editor to the weekly Dadeville and Tallassee papers and the daily Alexander City paper, but have failed to attract larger media attention. The steering committee also has a lawsuit pending against the Tallassee Waste Disposal Center, based on contamination found in soil on private property near the landfill.

This group appears to devote most of its time and energy to interacting with state-wide and regional environmental justice groups like AAEJAN (Alabama African American Environmental Justice Action Network), NEJAC (National Environmental Justice Advisory Council) and SOC (Southern Organizing Committee) than it does with its own local community. Members of the steering committee are active in these organizations (one member is even the secretary for AAEJAN), and they feel these groups have provided them with a great deal of help. These affiliations may inform other community or regional groups about their fight to keep the landfill closed, but they do little to build local organizational strength. For example, in Alexander City (located in northern Tallapoosa County) there is an African American community that has had an landfill operating in their neighborhood since the 1960s. The steering committee of the Ashurst Bar/Smith group is aware that residents in Alexander City are angry and want to take action. However, they have not attempted to form a coalition with them, or even get them in touch with SOC or other outside groups to help them organize.

The Ashurst Bar/Smith group used to hold meetings irregularly whenever new developments about the status of the landfill occurred, but they now meet monthly in an effort to increase attendance. Typically twenty people attend, most of whom are African-American women, middle aged or older. The members say that in the past more people were active with the group. Some members of the community not involved with the group are frustrated by the steering committee's

focus solely on environmental issues, and feel that the steering committee ignores other issues that are related and just as important to the community. There is an overall sense that the steering committee isn't meeting the needs of the community, and isn't making an effort to educate the community about the issues. Said one resident, "they [the steering committee] are doing a great job, but they need to do more to keep the community informed and involved. We [community members] need something to do to feel active, a part of things, not just go to meetings."

### **Macon County**

In July of 2000, the Macon County Commission was given a landfill proposal by the county's wealthiest landowner, Milton McGregor, who had already purchased an option to buy the land where the proposed facility was to be located. The proposed landfill (Macon County Environmental Facility) was to be located in Shorter, a small town off Interstate 85 midway between Montgomery and Tuskegee where the McGregor also runs a large greyhound racetrack. Initially, the proposed landfill was to receive wastes from all states east of the Mississippi River, as well as all the states bordering the river to the west, with a maximum of 10,000 tons of waste being brought into the community daily. A month after the initial proposal had been submitted, due to public pressure, the president of the company pushing for the solid waste facility had amended the proposal to ask for only a 5,000 ton a day capacity. This capacity would still be twice the amount of the daily capacity of Alabama's largest existing landfill.

The landfill was estimated to cost up to \$15 million to build, and its planned location was on a 1,300-acre tract of land, with the actual landfill occupying 700 – 800 acres (Amy 2000). The rest of the land was to be used as a buffer zone and a flood plain (as a quarter of the property frequently is flooded). This mega-landfill, even at the smaller volume, would have been the largest in the state, and had the potential to create many environmental and quality-of-life problems for residents of Shorter and Macon County (Table 1). The most serious concern for the community was ground water quality. According to a hydrologist that the community hired, the site was not suitable for a landfill. The site was situated directly above the Eutaw aquifer, which supplies water for 20,000 residents in three counties. In addition, a local creek runs through the site and drains into the Tallapoosa River, a major source

of drinking water for Tuskegee. The Tallapoosa River then flows into the Alabama River, a main source of drinking water for nearby Montgomery. Other community concerns related to the landfill were noise pollution, increased traffic, odors and a decline in property values as well as associated health problems like odor-induced nausea and headaches, asthma and cancer.

Residents of Macon County began to organize against the landfill shortly after the County Commission first met on July 7, 2000 to discuss the landfill proposal. Initially it was just neighbor talking to neighbor in the Shorter area, but soon two brothers set up a neighborhood meeting, and almost instantly residents organized into the Macon County Citizens for a Safe Environment (MCCSE). Even though the area is predominately African-American, both black and white members of the organization said that they didn't want to stress or address the environmental racism aspect of the issue because they were afraid of creating divisiveness.<sup>1</sup> They only wanted to focus on the potential environmental hazards of a landfill. They decided that their first priority as a group was to get the whole county involved in opposing the landfill. Said one member, "I knew that if this was just a Shorter issue we would fail, we had to make it a countywide issue." They accomplished this goal primarily by getting Tuskegee residents involved with their organization and holding half of their meetings in Tuskegee, making their organization more accessible to residents all over the county. The MCCSE also began a letter writing campaign to all five County Commissioners, and threatened a write-in campaign against local politicians that were unsupportive of their needs in the next election. They actively sought out the support of people living in those districts, which successfully resulted in the County Commissioners receiving roughly 600 letters apiece. The organization attributes this widespread support and community participation to the size of the landfill (5,000 to 10,000 tons of waste per day). According to one resident, "the sheer magnitude of the landfill is what mobilized so many people to get involved."

Another factor that benefited the MCCSE was the presence of

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<sup>1</sup> Local activists declined to use the term environmental justice or focus on racial discrimination because race is a sensitive issue in this and all other Black Belt counties in Alabama. The ability of whites and African-Americans to work together in opposition to the proposed landfill was indeed one of the more positive things to come from this controversy.

Tuskegee University. Even though the university was 20 miles away from the proposed landfill, some professors and alumni became concerned and took it upon themselves to gather information about potential impacts the landfill could have on the county. The Dean of Agricultural and Natural Sciences became involved, and subsequently the President of the University came out against the landfill. Researchers then produced a four page report on the negative social, environmental and health impacts that the landfill could cause in the county. The President also became personally involved; he was influential in getting national civil rights leader Jessie Jackson to visit Macon County to speak out against the landfill at a rally attended by over 2,500 people. The rally attracted state and national media attention.

The group also successfully recruited the support of local churches and state politicians. All 130 churches in Macon County were already organized into a ministerial council, and were frequently involved or influential in local political matters. Once they were informed about the landfill, the ministers served as a source of information to their congregants, speaking out against the landfill, and announcing the dates of meetings and rallies. The MCCSE's media exposure and abundant public support gained them powerful allies in state politics, such as the Lieutenant Governor and Governor. The Governor was even quoted by a Montgomery newspaper as saying, "[McGregor's claim that a mega-landfill will benefit the county] is the most asinine idea I've heard come from Macon County since I've been alive. Tell Jesse I'm with him on this one."

Despite the overwhelming public support to stop the landfill, local news media was often biased or apathetic to local residents' concerns. The *Tuskegee News*, a local paper, was steadfastly pro-landfill and stressed the potential economic benefits it could provide the county. The MCCSE also had to contend with Milton McGregor, who ran a public relations campaign on TV, with commercial spots in support of the landfill that suggested it was necessary to combat an illegal-dumping problem. As a counterpoint to this pro-landfill media exposure, the MCCSE utilized the Internet to rally support for their cause. One member of the group constructed a website ([www.nodump.org](http://www.nodump.org)) which had local news, information on meetings, links to related articles, and research about environmental justice issues. Even though many in Macon County do not have access to the Internet, the website was still very successful as it provided the group a medium to express their point of view, especially to potential supporters outside the community.

The MCCSE also independently initiated actions that were key in organizing and informing the community. The group organized rapidly and without a definitive leadership structure of any kind. Instead of this developing into chaos, this loosely-structured approach created a situation where many people took on responsibility and initiative, working with others or on their own. Additionally, one member opened her home to the group at all hours, letting it serve as a de facto headquarters where people could use the computer, telephones or fax machine, or just drop by to help out in their spare time. The combination of loose structure and central place for interaction encouraged participation. As one resident said, "We never let the ball drop. We made every contact we could make. Some folks were only getting 4 hours of sleep a night." This open accessibility to resources and space allowed members to effectively raise money and support through telephone calls, and to collate information packets. Other actions varied, such as buying billboard space on a local interstate for a large "No Dump in Macon County" sign, and hiring their own independent geologist to assess the impact a landfill would have on the local water supply. Local youth also became involved and organized a candle light vigil against the landfill in the Town Square of Tuskegee. These actions both sustained and increased community involvement in the fight against the landfill, and subsequently attracted as many as 650 people to community meetings.

The MCCSE, like the other organizations studied, also employed outside help in their efforts. However, members of the MCCSE were consistent in saying that these organizations served primarily to provide assistance to the group, not leadership. For example, SOC had a community organizer come to Macon County, and much of the information on the group's website came from SOC as well. The Southern Environmental Law Center gave advice to the group on how to represent themselves to the media, and was willing to provide them with a representative for any public hearings.

This representation proved to be unnecessary, as the group acted swiftly, and defeated the proposal in only a month and a half -- before it even came to public hearings or the County Commission for a vote. The upswell of vocal opposition resulted in the County Commissioners taking public positions of opposition and the proposal was withdrawn. Once the landfill proposal was defeated, the MCCSE did not fade away. Instead, six months after having won their own battle, this community organization continued to help other communities fighting landfills,

including Ashurst Bar/Smith and Lowndes County, as well as to work on other problems that plague Macon County. Members feel that the struggle against the landfill united the county, and they used that momentum to try to get other positive things accomplished. Monthly roadside litter cleanups were conducted and attracted many participants, and the group continued to support other communities fighting landfills. The MCCSE, in conjunction with a local chapter of People Against a Littered State (PALS), also worked on eliminating illegal dumps in the area, as well as on establishment of a countywide recycling program. Other members of the MCCSE wanted to focus on eliminating illegal drugs from the area to make the county more desirable for industry. Others have mentioned organizing for a statewide moratorium on landfills. At this point it is unclear what direction the group will take, and while many members are still active, the level of involvement is significantly less than it was before the landfill proposal was defeated.

### **Lowndes County**

In 1964, Highway 80 gained attention as the route of the historic Selma-to-Montgomery march that led to passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. In 1998, Highway 80 was designated a National Historic Trail. In the same year the Lowndes County Commission voted in favor of opening a 230-acre landfill on a 680-acre site off of Highway 80. The proposed landfill is located one mile from Lowndesboro, a middle-class and mostly white town of 139 residents in a mostly black county. However, the landfill would be adjacent to the predominately African-American community of Burkville (see Table 1, Lowndes County). If permitted, the landfill would accept wastes from the whole state except for the cities of Birmingham and Mobile, and it could bring in a maximum of 1,500 tons of household waste a day. Burkville is also the site of a large plastics plant operated by General Electric, which, in 1998, discharged 479,000 lbs of recognized carcinogens into the air ([www.scorecard.org](http://www.scorecard.org)).

According to residents, the landfill proposal for Lowndes County was submitted to the County Commission in the fall of 1997. Most local residents did not become aware of the proposal until July 4<sup>th</sup> 1998, when an article about the landfill proposal was published in the *Lowndes Signal*, a countywide weekly paper. The County Commission subsequently held one public meeting to listen to residents voice their concerns about the landfill. At this meeting, the Commissioners chose



to remain silent, replying to all questions by mail. The landfill proposal was passed in August of 1998 with the support of four out of five Commissioners in a meeting that some residents contend violated Alabama's Sunshine Law which requires all such meetings be advertised in advance and made open to the public. Despite public opposition, the Commissioners justified their support based on their belief that the landfill could improve the local economy of one of the most impoverished counties in the state. It is estimated that the landfill could bring in \$350,000 to \$500,000 per year in fees for the county, none of which is specifically designated to go to the affected communities. Local County Commissioners also said that the proposed landfill would help reduce litter and illegal dumping as well as reduce or eliminate the garbage rates county residents pay for waste disposal. The question of future fees, if any, is unclear because the County Commission and the company wanting to build the landfill, Alabama Disposal Solutions (ADS), have signed five different contracts that stipulate different agreements. Either way, local opponents insist that these benefits are minimal compared to the possible damage that the landfill could cause to the environment and the small but potentially important tourist industry, which local residents hope will grow now that the National Historic Trail designation exists. Another concern of residents is that the proposed landfill is located in the Tallawassee Creek basin, which feeds into the Alabama River and could possibly affect the purity of the area water supply. As one resident stated, "the economic benefits of landfills are equivalent to selling illegal drugs - a few people become wealthy while killing the community."

Because the County Commission approved the landfill in the face of great public opposition, local residents feel they have been shut out of the political process. This perceived lack of access has caused many in the community to become suspicious of their representatives; a phenomenon that has been documented in other cases as well (Solheim et al. 1997). For example, the owner of ADS is a friend of the Governor, and many residents feel that this has prevented local and state politicians from speaking out against the landfill. Other suspicions include allegations of County Commissioners receiving monetary kickbacks in exchange for their support of the landfill, and even concerns of organized crime being involved. In the words of one Lowndesboro citizen, "We've been forgotten. None of the people we've voted for are representing us, just because there is a lot of money in this."

Like the Ashurst Bar/Smith community in Tallapoosa County, the citizens of Lowndes County didn't begin to organize their fight against the landfill until after the County Commission had approved ADS' proposal. Unlike the residents of Macon County, instead of uniting into a larger organization, the citizens organizing in opposition of the landfill in Lowndes County have divided themselves into two groups, representing two different communities, and taking different approaches in fighting the landfill. Predominately white Lowndesboro has pursued their fight in court, while mostly African-American Burkville is centering their efforts on the community level.

On December 8, 1998, the city of Lowndesboro passed an ordinance to prohibit a landfill within the town limits and police jurisdiction. The County Commission had already approved the landfill that would fall within the city's police jurisdiction. ADS then filed a lawsuit against the city, claiming the ordinance had no legal basis<sup>2</sup>. Because the landfill was already approved, the citizens of Lowndesboro felt their only option was to fight the landfill in court. Said one resident; "We have a chance to change the permitting process for landfills in the state of Alabama forever. We are going to pursue this legally until we can't anymore."

As the city saw that their fight was going to end up in court, they began to set up a financial and advisory board primarily to raise funds through donations to pay their legal fees. This board was finalized in September of 2000, and raised around \$50,000. The financial and advisory board meets monthly to discuss their current financial situation, and usually one of their lawyers is there to inform the board of the progress of their various legal actions. They also open the floor for any community member to speak and offer suggestions for other strategies to fight the landfill. The board currently has 22 members and was intentionally set up to be biracial (with 11 black and 11 white members). This board is also the only group studied that has not utilized help from any outside organization, with the notable exception of their lawyers.

The City of Lowndesboro, with the support of the financial and advisory board, has instigated two additional lawsuits that they hope will defeat the locally approved landfill proposal. Their first lawsuit was against ADEM on the grounds that ADEM did not follow correct procedures in accepting the permit, as well as the fact that ADEM has

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<sup>2</sup> In January of 2001, a Lowndes County judge ruled against the city, on the basis that their city ordinance was unconstitutional.

yet to implement a statewide solid waste management plan as required by a 1989 Alabama law. ADEM proceeded nonetheless to approve a construction permit on July 19, 2000. However, on November 29, 2000, a Montgomery judge issued a stay against any building of a landfill off Highway 80. The judge ruled that “all proceedings concerning the issuance of a solid waste permit to Alabama Disposal Solutions landfill for the operation of the Tallawassee Ridge Solid Waste Facility shall be stayed pending adoption of a state solid waste management plan according to ADEM.” In order to circumvent this ruling, ADS has lobbied in support of a legislative bill that, if passed, will override this ruling by repealing the law requiring a state solid waste plan. If the bill passes, it will then allow this landfill to be constructed, as well as other landfill projects that had been put on hold due to this ruling (*Birmingham News* 2001).

The City of Lowndesboro has also filed a lawsuit against the County Commission and ADS. This lawsuit is based on the City’s claim that the County Commission’s approval of the landfill proposal on August 10, 1998 was invalid. There have been five different contracts between the County Commission and ADS, four of which were signed on behalf of ADS by a person with no legal authority to do so. That lawsuit is still pending.

The second local group, the Lowndes Citizens United for Action (LCUFA), is based out of Burkville, a predominately African-American and lower-income community that is a short distance from the city of Lowndesboro. The roots of the group began in 1998 when the landfill proposal first became known, but the LCUFA formally organized in August of 2000, with the aid of SOC. While they support the city of Lowndesboro’s legal efforts, overall the LCUFA is hesitant to rely solely on the Alabama court system. Rather, LCUFA focuses their efforts on community activism, encouraging residents to write letters-to-the-editor, go to County Commission meetings, and ADEM meetings and hearings. The group meets once a week, and attendance at meetings can vary from 5 to 50 people. The LCUFA, while having structured meetings, has no formal leadership structure; rather, it’s a collaborative effort, with the main goal of getting all members to be active participants. Members are all active on one of the many action committees the group has set up, like the public relations committee, or the county waste management plan committee.

In contrast to Lowndesboro’s single focus, the LCUFA is also more broad based, concentrating on multiple issues such ineffective

political representation, literacy and county machine politics, as well as fighting the landfill and advocating for a countywide master plan for garbage and recycling. As of July 2001, the group has also led a successful campaign to stop a large poultry plant from locating in their community, and are currently involved in fighting the building of a coal burning power plant nearby, a project which ironically many members of the Lowndesboro anti-landfill group support. As a group, the LCUFA feel both local and state politicians have ignored them. The group also complains that their state representative doesn't return their phone calls or answer their letters, and their state senator refuses to meet with them, saying that such a meeting would violate his integrity. In an effort to reclaim political power in their county, the LCUFA recently organized a write-in campaign for their own candidate for County Commission. Even though he lost by 125 votes, because he received that much support as a write-in candidate in a county they feel is controlled by a political machine, the election was still seen as a victory by the group. The run for office has also increased the community's interest and participation in local politics. One local resident feels that "this whole [political] process is not citizen friendly, it is designed to shut people up and keep people out of the process so that the power structure can make the decisions they want to. We want to change that."

Another source of frustration for the group is the lack of support they have received from civil rights groups. While they do receive support from individuals affiliated with civil rights organizations, residents feel that civil rights organizations will not support their cause because they don't want to go against local black leaders, many of whom endorse the landfill. The group claims the only African-Americans that support the landfill are the political elite, and are out of touch with citizens' needs. When Jesse Jackson came to Lowndes County, shortly after the defeat of the Macon County Landfill, many local African-American political leaders, except for the newly elected Mayor of Selma, failed to meet with him. Additionally, the state president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (who is also an Alabama State Senator) has formed a task force to study landfill problems in Alabama. Yet Lowndes citizens and other critics assert that his intention with this project is to set up a landfill proposal in Perry County.

Both the Lowndesboro and Burkville groups are also frustrated with media attention that the landfill has received. With the exception of the announcement of the proposal in the *Lowndes Signal* in 1998,

the landfill received little media coverage until June 2000. One main complaint is that the Montgomery media is not giving Lowndes County fair representation, as they have not investigated further the relationship between the Governor and the developer of the landfill, nor have they really questioned the legitimacy of ADEM's permitting process. Many residents believe this is because the Montgomery media is hesitant to go against the governor. Another problem is that the local paper, the *Lowndes Signal*, has come out in support of the landfill. However, media coverage in the local and Montgomery papers increased once the lawsuits were final. In addition, a member of the LCUFA prints a free newsletter roughly four times a year with information about the landfill and other local issues.

### **Effective Strategies for Community Organization**

The three community case studies presented here have both similarities and dissimilarities. All three African-American communities were confronted with a landfill proposal that raised environmental justice issues. The communities differed, however, in the approach taken, the types of organizations formed, and in the responsiveness of local political authorities to public concerns. This variability represents an important contribution of this paper to the environmental justice literature, and to our understanding of how minority communities respond to outside proposals to establish landfills in their midst. I believe several factors will help us understand both the similarities and the differences in the experience of the three case study communities discussed here: countywide support, active participation, self-education by group members and timing of mobilization.

The Macon County case, and to a lesser extent the Lowndes County case, indicates that broadening the organizational base beyond the individual community affected greatly increases the effectiveness of grassroots mobilization (Walsh, Warland and Smith 1997). In Alabama, as landfills are effectively approved at the county level, it is necessary to have the whole county unified and involved to successfully oppose a landfill. In the Ashurst Bar/Smith community of Tallapoosa County, for example, geographic isolation has made it easier for the County Commission to ignore the community's opinions and needs. While the representative from their district has always been consistent in supporting their opposition, his vote is only one out of five. If the Ashurst Bar/Smith group were to create a coalition with the community

in Alexander City (located in northern Tallapoosa County) that also has a landfill in their neighborhood, they could potentially double their influence with the County Commission. If they expanded their efforts even further by trying to make contacts and gain support in every district, as the Macon County group did during their letter writing campaign, it could make them a local political force to be reckoned with. The Steering Committee's strategy of depending on larger regional organizations may have attracted some legal help and more exposure, but in the long run it also may have alienated them from the very community they originally were working to serve. Over reliance on an outside group is fraught with danger (Alley, Faupel and Bailey 1995). However important external networks may be, building a strong local organization responsive to local needs is the first order of business in any successful grassroots campaign.

The Lowndes County organizations have also subverted their potential political power by remaining divided into two separate groups. Both groups would be more powerful if united by combining the Lowndesboro group's financial assets with the community-based mobilization that the Burkville group could provide. Yet as it stands now, no one from Lowndesboro attends the LCUFA's weekly meetings, and only a few of the LCUFA's members go to the monthly advisory board meetings in Lowndesboro. Unfortunately, this situation, according to residents, may be a remnant of racial divisions in that county, 35 years after the civil rights movement. Environmental justice issues such as this may produce a more unified community in the future, as they did in Macon County. However, the current reality for Lowndes County and other communities like theirs is continued division that landfill supporters, or proponents of other forms of locally-unwanted land uses, can and often will exploit.

Another crucial factor in the effectiveness of a community organization is that members must be active participants, not warm bodies filling seats at meetings. In advising local communities on how to organize, the Center for Health, Environment & Justice recommends creating an expansive and inclusive community group because "broad-based coalitions are much more effective and more likely to be successful" (Kornfeld and Subra 1990). They also recommend forming committees as a means of delegating work, responsibility and leadership. This creates an environment where everyone involved feels like they are contributing to the group as a participant, not an idle observer. They even recommend forming committees to maximize all aspects of

community involvement, such as a student committee, technical committee, publicity, fundraising, etc. (Kornfeld and Subra, 1990). Another community-based “how to” manual, put out by the Citizens’ Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, expands on this idea, giving pros and cons to different organizational structures (top down vs. collective) and even has recruitment strategies (Colette 1993). Of all of the groups studied, the Macon County group and the Burkville community group seem to be the most effective in actively involving their members to participate along these lines, which was a strong factor in the ability of the Macon County group to defeat their landfill proposal. Encouraging broad participation also played an important role in politicizing and motivating the Burkville group.

A case study of eight New England communities faced with hazardous waste incinerator proposals focused on effective strategies of resistance and found that effective community mobilization is based on political, not legal, action. According to Walsh et al. (1997), “Litigation typically alienates people and reduces participation as money is collected to pay distant attorneys with little real passion for [the] cause.” They also found that courts were unlikely to rule in favor of citizen challenges to local government initiatives (Walsh et al. 1997). Even though the setting and the issue were different from the three Alabama case studies, the findings are similar. While Lowndesboro is not the only community studied to take their opposition of a landfill proposal to court (the Ashurst Bar/Smith community also has a lawsuit pending), they are the only community to rely on the courts as their sole means of opposition. This dependence on the courts reduces the ability of the community to actively participate in the opposition. This sole reliance on the courts also makes the community vulnerable if they do not prevail with their litigation. As Cole (paraphrased by Schlosberg 1999:130) noted, “[Community tactics need to be diverse], the importance [is] of focusing on the building of a movement, rather than on specific court victories.”

Another effective means of organizing a community is to encourage concerned residents to educate themselves on the potential effects that a locally unwanted land use could have on their community and to spread this information throughout the community. Previous research on community organizational techniques supports the need for community-based education on the issues. In “PUEBLO Fights Lead Poisoning” two community activists detail their community organizational strategies, including a massive community education program

to direct action strategies. One technique they recommend is using education as a recruitment tool, by having the organization go to social groups, schools, churches, and homes, and conduct educational sessions (Calpotura and Sen 1994). The MCCSE of Macon County was extremely effective in educating residents of their county, taking advantage of many resources available to them. By getting Tuskegee University involved, they were able to provide credible information about the potentially negative social, health and environmental impacts the landfill could have on the county. They were then able to use flyers, information packets and even the Internet to make this information widely available to residents of the area. The LCUFA of Lowndes County made it a priority to inform and recruit residents around the landfill issue through the free newsletter *Esther's Trumpet*. The Ashurst Bar/Smiths community also provided local residents information regarding their landfill through pamphlets and information packs.

But perhaps the most crucial factor in determining whether effective mobilization will take place is something over which citizens generally have little control – the timing of the controversy itself. In Alabama, County Commissions are required to publish public notice on hearings regarding public issues such as landfill proposals. Yet more often than not, the public notices are published in a small ad, in small print, in the classified section of local papers that usually have very low readership. This allows the legal requirements to be met, but in reality the public is not informed, leaving the County Commissioners to make decisions without public input. In this situation, the public is not aware of the issue until it has been approved by their local representatives, as seen in the case of Lowndes and Tallapoosa Counties, making effective opposition at that point a near impossible task. The Macon County group is the only community thus far to be successful in their opposition to a landfill proposal. This success largely is due to the willingness of the Macon County Commission to solicit input from the public before voting on the issue. A month and a half later, due to a massive public outcry, the landfill proposal was withdrawn, and not even voted on, solely because the public had the time and the opportunity to mobilize.

Successfully organizing residents of a community cannot ensure that local residents will be able to prevent approval of an unwanted landfill. The most serious threat in the Alabama context comes from the local political representatives of the community. Current political trends emphasize returning power to local hands; yet this paradigm overlooks the reality that the local political process frequently is flawed.



County Commissioners are desperate for tax revenues and landfill developers promise to provide the county with desperately needed funding. In addition, there seems to be a pattern of locating landfills in the geographic and political margins of a county, in small communities far from the county seat. This can create a divided county, as residents nearest to the landfill may be concerned with potentially negative environmental and health impacts, while most residents have little reason to protest a landfill located far from their homes, and may even support a plan which would provide additional revenue for local government operations without the need of raising tax rates on sales or property. This reflects a struggle over scarce resources, short-term tax revenue versus potential long-term environmental problems, and determining who gets to benefit the most. Yet ADEM, with no state-wide solid waste plan to guide their issuing of permits, is leaving it up to local governments to act in the public interest in landfill siting decisions.

As there are conflicting needs and interests, a community needs and should have ample time to discuss and evaluate what is in their best interest. Unfortunately, those people impacted the most by such decisions are frequently shut out of the decision-making process. As best stated by Peter Montague, "It is now clear that the root cause of pollution and poisoning has been a long string of bad decisions made behind closed doors" (Schlosberg 1999).

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