Most states and cities have urban camper communities. Populations vary from one to several hundred. These people live in tents or shanties without services or utilities. Many residents go to work, access shopping and services and send their children to school. They are not quite the same as the homeless, because their camp communities are their homes. Public safety and social service agencies know these people, but they are invisible to the average citizen. Many urban campers are US citizens, but the mainstream community has traditionally overlooked their legal and personal rights. Acknowledging their rights may incur legal problems for local governments.

Land development and land use changes can often force these people out of their campsite locations. Sometimes they find out about changes the morning the bulldozers arrive. A widening
of US Highway 301 in Sarasota, Florida was going to displace hundreds of urban campers who lived in wooded patches along the roadway. FDOT asked a CIA team to identify the scope of the problem and to make the displacement go better than it has in the past. The CIA team surveyed social service agencies in the area. Many urban campers utilize these agencies on a regular basis. As traditional CIA meetings were not feasible or welcome, agency staff became the conduit for communication with the informal camp leadership. The CIA team kept the social service agencies updated. Before construction started the majority of urban campers had melted away and formed new communities.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The project was a simple roadway widening of approximately 3.8 miles. The US 301 corridor is a north/south principal urban arterial highway and is part of the Federal Aid Primary and State Highway Systems. Located in a populated area of Sarasota County, FL, this part of Florida has seen significant population growth. What fifty years ago was cow pasture or palmetto scrubland with an occasional upland tree was now gone. It was now small businesses surrounded by apartment buildings and single-family homes. The area included Newtown Neighborhood, an old, established minority neighborhood just north of downtown Sarasota. Capacity improvement alternatives ranged from a Transportation Systems Management solution to a six-lane curb and gutter section. The potential roadway improvement outside of downtown Sarasota included widening from a 4-lane to a 6-lane roadway. It sure wasn’t country anymore.

An FDOT biologist was the first to find the campsites. They were in small pockets of undeveloped woodlands (ranging from ½ acre to 2 acres) scattered along the existing roadway. Over time these had been cut off from normal access and development. No one cared for, monitored, or mowed them. Most were not fenced. An active CSX rail-line cut through several. These spaces were the prime candidates for placement of the retention ponds. They were close to the roadway, undeveloped and had adequate size for typical stormwater retention areas.

They first campsite was a single tent just inside the trees and shielded from view by some bushes. Campsites were found in all of the areas. One was a collection of 25 – 50 tents. It was large enough to be a state park campground if it were not for the presence of semi-permanent cardboard shanties and the absence of cars. A strange thing was the eerie absence of people. All those tents, and not a person in sight.

The FDOT team was puzzled. How could so many people live in an urban area and not be noticed? Where did they come from? Where did they go during the day? Who else knew about these people? Did any one else know they were there? How do we communicate with them? Did they have any rights that should be considered if the property was taken for retention ponds? Did the property owners (often governmental entities) know about them or have any responsibilities to or for them?

Historically, minority and low-income populations have been under-represented in the transportation planning and development process. Executive Order 12898 dictates that all members of a community have an opportunity to express their concerns and ideas early in the
PD&E process. In compliance, the USDOT established an environmental justice policy in April, 1997 that promotes public involvement efforts for minority and low-income groups.

**COMMUNITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

To resolve the urban camper situation and to respond to Newtown Neighborhood concerns over the US 301 roadway widening, FDOT initiated a formal Community Impact Assessment (CIA). The CIA would evaluate the effects of improvements along US 301 on the homeless community living in adjacent undeveloped properties, as well as on the more traditional long-term established residential community.

In widening the US 301 roadway, several issues surfaced. These included maintaining community cohesion and character in the affected mainstream communities, establishing safe crossings for pedestrians and improving both aesthetics and livability along US 301. It was also decided that the CIA process would attempt a gentler removal of the urban camper community.

CIA activities for the mainstream communities were traditional, community meeting intensive programs. This paper focuses on the initiative with the urban campers.

**Contacting the Urban Camper Community**

With the numerous, separate urban camper communities, constructing the retention ponds would definitely impact them. These communities usually find out they are losing their dwellings on the morning the heavy equipment shows up. The eerie absence of people at the campsites noted earlier was due to many of the tent dwellers holding day jobs. With the current construction startup process, campers returning home from their day jobs would discover their tents and entire life holdings gone – smashed by the bulldozers. This time things would go better.

The first step was to check with local law enforcement. Local police knew about the situation in general, but not in detail. As long as the tent people didn’t hassle the regular public too much, the police didn’t get involved. The second step was to check with local social service agencies such as the Salvation Army.

The CIA team met with local governmental bodies, the Salvation Army and other social service agencies (SSA’s). SSA’s include outreach ministries, Housing agencies, Free clinics, Emergency rooms, Soup kitchens and the Red Cross. SSA staff members have the most daily contact with urban campers SSA’s. They are also the people most trusted by the campers. Many of these agencies were impressed that the FDOT was attempting to resolve both the human and engineered issues.

Research was available through the Salvation Army in Sarasota County. As of December 2001, there were approximately 3,000 urban campers in Sarasota County. The general profile of urban campers is quite sad:

- 1/3 have substance abuse problems
- 1/3 suffer from mental health problems
• 1/3 came from regular living situations, but could no longer pay rent.
• 40% are female
• Many communities have an informal governing body to keep order and safety.
• The average age of an urban camper community is only 9 years old.
• If a person has been living in the camps for over a year, it is 90% likely they will not reenter regular society. They will have learned the urban camper system.
• Many campers have day jobs.

Campsites, some of which held up to 100 tents, offer an interesting view on a little known segment of our community. Within the urban camping population, females are the fastest growing segment due to:

• lack of education, resulting in lower wages, making it difficult/impossible to be self-supporting with children; and
• the governmental systems are more supportive of women and children without husbands/fathers.

This encourages family breakups in hard times. In addition, many women prefer the camps or abandoned cars (soft walls) to hard walled structures such as an abandoned house or an SSA apartment. It is easier to escape dangerous situations and men if you can avoid being cornered in a real corner. There is also a hierarchy within urban camps, with leadership, rules and regulations. For example, if a camper receives a monthly government support check, many camps require that part of it go to the community food pot. The camper system teaches members how to cash their checks, locate day jobs, and generally survive on the edge of society. Many campers also prefer campsites to structured housing. The camper system also allows cohabitation, smoking and drinking, whereas the Salvation Army would not.

**Community Impact Assessment Plan**

We wanted to notify the campers of the upcoming construction and the need to relocate. Formal relocation was not an option. Any agency or government that helped move campers or suggested a new place to camp might incur liability. There would also be “Not in my neighborhood!” issues at any new site. Some of the campers would prefer to find their own new sites anyway. We talked with the Sarasota County Parks and Recreation Department to discuss Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) methods for park safety and the process for notifying prior to construction.

We could not arrange regular public involvement workshops or campsite meetings. There was no formal two-way communication. They do not trust most government representatives. Our CIA plan therefore, has the following two components:

• **The Method:** We used the staffs of the SSA’s to put the word out to the campers. Through the SSA network, we alerted a leader from each major camper community of construction start dates (6 months in advance). We kept the SSA staffs informed and asked them to keep talking to the leaders in the periods up to and during construction.
The Message:
- You (urban campers) are on private property.
- You will need to relocate yourselves. If you do, there will be no police involvement.
- We will follow up the verbal notification at the SSA’s with flyers handed out at each SSA and posted in or near the campsites. (Note, the CIA team must be accurate about the construction dates or it will lose credibility in the future.)
- The flyers were done in the languages of the campers. We used Spanish and English. For low literacy reasons we wrote the information at grade school level. We listed all government and SSA services available for this and other problems, with contact information.

RESULTS

Construction has not yet begun. To our surprise however, site visits reveal that the communities have already melted away, except for an occasional solo camper. We cannot contact the campers to see where they moved to. SSA staff says they probably moved early to get a good choice of new sites. We do know that the move went simpler for FDOT, and it had to have been kinder for the residents of the camps. We recommend that any project on the rural/urban interface check for the presence of these people.