

The Lake Sidney Lanier Land Use Controversy

Overview

Land use and development is an enduring public issue facing many communities across the nation. Growth related land development places pressure on the environment as communities attempt to balance their needs for more transportation, housing, shopping, industry, leisure, and recreation. Lake Sidney Lanier, a man-made reservoir in Northeast Georgia, is currently the subject of an intense political struggle because the rapid development of areas surrounding it have affected the health and balance of this important ecosystem. Rapid population growth has surrounded the lake with many housing developments and increased water sport recreational activities. Animals and their habitats are affected by these expanding uses of the lake and the surrounding land area. As a result, many opinions are in conflict over how Lake Sidney Lanier should be managed. The case study that follows is located in a lakeside community, however it can be modified for any area that is experiencing growth that may threaten existing ecosystems.

In this case study, students are first introduced to a collection of stakeholders involved in a lakeside development controversy. Students learn how these stakeholders feel about the use of lake and the tradeoffs that come with changing uses. Groups are then formed to represent each person's view and they are engaged in finding support for that view using a variety of Websites, newspapers, interviews, and public opinion polls.

The information gathered in the groups is then organized into presentations given at a mock Commissioner's meeting*. Each group, representing the interests of one of the concerned people, presents their information to the Commissioners and listens to the decision that the Commissioners ultimately make. Students then discuss their part in the outcome of the meeting and explain how they feel about that outcome. Finally, students are asked to write a one-page assessment of the Commission meeting outcome and decision making process.

* Note: You will need to create your own County Commissioners group of 5 to 7 individuals from available adults or request the involvement of your existing County Commissioners. Parents, teachers, administrators, clerks, and other adults can be invited to participate in the final mock commission meeting.

Lesson 1: Local Access to Political Power

Materials:

Handout #1: Development Difficulties

Handout #2: Stakeholder Profiles

Procedures:

1. Have students read Development Difficulties (Handout #1). Brainstorm a list of the different problems (need for growth, employment, recreation, habitat for wildlife) that are presented by the scenario and list these on the board. Help the students refine their understanding of key terms such as land use, infrastructure, and commissioner, so that everyone is working with the same ideas and frames of reference.
2. Identify the different positions that the citizen stakeholders might be expected to have regarding the new housing development. Divide the students into research groups that will take the position of each citizen stakeholder. (You may wish to give the students some choice in their selections.) Give each group a profile of its stakeholder (Handout #2) and allow them to discuss what this person might use as evidence to support his or her point of view.
3. As a homework assignment ask the students to create a list of five problems and concerns that their stakeholder might encounter in daily life. Then they should try to imagine how these influence or contribute to their view of the development dilemma.

Handout #1: Development Difficulties

As the dim light of morning filtered softly through the pine trees Alex and Emily Burton performed a familiar ritual. The fishing tackle was already in the car and bait worms were waiting in the old back porch refrigerator. Alex examined the worms to make sure they were still alive. Emily poured coffee into her thermos and packed a small cooler with sandwiches and fruit. Fishing was a family tradition that Alex and his mom, Emily, had done at almost every opportunity since he was just a young boy. Now that middle school was almost over Alex thought that his frequent family fishing trips might soon come to an end.

As Alex and his mom drove the route to their favorite fishing spot he thought back about the many times he had taken this familiar path. He had played along the shoreline of the cove with his best friend during the summers exploring the different habitats of the animals that lived there. He wondered if the beaver dam he had discovered last fall was still there. He was anxious to see if the baby turtles were new baby turtles and he wanted to see if the owl had returned for its summertime visit.

As Alex and his mom approached the cove they heard the sounds of large earth moving machines at work. Rounding the last curve they saw a temporary 2x4 and plywood sign announcing the development of a new lakeside community. Beyond the sign the road to their favorite fishing cove was blocked by uprooted trees. Huge yellow machines leveled the ground and shaped a swarm of the new streets for the housing development. Noise, clouds of yellowish dust, and the odor of diesel fuel filled the air.

Looking at his mother, Alex remarked, "Well there goes our fishing cove. Guess there'll be no fishing from there any more. Where else are we going to go, Mom? And what's going to happen to all the animals that lived here? The developers are going to ruin everything. Where can we go this summer to fish and where will the turtles, beavers, and owls go?"

Emily said, "I don't know, but I know what I can do about it!"

Casting an exasperated look her way Alex said, "You can't do anything about this, you know those people can do anything they want. They have the money and they have the power. All you are is one person against the whole bunch of them."

"You're wrong, son," she said, "There's many people who feel like us and there's a County Commissioners' meeting next week and I intend to be there. I know several other people who are upset about this kind of development and we've begun talking about what we can do. Now I can see there is no time to lose, so I'm going back home and start making some phone calls. It won't be easy, but if we can find enough interested people, there will be more than just my one small voice opposing this development and that's real power."

"I think it's a waste of time," Alex said, "I don't understand how going to some silly old Commissioners meeting will help this situation. What can they do?"

"Alex, they are the ones that decide what gets built because they are the ones that give the permits to the builders," Emily said. "But they have to listen to the public because the public is who puts them into office and my friends and I are the public. Remember last November when I went to vote, that's when the present Commissioners were voted into office. I'll tell you what; you come with me to the Commission meeting and see how things work. This is the best way to get involved in government and you can observe how government impacts all our lives."

“Oh brother,” Alex complained, “Now I’ve done it. You did this on purpose didn’t you? You knew about this new housing development before today didn’t you?”

“No, honey,” his mom said, “I didn’t, but it’s time for you to learn how the local government works. You need to learn how things happen so you can be involved in your own community when you are old enough to vote. Even if you can’t vote now, your opinion is valuable and you have every right to let the County Commissioners know how you feel. If people like you and me want a say in things we must make the effort to get involved. Now let’s turn this car around and get started.”

The Commissioner’s Meeting

The next week’s County Commissioners’ meeting was heavily attended. Emily’s group had received permission to speak regarding the new housing development and the plan for land use around the lake. She introduced her concerns about the need for shoreline fishing facilities, low-cost lakeside recreation spaces, maintaining the high water quality of the lake, the lack of infrastructure to support so much new development in the county, and whether or not the commissioners’ land use plan adequately protected the environment.

After Emily spoke, Joe Thurston the builder of the development asked to speak. He acknowledged Emily’s concerns but said they were unfounded and that the building industry was under government mandate to follow EPA regulations that prevented environmental damages. He also stated that the commissioners would not have granted the building permit if they didn’t think the infrastructure could support the new development. He said, “Why, that’s my brother on the Commission, and he’s an honest man. He’s not going to do anything wrong. You can trust him.”

Mr. Thurston’s comments sparked some exchanges and questions among the Commissioners and people in the audience. Next, Edward Prescott, the head of the local environmental watchdog club spoke. He presented evidence of several past violations of environmental regulations by previous builders. He stated that regulations were often overlooked and that overbuilding throughout the county was seriously stressing the welfare of the ecosystem and many of its wildlife. Mr. Prescott concluded, “I suggest a halt on all building permits until these concerns that are before the commission can be resolved. It’s only fair.”

Mr. Thurston stood and replied, “You can’t do that. You’re going to take away the jobs of all those people working on the new development that you’ve already approved. They have families to feed and bills to pay. What about all of them?”

“Now wait a minute,” Emily said. “We’re not asking for you to stop buildings already being built, but don’t you think it is reasonable to slow down new growth, try to balance the public’s right to use of the lake for low-cost recreation, examine the impact of all this development on the environment?”

“Now let’s talk about growth,” said Sue, a local real estate broker. “If you make it so hard on the builders, then the real estate market is going to be hurt. The growth in this county is at an all time high and slowing down the builders is only going to make people build somewhere else. You are asking our commissioners to stand in the way of progress. If we don’t allow building in this county, then some other county will, and we will have lost out on a great opportunity. You are asking too much.”

Alex was amazed that the meeting had held his attention. An hour had passed and he had hardly noticed. Sitting there, he began wondering who was right. He saw his mother’s point and wanted her to win. But he also understood that the other side had

legitimate concerns. He was glad he was not on the commission and wondered how an equitable solution could be found.

Handout #2

Emily Burton

Age: 37 Occupation: Store manager at a local outlet mall Income: \$32,000

Goal: Wants to protect the lake for shoreline fishing and other forms of low cost recreation

Emily Burton's family has lived in this area for over fifty years and she wants to make sure that the lake remains healthy for shoreline fishing and other forms of low-cost recreation such as picnicking, and bird watching. She especially does not want to see the fishing ruined by the construction of lakeside housing developments. She is concerned for herself, Alex, and her potential future grandchildren. Ms. Burton is a single parent and lives in a modest two bedroom home with her middle school aged son, Alex.

Joe Thurston

Age: 33 Occupation: Residential home builder Income: \$100,000

Goal: Wants to keep building homes, stay employed, keep making money

Mr. Thurston has his own company, has worked to make it profitable, and wants to keep it that way. He has invested large amounts of time and money in getting this project started and stands to lose a great deal if it is stopped or even slowed down. The commission has approved the first phase of the project that includes 30 homes located on 1/2 acre lots. Phase two, which will double the size of the development, has not yet been approved. Mr. Thurston's development plan calls for completion of the 30 homes by the end of the year. In order to meet this goal he will have to employ almost 50 carpenters, plumbers, electricians, roofers, and other skilled workers. The expected price range for the homes he is building will be between \$200,000 and \$250,000.

Handout #2 continued...

Edward Prescott

Age: 46 Occupation: Forest Service Law Enforcement Officer Income: \$45,000

Goal: Preserve the environment and stop growth throughout the county

Edward Prescott is very concerned about the wildlife of the county and maintenance of a healthy ecosystem for the lake. He knows that growth-spurred construction will cause more pollution of the lake and further destruction of other animal habitats. He has statistics that show a decrease in both land and water animals, and the decline of water quality in the lake. He feels that all construction must be stopped and no more should be allowed in order to save the lake.

Sue Kennedy

Age: 27 Occupation: Real estate broker Income: \$150,000 (average)

Goal: Keep building lakeside houses to promote upscale growth of community and help guarantee her excellent annual income as a local real estate agent.

Sue Kennedy has become one of the top salesperson on her staff. She is working to become the number one salesperson of the year. She believes that this new development will provide her with many opportunities to increase her sales for the year. In fact, she has signed an agreement with Mr. Thurston to have the listing for the first 10 homes in his development. She can see no visual damage to the lake and uses the lake as a selling point when talking to prospective customers. If the project is stopped or if Phase II is not approved, she believes that growth will occur in other close-by counties, that businesses will move out of her area, and she will lose many customers.