Reusing the Arsenal: How the University was Involved in the Planning Process

by Mark D. Bjelland

With the end of the Cold War, the U.S. military has begun the process of closing unneeded bases and engaging communities in reuse planning. In 1991 the United States Army declared the arsenal in Arden Hills (formally known as the Twin City Army Ammunition Plant) to be in excess of their needs and initiated the process of returning it to local control. The reuse planning process contains similarities to one of the most fascinating chapters in the history of urban planning—the Ringstrasse reconstruction in nineteenth century Vienna. As the military reluctantly released the land formerly used as a defensive barrier around the walled portion of Vienna, the undeveloped land became a stage for competing social groups trying to express their ideals through the built environment. Like the Ringstrasse reconstruction in Vienna, the planned closure of the arsenal in Arden Hills potentially frees a large parcel of undeveloped urban land and it quickly became a stage for competing interest groups. The reuse planning process for this large and unique piece of property generated intense citizen and media interest and was at times highly contested.

The Arsenal Land

The arsenal site spans the northern section of Arden Hills, extending from Lexington Avenue west to Interstate 35W and US Highway 10. It is bordered on the north by County Road I and on the south by State Highway 96 (Figure 1). There are approximately four square miles (2,383 acres) inside the chain link fence that has marked its borders for more than two generations.

Before government acquisition in 1941, the arsenal was a rural area of small farms containing a mixture of cropland, pasture, woodlands, and wetlands. The arsenal was rapidly constructed during World War II and produced large quantities of small caliber ammunition during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. The arsenal is a government-owned, contractor-operated facility. Alliant Techsystems, Inc., a military contractor, currently manages the facility and leases several buildings from the Army for defense-related production work.

In the northwest corner of the site, between I-35W and Rice Creek, are fourteen former staff houses. The western third of the property was the primary focus of military production activities and is extensively developed with roads, buildings, parking lots, and railroad tracks. The central third was used for bunkers and waste disposal pits, while the eastern third was only used for rifle and grenade ranges.

Portions of the western and central sections of the arsenal are highly contaminated with toxic chemicals as a result of ammunition production and on-site waste disposal operations (see sidebar). The eastern section of the arsenal contains Sunfish Lake and Marsden Lake and remains in a relatively undisturbed state. Because the land has been protected since the fence was installed during World War II, it retains much of its natural vegetation—upland forests, wetlands, and prairie—and is home to various species of wildlife and waterfowl that are now rare in the Twin Cities. Marsden Lake is the largest undisturbed wetland in Ramsey County and egrets, bitterns, grebes, herons, loons, and trumpeter swans are often sighted there. A glacial kame (hill) at the center of the site is the highest point in Ramsey County. It offers scenic vistas. The army has supported conservation activities including prairie restoration and a bluebird restoration program. The arsenal is home to several rare species, including Blanding's turtles and Illinois tick trefoil.

Suburbs have grown up on all sides of the arsenal, so that it is now bounded by urban development in Shoreview to the east and north, Arden Hills to the south, and Mounds View to the west. These communities provide a variety of housing stock and socioeconomic conditions surrounding the arsenal. Adjacent to the western, highly industrialized portion of the arsenal, the housing stock is older, moderately priced, and includes several trailer parks. Border-
ing the undeveloped portions of the arsenal to the north and east are relatively newer and more expensive single-family houses.

The many natural features of the arsenal site, its large size, and its public ownership have combined to generate grand visions for its future use. The situation promised greater public control of the land’s development than is usually possible when land is available in small, privately-held parcels. The social and economic diversity of the surrounding communities suggested that local citizens would hold competing visions for the future use of the land. This set the stage for a reuse planning process marked by strong opinions and sometimes conflicting agendas.

The Army’s Disposition Process
The arsenal is managed by the Army Munitions and Chemical Command, which no longer has a mission for the installation. The property disposition process is managed by the General Services Administration (GSA), which attempts to balance the needs and reuse plans of the local community with any requests for the land made by qualifying government agencies. GSA rules set forth a hierarchy for evaluating claims to excess property. First in line is the army, followed by other branches of the Department of Defense. Then come other federal agencies, followed by homeless providers, under the McKinney Act.

If the property is not claimed by federal agencies, the Department of Defense’s stated goal is to place the property “into uses that benefit the community.” Given the goal of benefiting the community, the GSA guidelines state that before releasing the property, “public bodies and regional metropolitan comprehensive planning agencies are given an opportunity to advise GSA if the proposed disposal of a surplus property is incompatible with their development plans or programs.”

Small parcels of the arsenal property in the southeast and northwest corners have already been released to the Army Reserves and the Minnesota Department of Transportation. Portions of the arsenal that are not suspected of being contaminated, such as the former staff housing complex, are further along in the disposition process and are most likely to be released first.

The Reuse Committee
When the army began the process of disposing of the arsenal, it appeared that community input would be limited to municipal officials from Arden Hills. Aware of federal guidelines calling for broad community involvement in planning for the reuse of military facilities, Janet Groat of the Minnesota Jobs with Peace Campaign approached the army and Congressional Representative Bruce Vento about forming a reuse committee. As rumors about the future of the arsenal began to create controversy, the army came to view the formation of an official reuse committee as a means of reducing conflict. The army requested that Representative Vento form a committee to develop a consensus reuse plan that would guide the army’s and GSA’s decisions about releasing parcels of the arsenal property.

Representative Vento solicited nominations and selected twenty persons to form the TCAAP (Twin Cities Army Ammunition Plant) Reutilization Committee. Each member was designated to represent different community interests. Included were the business community, labor, homeless assistance providers, environmentalists, the four nearest suburban municipalities, and other units of local, regional, and state government. These different interests were represented with varying strengths, depending on the expertise, availability, and interest of the designated representative. Despite the good intentions in trying to represent the diversity of community interests, those with the least political power, such as homeless assistance providers, actually received little or no official representation on the committee.

The committee was charged with developing a long-range, conceptual land use plan for the reuse of the arsenal. Their mission statement stressed a commitment to environmental sensitivity and to the long-range needs of the metropolitan community as a whole. They realized there was some uncertainty about the timing of the cleanup and release of land, but to simplify their task they chose to assume that the entire site would be clean and available for civilian uses. The committee met monthly from September 1984 through December 1995 and held two public hearings near the end of the process.

Unfortunately, the reuse committee was not given a budget with which to hire planning consultants and it was plagued by both a lack of expertise and a lack of direction. Since the committee’s recommendations would be the only ones recognized by GSA and the army, their meetings became a battleground for competing interest groups offering different visions for the future of the arsenal. The most important of these interest groups are profiled here.

Arden Hills Task Force. Nearly out of vacant land, the City of Arden Hills eagerly viewed the redevelopment of the arsenal
as a source of additional tax base and as a site for a proposed municipal government complex. Recognizing that the city would in the future be responsible for municipal services at the arsenal site, the city created the Arden Hills Task Force and hired planning consultants to do a detailed comprehensive plan for the reuse of the arsenal. The City of Arden Hills placed the consultants on a fast track to finish the land use plan in time to present to the TCAAP Reutilization Committee.

The Arden Hills Task Force adopted an expert-driven planning process with planners developing and evaluating alternatives and then presenting them to the public. Rather than soliciting the views of the public beforehand, the planning process was driven by the objectives of maximizing fiscal benefits and keeping out unwanted uses. Public participation in the City of Arden Hills process was limited to two open houses which showcased the nearly complete plans.

Because the TCAAP Reutilization Committee had no budget for preparing comprehensive land use maps, they accepted those prepared by the City of Arden Hills with only minor revisions. With their superior access to resources and planning expertise, the City of Arden Hills was able to exercise a great deal of control over what was intended to be a planning effort involving all of the surrounding communities.

**Arsenal Cleanup and Conversion Project.** Committed to the goal of seeing the arsenal converted to civilian uses that benefit the entire community, Minnesota Jobs With Peace helped form the Arsenal Cleanup and Conversion Project (ACCP) citizens group. ACCP was a diverse coalition drawing its membership from labor unions, church leaders, affordable housing advocates, local residents, and low income persons from the trailer parks adjacent to the arsenal. Its goals were to:

- advocate for a broad-based, democratic reuse planning process;
- ensure that non-traditional “stakeholders,” such as low- and moderate-income people and unemployed or displaced workers, take part in decisions about the future use of the site; and
- increase citizen oversight of the cleanup of toxic wastes.

ACCP and Minnesota Jobs with Peace worked in partnership with the University of Minnesota Collaborative, which is profiled in the next section.

**American Indian Housing Corporation.**

The American Indian Housing Corporation is a Minneapolis-based developer of low income housing. Most of its projects involve rehabilitating dilapidated buildings in the inner city. It was quite pleased with the prospect of acquiring fourteen homes in relatively good condition on large lots bordering Rice Creek. It put together a development proposal and presented it to Vento’s staff and to the City of Arden Hills Task Force. To satisfy the requirements of the McKinney Act it proposed using the former staff housing complex for transitional housing for American Indians.

This proposal generated strong opposition from the City of Arden Hills’ planners, who cited it as the type of unwanted use that had spurred them into action in forming the task force and hiring planning consultants. Despite some local support for the transitional housing proposal, the land use plans prepared by the City of Arden Hills and later adopted by the TCAAP Reutilization Committee persisted in showing the former staff housing area zoned for commercial and industrial development. After much debate the TCAAP Reutilization Committee finally settled on a resolution.
to support the reuse of the fourteen former staff houses—but not at their current location.

Preserve Open Space Environment Citizens Group. The Preserve Open Space Environment (POSE) Citizens Group was made up of local environmentalists who developed their own reuse plan for the arsenal, recommending that the entire property be converted into a park preserve. At each of the public meetings, POSE members were outspoken in their opposition to any new development on the arsenal site, whether it be housing, industry, or golf courses. POSE cultivated connections with major environmental groups and gained endorsement for their reuse plan from local experts on natural resources management and from the Izaak Walton League and the local chapter of the Sierra Club.

The Mdewakanton Sioux. Midway through the reuse planning process, The Mdewakanton Sioux Tribal Council passed a resolution requesting that they be relocated from their Prairie Island reservation to the arsenal. They argued that they are exposed to undue risk from the storage of spent fuel at the Prairie Island nuclear power plant and pointed to an Executive Order that provides for federal actions to address environmental justice issues among minority populations. By enlisting the support of the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs their claim would be placed relatively high on the GSA priority list. Their proposal for the arsenal included housing, social services, job creation, and possibly a casino. The Mdewakanton Sioux argued that the casino was only a small part of the proposal and that their vision was one of environmental justice and greater economic self-determination for indigenous peoples. Tribal counsel Robert Grey Eagle made a number of conciliatory gestures to the local community by stating in the application to the Bureau of Indian Affairs that they intended to preserve the wetlands and open space and wanted to work with local residents "with the intent of ultimately creating a healthy, safe and self-sufficient community for its tribal members that will be a good neighbor to the surrounding communities." The prospects for the Mdewakanton Sioux were dampened when the TCAAP Reutilization Committee passed a resolution against a casino and the Bureau of Indian Affairs ruled that they would not support a proposal that included a casino.

The University of Minnesota Collaborative Project and ACCP
Concerned that Vento’s TCAAP Reutilization Committee would not adequately target non-traditional stakeholders and that citizens would not have access to the expertise necessary to contribute on the same level as the Arden Hills municipal officials and consultants, the Arsenal Cleanup and Conversion Project (ACCP), in partnership with the Minnesota Jobs with Peace Campaign, turned to the University of Minnesota for help. Through an innovative grant from CURA, the College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, and the Minnesota Extension Service, the University formed a multidisciplinary team of graduate students drawn from public affairs, planning, landscape architecture, and geography to work on the issues of public participation, economic development, landscape design, environmental restoration, and housing.

The University Collaborative began operations in the fall of 1994, about the same time that the TCAAP Reutilization Committee began meeting. The students worked directly with community members under the day-to-day supervision of staff from the Minnesota Jobs with Peace Campaign and with the guidance of a University faculty advisory committee drawn from planning, public affairs, landscape architecture, and public health. The students, faculty, and Jobs with Peace staff met monthly to assess progress and comment on future plans.

A significant component of the project was a series of eleven community brainstorming meetings targeted at different constituencies within the communities around the arsenal. Sacha Peterson, a graduate student in planning at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, managed the community meetings. The meetings were facilitated by Ms. Peterson and citizen volunteers trained in meeting facilitation techniques. The aim of community brain-storming was to go beyond the typical reactive and non-interactive public hearings by encouraging more meaningful, proactive citizen participation that would inform decision-makers of the concerns, hopes, and ideas of citizens about the future uses of the arsenal.

The meetings were equally divided among the surrounding communities, and four of the meetings targeted specific constituencies: the business community, youth, senior citizens, and low income persons. Various community organizations—including churches, schools, chambers of commerce, and youth and seniors groups—helped sponsor the meetings by providing facilities and contacts. The meetings began with a presentation on the status of the cleanup and reuse of the arsenal and by sharing success stories from the reuse of other military bases. Then the audience broke into small groups and facilitators led
American Indian Housing Corporation’s plans to use the staff housing complex along the western border of the arsenal near Rice Creek for transitional housing generated strong opposition.

the participants through a series of questions about their visions of an ideal community, the strengths and needs of their community, and their ideas and principles that could be used to guide the reuse of the arsenal.

The major message of the brainstorming meetings was that there should be a mixture of commercial, industrial, and residential uses on the developed portions of the arsenal and that the less developed areas should be kept as a nature preserve. A significant number of participants called for a more diverse community with a wider range of affordable housing options. Other messages coming from citizens included the need for better public transportation and alternatives to automobile-based development, environmental protection, elimination of military activities at the site, and a greater sense of community.

One set of messages that came from the brainstorming included the desire for living wage jobs, jobs closer to home, non-polluting industries, increased tax base, and more community-based businesses. In response, Lisa Zellmer, a public affairs graduate student, researched ways to incorporate these concerns into business development strategies appropriate for the arsenal site.

The skills of a landscape architecture student, Jo Magnuson-Martinson, were used to create a set of photographic displays and color illustrations of the arsenal site (some of these are reproduced here in black and white). Their purpose was to help citizens better visualize this complex site and to stimulate imaginations about how they might use the property if given the chance. Concerned that the TCAAP Reutilization Committee and the Arden Hills Task Force were proceeding in their work without a thorough analysis of the whole site, ACCP presented Ms. Magnuson-Martinson’s work to show the immensity and diversity of the arsenal site. After gaining clearances from the army, Ms. Magnuson-Martinson spent hours viewing, sketching, and photographing the site both on foot and from a helicopter. Her beautiful illustrations and photographs highlighted different natural areas: the industrialized western portion, wetlands, the glacial kame, woodlands, and prairie areas.

The illustrations and photographic displays were used during the community brainstorming meetings to offer a new perspective to citizens who had only viewed the site through the perimeter fence. Later, when different reuse scenarios were being debated by the TCAAP Reutilization Committee, Ms. Magnuson-Martinson prepared overlays showing how affordable housing and the American Indian Housing Corporation’s proposal could fit in with the other development plans for the site.

ACCP wanted to see the former staff houses reused but recognized two major barriers to reusing them at their existing location: 1) the Arden Hills and TCAAP Reutilization Committee’s land use plans designated the staff housing site for commercial or industrial development and 2) the existing site fell within a 2,000 foot safety arc around Alliant Techsystems, Inc.’s flammable and explosive materials storage areas. In recognition of these concerns, Kirby Pittman, a graduate student in public affairs, was hired to work on the logistics of moving the houses and finding a suitable location for them. Her work involved coordinating efforts among the army, the ACCP, the American Indian Housing Corporation, and local churches and other nonprofit organizations interested in affordable housing development.

The environmental cleanup of the arsenal was a major concern continually raised in discussions about the future of the site. Mark Bjelland, the author of this article and a doctoral student in geography with a professional background in hazardous waste site cleanups, worked with ACCP to prepare educational materials and position statements on the environmental cleanup. Mr. Bjelland prepared summaries of environmental reports in non-technical language for use at ACCP meetings and at the community brainstorming meetings. Further, Mr. Bjelland worked with ACCP to lobby the army and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to create a citizen’s advisory board to advise the army and environmental regulators on community concerns about the cleanup.

One of the largest challenges facing the University graduate students was the attempt to serve the interests of the broader community when conflicts arose among different interest groups. The University graduate students attempted to reach out to the other community groups, to work collaboratively whenever possible, and to be a moderating influence among sharply defined interests, such as those that were pro-development and pro-environment, when they came into conflict.

The University’s involvement with the planning process helped ACCP promote a
Land in the eastern section of the arsenal remains relatively untouched and is home to various species of wildlife and waterfowl now rare in the Twin Cities. This view shows the southern edge of Sunfish Lake.

Regional perspective on housing and environmental issues in strong contrast to the positions adopted by municipal officials from the City of Arden Hills. Despite the tensions between ACCP and the City of Arden Hills, the Arden Hills Task Force incorporated many of the mixed-use development ideas generated during the community brainstorming meetings. Further, when the City of Arden Hills was challenged about their lack of public consultation, they credited ACCP’s community brainstorming meetings as a source for their ideas.

ACCP, in collaboration with the University of Minnesota, served to complement the work of the TCAAP Reutilization Committee. The photographic displays and color landscape illustrations were prominently displayed and served as a focus at the meetings and public hearings. The committee adopted many of ACCP’s positions in their final recommendations, including commitments to a diversity of housing options, significant preservation of open space, economic development, transit, and pedestrian and walking-friendly urban design (Figure 2).

The final outcome was a compromise satisfying many, but not all, of the diverse community desires. Certainly it was a much better product as a result of the extensive public input gained through ACCP and the University of Minnesota Collaborative Project. For the graduate students involved in the process, it was a highly satisfying experience of honing their skills to benefit the local community and gaining experience with the challenges of real-world projects.

**The Arsenal Today**

The full implementation of the reuse plan—adopted by the TCAAP Reutilization Committee in March of 1996—has been delayed by the army’s surprise announcement that they are transferring control of most of the arsenal to the National Guard for use as a training facility. The National Guard plans to cooperate with the community and to accommodate the reuse plan to the extent that it is possible. Small parcels of land not suspected to contain environmental contamination, such as the former staff housing complex, may be released in the near future in accordance with the reuse plan.

The reuse plan is also proving useful in the ongoing negotiations over whether Superfund hazardous waste sites should be cleaned to meet parkland, residential, or industrial standards. In the face of cutbacks in environmental cleanup budgets, the army has proposed cleaning up the waste sites to industrial standards only. Community members are arguing, however, that the official reuse plan should be used to determine the appropriate level of cleanup at different hazardous waste sites within the arsenal.

**Figure 2. Arsenal Reuse Plan as Adopted by the TCAAP Reutilization Committee**
The reuse of a large parcel of urban land inevitably creates a stage for competing social groups trying to express their ideals. Recognizing that most planning processes are dominated by experts and society's more powerful groups, Minnesota Jobs with Peace, the ACCP, and the University of Minnesota collaborated to broaden public and non-traditional stakeholder participation. This approach avoided the extremes of either bringing in the public at the end of an expert-driven process or giving the public responsibility to develop plans without adequate guidance and access to expertise.

The visions that were voiced by the public provide fascinating insights into the concerns of northern suburban residents. Competing with the conventional model of suburban development were hopes for a large natural preserve, greater diversity among suburban neighbors, a stronger sense of community, and justice for indigenous peoples. The challenge of implementing these visions will be to move past the narrow, expert-driven planning frameworks so commonly employed towards greater public participation, especially on the part of non-traditional stakeholders. This collaborative project between the community and the University of Minnesota offers a model for tapping the resources of the University to do just that.

In an attempt to keep our readers up to date about CURA projects, we feature a few capsule descriptions of projects underway in each issue of the CURA Reporter. The projects listed this time are the winners of CURA's faculty research competition for 1997-98. These research grants are made possible with funds provided by CURA and the Vice President for Research at the University of Minnesota. They are designed to encourage University of Minnesota faculty to carry out research projects that involve significant issues of public policy for the state and that include interaction with community groups, agencies, or organizations in Minnesota. The grants are available to regular faculty members at the University and awarded annually on a competitive basis. The results of interactive research grants are published in the CURA Reporter.

**The Policy Impact of Minnesota's Public Affairs Community**. Minnesota is well-known in state government circles as an innovative state, but where do the new ideas come from? A professor of political science is investigating the role of Minnesota's public affairs community through its think tanks (the Citizens League and the Center for the American Experiment), large foundations, and major newspapers in supplying solutions to public problems. Are they a key source of innovative ideas? Do they generate knowledge? Do they elevate the level of debate? Through an analysis of publications and position papers, interviews with leaders, a survey of state legislators, and an historical tracing of the origins of the ten most important policy innovations the study seeks to learn more about the flow of public policy ideas in Minnesota.

**Domestic Violence in West-Central Minnesota**. There is a lack of data on the prevalence of battered women in rural outpatient clinics in west-central Minnesota. A professor of mathematics at the University of Minnesota, Morris has teamed up with a clinical nurse specialist at Otter Tail County Public Health and representatives from the Region IV Council on Domestic Abuse to survey women seeking care in outpatient clinics and WIC sites. The survey is being analyzed to determine what characteristics of the women are related to their knowledge about support services for victims of domestic violence and to explore how isolation relates to domestic violence. The results should help in further educating health care providers about domestic violence—how to identify it, educate patients about it, and make referrals when it occurs.

**Implementing a New Cash Grants Program for Disabled Minnesotans**. In 1995, the Minnesota legislature established a Consumer Support Grant Program to allow disabled Minnesotans more control and responsibility in their long-term service needs. The program provides direct cash grants to some of Minnesota's disabled citizens, allowing them to do their own hiring of the persons needed for their long-term care. At least nine counties in Minnesota, most of them rural, have just begun to offer the new program. It lowers administrative costs and empowers the disabled, but it raises questions about how health and safety can be assured for the disabled and about accountability in how the funds are used, and liability, in whether all tax and employment regulations are followed. A professor of public affairs is researching how similar programs are administered in other states and is developing a model framework for the new program in Minnesota. It will include learning strategies, methods, and materials that can assist the disabled as they make the transition into self-directed service arrangements. A survey of consumer participants is planned as well as interviews with community organizations that might be enlisted to aid in the transition. Tools for evaluating the new program will also be suggested.

Mark Bjelland is a doctoral student in geography at the University of Minnesota. He holds a master's degree in environmental engineering and worked for five years on environmental cleanups in Minnesota and British Columbia. CURA is grateful to Scott Magnuson-Martinson for the use of the drawings that appear with this article. Originally in color, they are the last art work of his wife Jo, who died shortly after her part in the University of Minnesota Collaborative Project was completed.