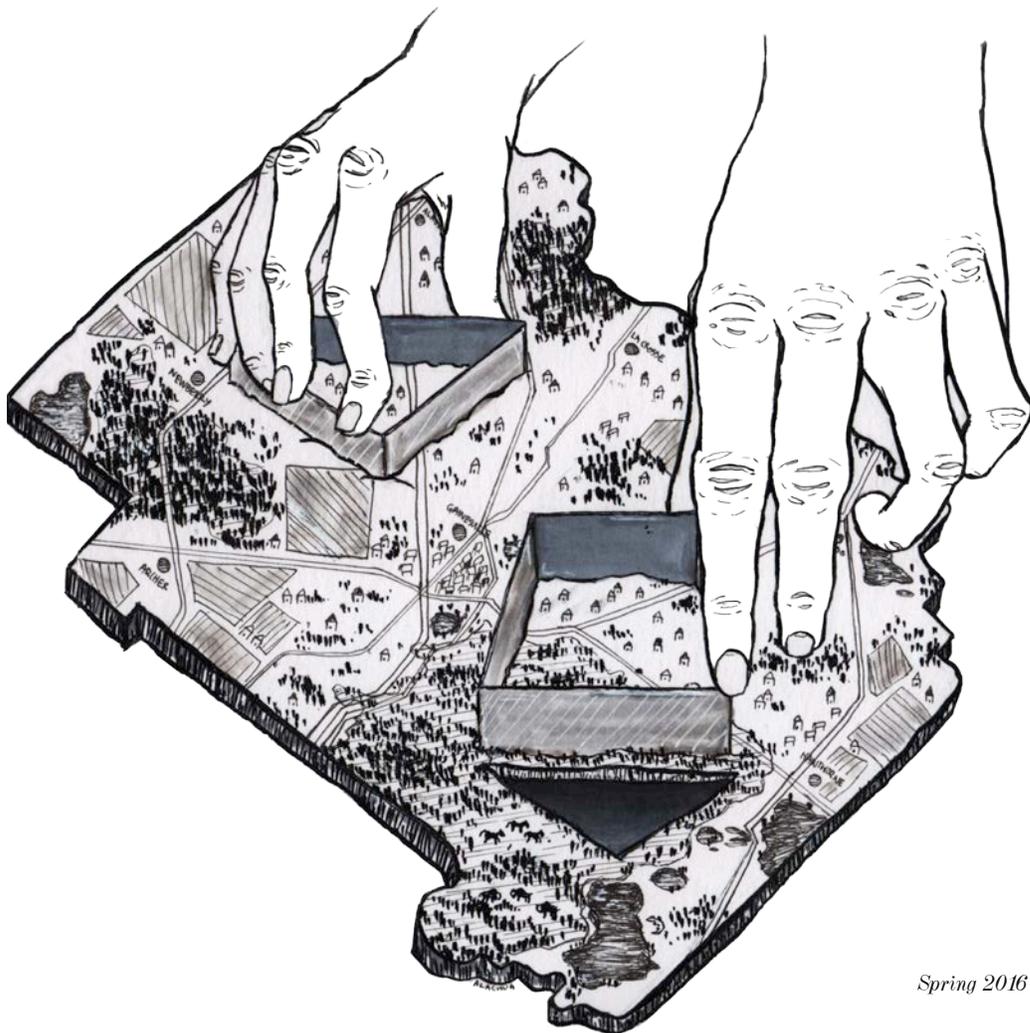


TOGETHER WE STAND

The story of how a group of local activists came together to confront a national corporation.

BY KYLE GIEST

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On her drive to work one day in the summer of 2014, a bright green lawn sign caught Lori Wiggins' eye. The same sign, she saw, stuck out of several neighbors' lawns, each with a circle slashed through over the words "Plum Creek's Plan."

When she took to the Internet to investigate, what she found made her heart sink: Plum Creek Timber Corporation, the largest landowner in Alachua County, was planning a 6,000-acre urban development to be built in her family's and friends' rural backyards.

At 54 years old, Higgins wasn't particularly familiar with Facebook. But she knew it was a way for people to connect. That night, she logged in and created a group. The title shouted in all caps to the Internet at large:

"WHO IS PLUM CREEK AND WHY DO THEY WANT TO DEVELOP OUR BACKYARD?"

Plum Creek Timber Company Inc. is one of the largest private landowners in the U.S., owning 6.3 million acres of timberlands in 19 states. The bulk of its business is harvesting trees and converting them into lumber, but it has also pursued a number of real estate development projects across the country. Each follows a similar pattern: Convince local governments to grant development rights on large swathes of rural timberlands; market the timberlands, now with a much higher monetary value, to potential buyers such as developers; then sell the land in parcels with a high profit margin.

Plum Creek arrived in Florida in 2001 when it merged with the timber division of Georgia Pacific, a company owned by

Koch Industries. In the process, it acquired land holdings in Florida — about 85,000 acres of which were in Alachua County, most east of Newnans Lake. For nearly a decade, Plum Creek used its newly acquired land in Alachua County in the same way as its timberlands across the country: grow trees and harvest them for timber production, sometimes selling off parcels.

In 2011 the company hired MIG Inc. and Sasaki Associates Inc. — planning and design firms based in Berkeley and Boston — to launch a development project called Envision Alachua.

Plum Creek's Envision Alachua employees kicked off the project by selecting 29 members of the community — almost all of whom were the heads of their businesses or organizations — to create a task force, which met that July to discuss the development's vision in a public meeting. They hosted workshops where they invited the community to share their visions for the future of Alachua County.

Through these meetings, Plum Creek's officials identified three key issues in the community: the economic disparity between East and West Gainesville, the growing economic competition from other regions and a lack of funding for conservation.

After two years of task force meetings and workshops, the company finally submitted its sector plan to the county commission for approval in December 2013. The plan included converting 11,000 acres of their rural property — scattered with wetlands, floodplains and small rural communities — into residential and industrial land. Eventually, this would make way for the development of 10,500 homes and 14 million square feet of commercial and industrial

space.

The plan also addressed issues the task force had discussed during the meetings and workshops, said Tim Jackson, Plum Creek's director of real estate. Regarding concerns over conserving the environment, Envision Alachua's plan would put 25,000 acres into conservation and reduce water usage by 50 percent in the planned residential homes in return for the development.

Not only that, the proposed development would create large job centers, which Jackson said could help reduce poverty and unemployment in East Gainesville.

"UF needs major employers in town for whom they can do research," he said, adding that the plan's proposed job centers would be big enough to attract these large corporations to the Gainesville area and diversify the local economy.

"Plum Creek's success in getting the master plan approved could potentially bring the economic breakthrough for which we've been waiting nearly 40 years," wrote Albert E. White, a local consultant for Plum Creek, in a 2013 op-ed for *The Gainesville Sun*. "This is a vision that could develop economic, conservation and community prosperity in east Gainesville and eastern Alachua County."

County Commissioner Mike Byerly had watched from the sidelines as Envision Alachua courted the community for two years. When the group submitted its plan to the commission in December, everything he had objected to landed on his desk, ready for his perusal.

That evening, he took it to a local Sierra Club meeting.

Byerly objected to Envision

Alachua's plan for a number of reasons, the primary being that it contradicted an already existent plan, which had been adopted two years prior: The Alachua County Comprehensive Plan. The 432-page document mapped out how the county should grow over the next 20 years and had taken nearly a decade to wrestle into place, Byerly said, after 207 public meetings, workshops and forums that included both local government and citizen advisory groups like the Builders Association of North Central Florida and the Sierra Club.

"In the end, a plan emerged that a politically diverse county commission could vote into law," Byerly said, "even if those on opposite ends of the political spectrum had to hold their noses to do it."

Envision Alachua's plan, he said, aimed to develop land miles outside the comprehensive plan's urban growth boundary, which had been created to prevent development from sprawling into rural areas. It also disregarded several of the plan's environmental protection policies, which could affect hundreds of acres of wetlands and strategic ecosystems.

The plan's environmental impact made going to the Sierra Club, a national environmental organization, the obvious choice. But Byerly had someone in mind. Scott Camil, a member of the club's executive committee and Byerly's longtime friend, was exactly the person who could kickstart a counter-campaign.

A two-time purple heart Vietnam veteran, Camil has the straight-backed demeanor and dogged commitment of a person who has never forgotten his time as a platoon sergeant. He's best known as one of the Gainesville Eight, a group of anti-war activists whom the government attempted

to frame for conspiracy in the '70s. His Wikipedia page is fairly sizable. His ponytail is impressive.

"I'm a mission-oriented person," he said. "In the Marine Corps, they teach you how to accomplish your mission."

After listening to Byerly explain the Envision Alachua sector plan, Camil and the rest of the Sierra Club's executive committee formed an independent, volunteer citizen group of local activists called Stand By Our Plan, referencing

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the county's comprehensive plan that Envision Alachua aimed to override. The activists created a rudimentary HTML website and packed it with information about Plum Creek, directly linking to the plans written by Envision Alachua and Alachua County so visitors could compare them. They also explained how the comprehensive plan could be amended and shaped by the community, along with maps of the wetlands, floodplains and strategic ecosystems on Plum Creek's proposed development area.

"From the beginning," Camil said, "our mission has been to educate the public and change the narrative that Plum Creek has been telling the community."

Frank and Susan Morey live on 30 acres of open, grassy land ringed by pine and cypress trees in eastern Alachua County. And across a fence at the south end of their property, Plum Creek's land begins.

In the spring of 2014, Frank and Susan found an article in the Gainesville Sun announcing a community workshop hosted by Envision Alachua. Noticing that the plan affected land close to their home, they attended the next scheduled workshop. Not satisfied with the Envision Alachua representatives' evasive answers to his and his wife's questions, on April 13 Frank drafted a letter to the county commission expressing opposition to Plum Creek. He organized 40 people from the surrounding rural communities to sign the letter.

Camil came across Frank's letter while combing through backlogs of county emails, something he does fairly often. He gave Frank a call, and the two ex-Marines quickly hit it off — but Camil got to the point. Stand By Our Plan had already created an organized foundation, he said. Joining together would benefit both groups: It would give rural citizens' complaints a bigger voice, and Stand By Our Plan could reach residents who would see the most drastic changes.

Meanwhile, Wiggins' Facebook group was growing. Over 100 people in the rural areas of Alachua County had joined the group since its inception that summer, and it buzzed with activity. People posted at least once a day, sharing everything from information about Plum Creek's projects in other states to Envision Alachua

meeting dates and times to their experiences at those meetings.

Then Wiggins got a call from Camil, too. He'd heard about her group from other Stand By Our Plan members and wanted to know if she would post some information he sent to her. Stand By Our Plan had a presence on Facebook, but as a page it didn't offer a forum for people to post their own content or start conversations. More and more, Stand By Our Plan Members started using Wiggins' Facebook group to talk with each other, including Camil, until at 656 members it became the primary platform through which the activists communicated.

"Lori, thanks for starting this page," one member posted in February, above a candid iPhone photo of a grinning Wiggins. "Even through all of the ups and downs you always have a ready smile and a willingness to listen."

In order for a development plan to be approved, especially one proposing a change or diversion from the county's comprehensive plan, it has to first go through the county's Office of Growth Management, headed by Steve Lachnicht. Though the office doesn't have a final say in the plan's approval or denial, its analysis, and ultimately its recommendation for how to proceed, is forwarded to the county commissioners for their consideration.

After more than 2,000 hours of research and analysis, Lachnicht and his staff recommended that the county commission deny Envision Alachua's plan, and they offered a 137-page report to back their decision. Their reasoning echoed many of Stand By Our Plan's complaints. First, the growth management staff concluded that Envision Alachua's planned development would

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not preserve the rural character of Windsor, Campville, Grove Park and Rochelle — the rural communities that the Moreys and Wiggins had been concerned about. Second, the plan would take away the commission's authority to oversee what would happen to the area's wetlands and allow for 400 acres of those wetlands to be filled without county review. Finally, Envision Alachua's plan hardly considered the resources needed to create an entire urban infrastructure from the ground up.

Envision Alachua withdrew its initial application in the wake of the office's non-endorsement and submitted it again in the summer of 2015 with a few minor changes. The new plan called for two urban mixed-use job centers, both bordering Lochloosa Creek between Newnans Lake and US Route 301. The new "city" would be more than double the size of UF's campus and allow for 8,700 residential homes and 11 million square feet of commercial/industrial facilities. And, once again, the Department of Growth Management recommended

denial on the same grounds.

Envision Alachua continued to promote the plan without Growth Management's approval, using public events and op-eds submitted to The Sun to describe it as a community vision that balanced environmental conservation and economic development. It was capable of generating 30,000 jobs over a 50-year time period, they argued, while also preserving thousands of acres of land designated for permanent conservation (though that designation still allows for timber production).

Stand By Our Plan worked to spread its message, too. Over the course of a year, Byerly gave at least one public presentation a month, going to church events, neighborhood meetings, anywhere he could get time to speak in eastern Alachua County, and staying after to answer questions about Plum Creek and what its plan could mean for the community.

The group raised \$36,000 by members reaching into their own pockets; Camil, having been a local organizer for decades, called up friends in his network who had donated to political campaigns in the past. All this went toward printing the notorious lawn signs that had caught Higgins' attention, as well as T-shirts and bumper stickers, all with the intention of getting people to investigate Plum Creek.

Plum Creek, on the other hand, had spent several million dollars on the creation and execution of Envision Alachua, said Jackson, Plum Creek's director of real estate. According to the list of registered lobbyists in Alachua County, 19 out of 30 are employed by Plum Creek to lobby on its behalf. Most are from local and out-of-town public relations, engineering, design and law firms, but a few are local

residents. The lobbyists regularly sat down with commissioners, detailing how Envision Alachua would help the local economy.

“When you as a citizen lobby, it’s your time, your expense,” said Jim Dick, a Stand By Our Plan member. “When Plum Creek does it, they do it with paid employees.”

Stand By Our Plan members also spent time pointing out the logical flaws in the East Gainesville argument. First, Byerly said, East Gainesville is more than 10 miles from the edge of Plum Creek’s proposed development area and 20 miles from where the jobs would be located. Second, the highest concentrations of poverty in the county are in areas surrounded by new growth, like those west of Interstate 75.

“Growth in itself clearly does not reduce poverty or unemployment or economic disparity, even when it’s literally next door,” he said. “Real improvement requires upward wage pressure without incoming residents wiping out the net gains, and it has little to do with growth. The wrong kind of growth doesn’t make us better, it just makes us bigger.”

“In all the years I’ve been in government,” Byerly continued, “it’s the same circle of people expressing concern about poverty and economic injustice and trying to do something through public policy. Suddenly, with Plum Creek, there were new faces. And they were only concerned about it so far as it affected Plum Creek.”

Everyone knows each other at Stand By Our Plan meetings.

After two years of working closely together, the gatherings have an air of camaraderie, or at least familiarity. Frank, whose humor is both dry and constant, prompts ripples of laughter. There are usually snacks. At a recent meeting, 15 members sat on chairs dragged from the dining room and on the plump maroon couches at Camil’s house, planning for the county

commission meetings in February that would decide the plan’s fate.

In the weeks after, they would email the listservs, send out information to their mailing lists, table everywhere they could. Their goal was to get as many citizens as possible to speak against the plan during public comment.

And then there is Katy Davis.

At the Stand By Our Plan meetings, Davis is restless and quick to express her thoughts, sometimes by rolling her eyes at stray comments, sometimes by bursting into passionate declarations. She left Philadelphia in 2006, when her rent doubled after speculators started planning a development project in her neighborhood — a project led by Sasaki, one of the firms behind Envision Alachua. She chose rural Hawthorne, she said, to escape the constant development game.

“You don’t have to be smart to see what’s happening here,” she said. “You just have to have experienced it before. Most people out here haven’t.”

Davis took a vigilante approach to getting the word out. She and her beat-up blue pickup traveled across Hawthorne and its surrounding rural communities, where she knocked on as many doors as possible to personally tell people about the meetings. She

visited at least 10 homes in a day. When she spoke to older women, her demeanor softened (she’d drop the profanities); when she spoke to pastors, she’d tie in religion; during church services, she’d sing until the end to speak to the congregation.

And when talking about Envision Alachua, she would whip herself into a frenzy.

“The way [Plum Creek officials] treat people in person is shocking,” she said, breathless and nearly shouting. “A combination of pandering, insults and classism.”

Aware that she was between jobs and struggling to pay her bills, Stand By Our Plan members helped pay for some of Davis’ gas for her door-to-door crusade. Without Internet at home, she would take her old Blackberry to places with Wi-Fi to read through documents and post information on the Facebook group. She, Wiggins and the Moreys Xeroxed fliers by hand.

These efforts resulted in packed rooms when the meetings began in February. Over 250 people from the Alachua County community offered public comment — an unprecedented turnout, Byerly said. The commissioners had scheduled two meetings, but due to the number of people who wanted to speak, they had to add two more. Over 75 percent of public comment was in opposition. The Facebook group went crazy.

“I have been very deeply touched by the comments of those of you who came to Eastside High School this week to speak out against the Envision Alachua Sector Plan,” someone posted. “Some of you told stories while others gave impassioned pleas to save our way of life and the environment of East Alachua County. Some of you made me laugh, and some of you made me cry. Others made me think and consider things I had not thought about before and all of you made me proud to be a resident of Alachua County. Thank you all.

“IF YOU VOTED AGAINST PLUM CREEK TONIGHT, YOU’RE GOING TO HAVE A PRO-PLUM CREEK CANDIDATE RUNNING AGAINST YOU,” HE SAID. “THAT’S A GIVEN.”

There is a sense of community in Alachua County today which did not exist last week.”

But the final meeting, scheduled for the first day of March, would decide everything.

About 140 people sat, rapt and hushed, as the county commissioners deliberated at the front of the room.

People wearing green Stand By Our Plan shirts speckled the audience, including Camil, who kept his eyes trained on the commissioners, expressionless. Although the final meeting was reserved solely for the commissioners to speak, Camil had encouraged Stand By Our Plan members to come all the same.

Make them look you in the eye when they vote on this, he said.

The commissioners had 30 minutes each to present their comments, and for the most part they expressed why they supported or opposed the plan under review. Commissioner Hutch Hutchinson, however, used his time to present a compromise that would consolidate Envision Alachua’s interests and Stand By Our Plan’s arguments — a land swap centered around Tacachale, a developmental disability center, that could provide the jobs Envision Alachua had been promoting without dissolving the urban growth boundary set in place by the

county’s comprehensive plan.

When it came time to vote, Byerly made the first motion to deny Envision Alachua’s plan. As had been expected, commissioners Lee Pinkoson and Charles Chestnut motioned to approve; Cornell motioned to deny. Everything came down to Hutchinson.

Byerly leaned toward the microphone, shooting a look across the table toward Hutchinson.

“Since you are now the man in the middle, Mr. Chair,” Byerly said, “and we’re all waiting to see how you’re going to shake out on this: Tacachale is a great idea, and I will gladly support you in your effort to try to make it happen...If you tie it to a ‘no’ vote, I will certainly work with you to try to make it happen. If you tie it to a ‘yes’ vote, I believe you are very clearly surrendering the little leverage we might have in that process to make it a reality in the future.”

Some moments passed before Hutchinson spoke.

“I’m going to make a motion to not transmit this,” Hutchinson said, and the crowd erupted into applause that turned into a standing ovation.

Camil allowed himself a moment to smile.

After the denial, the Facebook page exploded with activity. People wrote out their thanks to Camil, Wiggins, Davis, the Moreys and others for their work. One member posted a video of the moment Hutchinson voted to deny. (Davis posted “VICTORY!!!!” above the photo of a cartoon middle finger.)

“It’s nice to be able to take a breath,” one commenter wrote, posting a video of Jacksonville jam band JJ Grey & Mofro’s song “The Sun is Shining Down.”

But Camil and others understand that while they won this battle, their fight against Plum Creek isn’t over. They’ve discussed the possibility that Envision Alachua could resubmit the plan successfully if only one county commission seat flips in favor of Plum Creek. Knowing this, James Thompson, a member of Stand By Our Plan, shook his head during the revelatory aftermath of the vote.

“If you voted against Plum Creek tonight, you’re going to have a pro-Plum Creek candidate running against you,” he said. “That’s a given.”

Though Hutchinson is currently running unopposed, Byerly will run against Kevin Thorpe, an Envision Alachua task force member, in the upcoming democratic primary.

They also have to deal with a new issue: Plum Creek was bought by another timber corporation, Weyerhaeuser, earlier this year — and the name change could potentially confuse community residents.

But Camil remains undeterred.

“The director of Plum Creek in Gainesville told me, ‘Scott, we’re not going anywhere,’” Camil said. “I told him, ‘Neither are we.’” •



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