

# Siting Major Public Facilities: Facts, Values, and Accountability

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**Abstract:** Government agencies and other organizations responsive to a diverse constituency face enormous challenges in identifying priority sites for relocation, expansion, or new development. Of paramount importance is establishing transparent decision processes that reach accountable, defensible, and wise outcomes. Unfortunately, documented examples of successful approaches to evaluation, prioritization, and site selection are scarce. The purpose of this paper is to both offer a descriptive case study and an intellectually rigorous, fundamentally practical "best practice" approach for identifying priority sites. By employing value-focused thinking and decision analysis techniques to a complex site selection problem, we present a way to address common challenges such as potential technical and nontechnical knowledge conflicts, distinguishing between "facts" and "values," incorporating uncertainties, generating criteria weights, making trade-offs and building consensus across interests. Our approach is contextualized in a Canadian government case study of relocating a \$300 million dollar facility.

DOI: 10.1061/(ASCE)0733-9488(2009)135:4(159)

CE Database subject headings: Evaluation; Decision making; Site selection; Urban development; Canada.

## Introduction

### Overview

From corporate headquarter relocation to waste disposal sites, responsible parties such as property developers, corporations, and government agencies are faced with the challenge of identifying the best site for locating a facility. Despite the wide array of siting issues, the core test remains the same: how is "best" defined, who should be defining best, and how is it measured? This is not a simple task. Numerous facts, values, objectives, stakeholders, constraints, and criteria confound even relatively straightforward site selection problems. In the absence of a clear process and framework, site selection choices are vulnerable to well-intended oversimplification or exposure to outside political pressure. Potential downsides include public outcry and suboptimal site selection. Our experience suggests that what is needed is an approach to site selection that clearly separates facts from values and embraces a process that is thorough, inclusive, and transparent. The results of such a process should be highly defensible and easily communicated, whether explaining site choices to a board of directors, to the general public, or communicating between decision makers and staff.

Despite the widespread need for good examples, there are few case studies in the literature that outline an approach that can be broadly applied. The purpose of this paper is to help close this

gap by outlining a sensible decision and process support (DPS) approach for site selection for a corporate headquarters facility. This paper is particularly relevant to industry practitioners who can adopt the process outlined in order to develop workable criteria and measures, and to explore the impact of values on the decision making process. Using this approach will also help to minimize the polarization and politicizing of the site selection process, and ultimately the decision itself, by focusing on the importance of the criteria before examining the range of site alternatives. The paper first outlines the common approaches used by industry practitioners in the site acquisition phase of a construction project. Next, we introduce the case study project and the site selection process adopted for this project. Finally, we draw conclusion on the broader applicability of the approach.

### Perspectives in Site Selection Problems

Developing an approach to site selection requires integrating several perspectives. One comes from technical experts, such as security professionals, engineers, architects, environmental scientists, or human resource specialists. Each technical expert has some idea of what qualities define a property as "best." A second perspective is that of accountable decision makers who not only bring additional ideas about what is a high quality site, they are also expected to balance competing interests, multiple objectives, stakeholder values, and a variety of risks that are an inherent part of site selection decisions. What we have observed as common practice is an informal decision process based on an opportunistic and reactionary approach where staff put forward a limited number of sites based on poorly defined decision criteria. Experts and decision makers are then asked to choose a site and rationalize their decision with a limited set of objectives (e.g., such as cost and availability). A step up from this approach is for technical experts within an organization to develop the site selection criteria and score site alternatives. Site selection is therefore approached as a constrained optimization problem with limited treatment of project/corporate objectives. While certainly devel-

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Note. This manuscript was submitted on April 25, 2007; approved on August 11, 2009; published online on November 13, 2009. Discussion period open until May 1, 2010; separate discussions must be submitted for individual papers. This paper is part of the *Journal of Urban Planning and Development*, Vol. 135, No. 4, December 1, 2009. ©ASCE, ISSN 0733-9488/2009/4-159-165/\$25.00.

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