

Meet the neighbors who said, 'Yes, in my backyard'

A band of suburban women weren't going to let their most vocal neighbors drive away a proposal to build a new mental health facility in their community.

By [Laura Yuen](#) Star Tribune
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DAVID JOLLES, STAR TRIBUNE

Jessica Mager, center, Randi Walz, left, and Michelle Lewis, right, organized West St. Paul residents to voice support for a new mental health facility.

The more that Jessica Mager learned about plans to build a mental health and recovery center in her community, the more distressed she became.

But that's not because she opposed the development. Far from it. Her agitation sprang from a growing narrative that pitted the proposal against vocal homeowners and church leaders of West St. Paul who were pushing back. [Opponents](#) had gone so far as to create a website detailing safety concerns. What troubled her most? Some of the project's adversaries were people Mager knew and respected.

"This mental health center is being built very close to me, and it's my own neighbors who were quoted in the article as questioning it," she told me, recalling her reaction after reading a piece in the [West St. Paul Reader](#). "This is my neighborhood reflecting to the world that we're not welcoming to a population of people who need to be welcomed. That didn't sit right with me."

The soft-spoken stay-at-home mom and some of her like-minded neighbors were so stirred that they unleashed a suburban YIMBY movement in their community. Their goal: Mobilize community members. Flip the narrative. Show up and speak out in favor of a mental health facility that they believed would make their city *safer*.

First, Mager texted everyone in the area who she could think of. "That's something I guess I am good at," she told me with a self-deprecating chuckle. "I'm not articulate, but I can connect with people."

She and fellow residents Randi Walz and Michelle Lewis drafted letters to the city and county, urging other townspeople to sign their names and lend their voices to a burgeoning tidal wave of support. Organizers invited residents to a neighborhood pub to practice the two-minute speeches they had prepared for City Hall. People in favor of the center crowded public meetings, eventually outnumbering the opposition by nearly 4 to 1.

"It was the opposite of the whole 'Not in My Backyard' take," said Council Member Wendy Berry. "They were like, 'Yes, put it in my backyard, please.'"

The center, which would be owned by Dakota County and operated by nonprofit provider Guild, would offer 16 beds for adults in need of mental health or substance abuse treatment. Residents who stayed there for up to three months could receive interventions and skills that would help them transition toward independent living. For others, in crisis, a 10-day stay would help stabilize them and prevent hospitalization.

To some community members, this facility sounded like a boon. The NIMBY way of thinking asks, "Why here?" The YIMBYists in West St. Paul offered: "[Why not here?](#)"

It's not to say there is no risk when you develop a parking lot into a crisis and recovery center. I have no doubt that a mom and neighbor who spoke out against the facility believed her words when she ominously [warned](#) that "something will happen."

But that risk is everywhere in our communities, and it only increases when our most vulnerable neighbors are turned away from treatment and healing.

Last month at a [public hearing](#), the West St. Paul City Council heard a crush of residents, mostly those in support of the center. Some recounted the desperation they felt while searching for psychiatric beds for loved ones, only to be referred to places in other states. Others bravely shared their own mental health struggles. Some speakers were school social workers and medical professionals who saw the acute need for a place that would house and care for people in crisis. Many, like Mager, were parents of young children, who instead of following the instinct to insulate and harden their borders, embraced a refuge like this.

Collectively, they helped remove the stigma — and the sting — from the topic of mental illness.

"People opened up about their mental health struggles in a way that I don't think would have been possible five years ago," recalled resident Ken Paulman, who spoke in favor of the center. "Usually, these public hearings are contentious and ugly and leave everyone feeling angry. This was like going to church. I left feeling uplifted and positive."

The council unanimously [approved](#) the rezoning needed to move the plans forward. Pending county board approval of contracts, construction is expected to begin this fall and should be completed by the end of 2024.

For Mager, a member of the citizen group [Women of West St. Paul](#), it was a sign that everyday people — including those in passive agreement with a proposal — can overcome the loudest minority.

"I don't like conflict," Mager acknowledged. "I was most nervous about being in conflict with my own neighbors who I care a lot about. That was very, very hard on me."

Mager experienced two seizures during the ramp-up to the council vote, episodes that stemmed from a preexisting health condition but likely triggered by emotional stress. Still, she has no regrets about taking a stand, and even has gratitude toward those who vociferously fought the proposal.

"It brought up how strongly I feel for how our community portrays itself," she said, "and how strongly I want it to be a welcoming and supportive community for all."