

# Community Participation in Brownfield Redevelopment:

**A Collaborative Process Affecting the Interests of All Stakeholders**

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## Introduction

Brownfield redevelopment involves a collaborative process affecting the interests of a variety of stakeholders—investors; developers; financial institutions; city, county, and state officials; and community members. Although these parties have significant vested interests, the Environmental Protection Agency is giving significant attention to the inclusion of the community in the process. Success of any redevelopment program is dependent on several factors, including effective community participation in planning efforts. Although achieving successful community involvement benefits both the city and the community, it is the exception rather than the norm.

A four-hour workshop entitled, “Community Participation in Brownfield Redevelopment,” was held at the 1999 Annual Conference on Hazardous Waste Research. The workshop hosted such nationally known experts as John Rosenthal, director of the Urban and Environmental Institute of the National Conference of Black Mayors; Donna Ducharme, executive director of Chicagoland REDI, and Charles Utley, president of the Hyde and Aragon Park Improvement Committee in Augusta, South Carolina. In addition Julie Stone, policy assistant to the mayor of St. Louis; Lawrence Brady, mayor of Wellston, Missouri; Jessica Perkins, Vector Communica-

tions; Lucille Walton, director of sustainable neighborhoods at RHCDA; and Beth Noonan, project manager for real estate and community development at the St. Louis County Economic Council, served as speakers and panelists.

The workshop was held at the Cornerstone Training Center in Wellston, Missouri, for two main reasons: 1) to stress to workshop attendees the importance of connecting with and physically being in a community setting, and 2) the Cornerstone Training Center is a former brownfield site. The Cornerstone, once the Wagner Electric plant that employed 4000 people, has been reborn to provide high-tech training to youth and displaced workers. The center celebrated its one-year anniversary in June 1999. The program began with four students, but in 1999 was functioning at full capacity, given funding limitations, with an enrollment of 60 students. The Cornerstone has been attractive to potential developers/businesses interested in relocating to the property near the training center. Workshop presenters and participants were given a tour of the facility before the workshop began.

## Workshop Goals

The workshop was intended to focus on various perspectives and myriad

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practical examples from the Wellston community. It was designed to expose participants to issues surrounding community input, and provide strategies for engaging citizens through panel and roundtable discussions. To reinforce the importance of the community, conference participants were asked to take the Metrolink from the downtown conference site to the Cornerstone Training Center at Wellston Technology Park. The workshop demonstrated how the development of an open, consensus-based community participation program, which addresses stakeholder concerns about potential impacts to the community, can streamline the brownfield redevelopment process.

To give workshop participants an understanding of local brownfield redevelopment issues and lessons learned by the municipalities governing the cities of Wellston and St. Louis, representatives from both city governments addressed the audience. According to Julie Stone, assistant to the mayor of St. Louis, local governments in the area have reached the conclusion that a collaborative approach on the part of government is the best way to serve the community. People across jurisdictional boundaries have similar issues and concerns: employment, low income, and brownfields. Stone identified a key barrier to community involvement in brownfield issues—at the community level, people don't recognize what brownfields are. The language used to educate and inform the general public is not appropriate. Stone suggested two remedies to stimulate community involvement and awareness to 1) talk

to residents in their own language; and 2) make connections between issues— environmental concerns are related to crime, jobs, and other more important, higher priority community and personal issues.

Stone reported a growing awareness within city government that community involvement is essential. St. Louis is making efforts to build in community involvement in several projects. The city, county, and federal agencies have figured out they are all working toward the same goal and are seeking creative ways to solve problems.

## **The Brownfield Redevelopment Process**

Blase Leven from the Great Plains/Rocky Mountain Hazardous Substance Research Center provided an overview of the brownfield redevelopment process. The presentation defined brownfields; examined the reasons behind the movement to redevelop brownfields; and discussed common barriers to redeveloping urban brownfield sites; including liability, regulatory concerns, and financing.

## **Identification of Community Issues**

John Rosenthal, director of the Urban and Environmental Justice Institute, was the workshop's keynote speaker. Rosenthal addressed issues related to community redevelopment. According to Rosenthal, environmental injustice can be avoided by involving everyone and insuring that all stakeholders un-

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derstand the substance (issues) and procedures (rules) involved in any process or decision. Rosenthal illustrated this point by using an analogy and asking participants to think about the following: If there were a stink bomb that was going to be placed next to one chair in the room and only two people had to decide its location, where would those two people choose to place it? How would the location of the stink bomb change if two rows of people chose its location? How does it change when everyone has a say in the stink bomb's siting?

Rosenthal stressed that community participation in any project is affected by the time and place of events, not only in terms of convenience to the community, but in terms of the community's relationship and history with specific places and entities. He cited an example of a summertime meeting held in an African-American community in Mississippi. In the summer, a big incentive for attendance at community meetings is to hold them in air-conditioned locations. Meetings usually held at the community's public library were well attended. When the library's air-conditioning unit broke down, the meeting was moved to the police station. The community members were not comfortable with that location and did not attend the meeting.

The largest challenge in securing meaningful community participation is making certain that the community understands the technical and complex nature of the issues. The community doesn't often understand the rules that govern the brownfield redevelopment

process. Other stakeholders must also give feedback to the community by keeping them informed of the project's process, even if their advice isn't incorporated.

## Exploration of Community Concerns

Donna Ducharme, executive director of Chicagoland REDI, facilitated a panel of community involvement activists and experts that discussed concerns of relevance to their particular communities.

Ducharme began the panel with the following statement regarding community involvement in brownfield redevelopment:

"We need to expand our thinking about the ways that communities can be involved in brownfield redevelopment and take the steps necessary to prepare for that involvement." Communities can

- provide input/feedback/advocacy,
- participate in planning and information gathering,
- facilitate redevelopment,
- build connections to and broker community benefits, and
- impact policy and system development.

In order to be involved effectively, communities need to

- understand these roles,
- determine which roles they are interested in playing (in the short and long term), and
- develop the capacity to play these roles and add value to the process.

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These steps, when taken, increase “community readiness.” Community readiness needs to happen early. It is critical to successful brownfield redevelopment due to the following:

- It opens up a range of positive roles for the community rather than confining it to negative responses and reactions.
- It can help the community identify and begin putting in place the supports and resources such as site assembly or tax increment financing districts needed to spur brownfield redevelopment.
- It can identify the parameters of redevelopment and help create certainty and reduce risk for potential developers and end users, as well as for the community.
- It can identify the community benefits expected from redevelopment and begin putting in place the mechanisms (such as effective job training programs) to achieve them.

Early, positive community involvement is critical to direct redevelopment, adds value, and increases community benefits. It is also critical because brownfield sites already face many competitive disadvantages to greenfield sites. Extra layers of community process that are specifically for brownfield sites and do not apply to greenfield sites will only exacerbate the problem.

Lucille Walton, director of Sustainable Neighborhoods, Regional Housing and Community Development Alliance, is a long-time Wellston resident. Walton focused her comments on some of the Wellston community’s challenges and concerns. Her comments were delivered in the context of the community’s past, present, and future.

Wellston was once a thriving community with more than 10,000 residents and a very prominent business district. This district had two banks, a transportation hub (commonly called the Wellston Loop), a chain grocery store, retail stores, one high school, one middle school, and two elementary schools. By 1968, Wellston was 80% African American and 20% white. The city government became culturally diverse in 1969. The southern section of Wellston housed such industries such as Wagner Electric, Moog Industries, and Ni-Jan.

Much of the property in Wellston is now underutilized and/or deteriorating. There are no retail stores or grocery chains. The population numbers about 3300 African-Americans and 150 white residents. The city or county owns more than 250 parcels of vacant land. Since 1980, the population has declined by 20%.

Wellston is a sustainable development community and an empowerment zone. Residents find themselves asking, “What now? What’s in it for us?” An industrial development plan for Wellston has focused community concerns on the following issues: fear that the redevelopment plan will be used to invoke eminent domain to displace residents, and possible further contami-

nation of the area on the part of new industries that may locate in the area. The biggest challenge facing the Wellston community and the redevelopment plan is the need to develop a citizen-driven process involving communication, information dissemination, and partnership.

Jessica Perkins from Vector Communications shared what her firm had done to elicit community concerns regarding environmental issues in the area. Through a partnership with St. Louis College and the Environmental Protection Agency, Vector Communications implemented a listening tour, which surveyed community participants. Twelve tours were conducted and the lowest attendance was on weekends. Tuesday and Wednesday evenings were the most well-attended sessions. Surveys and information were focused on environmental issues and on finding out what the participants saw as the most important issues? Resource needs identified by the community were technical expertise and community support. The next phase of the project will involve concentrated leadership training in two communities. Lessons learned during this project include the importance of building relationships (54% of participants attended because someone had told them about it) and community engagement. Perkins analogized community relationships to personal, romantic relationships. Stakeholders must ask the same kinds of questions of their community relationships as their personal relationships, such as “Am I doing things right? Do I do enough caretaking? How am I communicating my respect?”

Charles Utley is president of the Hyde and Aragon Park Improvement Committee, a community-based organization in Augusta, South Carolina. According to Utley, this organization was originally created to focus on improving living conditions for the area residents, i.e., running water, plumbing. His community is similar in many respects to Wellston. Currently the Hyde and Aragon Park Improvement Committee is working to address contamination issues caused by the dumping of wood treatment by-products to unlined ditches. The committee worked to develop a community-driven application to the EPA Brownfields Program. Utley identified the following as important tools for engaging and motivating community members: identification of informal leadership, working through the community center, establishing a Web site, and working to build cross-cultural relationships. He also emphasized the importance of building trust among stakeholders. According to Utley, trust has to be present before any significant progress can be made.

Beth Noonan, project manager for real estate and community development for the St. Louis County Economic Development Council, is working to facilitate redevelopment of Wellston. There are approximately 400 abandoned properties in Wellston. Residential, commercial, and industrial redevelopment is part of the plan for the city. The community was involved in passage of the redevelopment plan and is very involved with the city council. Challenges involved in working with the Wellston community revolve around fear. The county is doing work

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in the city, and the community has the perception that the county wants to take over. Another challenge is identifying and disseminating information into the community when no communication mechanism exists. Noonan is searching for an effective way of reaching the community. The long period of time involved in the brownfield redevelopment process makes it difficult to keep the community motivated.

Community concerns expressed by Wellston area activists and experts included fear that the redevelopment process will be used to force residents from their homes and that new industries brought in by redevelopment efforts will contribute to existing environmental damage. Specific challenges to involve the community in the redevelopment process include creating and maintaining a mechanism for identifying and disseminating information, and keeping motivation and participation levels up during the long time period required by the process.

### **Strategies for Community Involvement**

Using the Wellston community as an example, participants, community representatives, and workshop presenters met in small groups to discuss a series of questions centered on community involvement issues. Discussion centered on defining the role of the community in the brownfield redevelopment process, how to elicit “real” community concerns, and integrating stakeholder visions into achievable goals. Based on their discussions, the small groups were asked to diagram

strategies for creating partnerships among diverse stakeholders. Issues identified by both groups include the importance of establishing an honest relationship with residents and other stakeholders as early and as often as possible, sharing scientific information in nontechnical terminology on relevant issues, engaging residents in promotion of educational opportunities, offering various educational opportunities so that the community’s expectations are reasonable, and assessing the success of the project from the community’s point of view.

## Appendix A Creating a Community Web

**GOALS:** To introduce workshop participants through shared community experiences.

**MATERIALS:** A ball of string or twine.

**INSTRUCTIONS:**

1) Gather workshop participants in a large circle. Separate the workshop presenters into a separate group.

2) Choose a person to begin the exercise by giving them the ball of twine. People will introduce themselves by relating experiences they have had in community involvement, i.e., scouting, church activities, volunteering, etc.

3) When another member of the group has had a shared experience, he or she can take the ball from the originator, who keeps hold of the end of the string. It becomes the second person's turn to introduce him or herself by relating experiences in community involvement. When someone else in the group shares one of that person's activities, the ball is passed, with the second person maintaining a hold on the twine.

4) Eventually some common activity or experience connects everyone.

5) After everyone is connected, the facilitator should stress the following points:

a) Take a look at the web that this circle of people has created by their involvement in common activities. The web should be an intricate pattern creating a visual picture of community strength and commitment.

b) Notice the group of people that have been excluded from the web. This group of people represents a community impacted by brownfield redevelopment. Encourage the participants to envision how much stronger and more involved the web could have been if those left out had been included.

## Appendix B Case Study Scenario and Followup Questions

### Wellston Technology Park Redevelopment Plan

The Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority of St. Louis County (county LCRA), in cooperation with the city of Wellston, Missouri, will administer implementation of the Wellston Technology Park Redevelopment Plan, a plan to foster commercial, industrial, and residential redevelopment within the city of Wellston. Currently, there are a significant number of abandoned and/or underutilized properties in Wellston, and areas of the community characterized by an incompatible mix of light manufacturing/industrial and residential uses. The redevelopment plan provides a new land use plan for the city that is intended to improve upon the current uses and enhance the living and business environment of the community.

The role of the county LCRA is to facilitate the redevelopment process, in part, by taking the necessary steps to prepare abandoned/underutilized properties for redevelopment in accordance with the redevelopment plan. Redevelopment preparations involve, among many things, the conduct of environmental assessments of properties to ensure that no conditions exist that would affect the residents or the development or sale of the properties. A grant through the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Brownfield Pilot Program provides funding for the environmental assessments and related activities.

The county LCRA believes that community participation will lead to greater understanding of and commitment to the Wellston Technology Park Redevelopment Plan. Securing that commitment rests on effective, ongoing communication with members of the community and will be integral to successful redevelopment. To this end, the county LCRA has secured the assistance of the urban league of metropolitan St. Louis to act as a community liaison and to assist the county LCRA in providing community outreach to all Wellston residents, and in particular, to those who will be most affected by redevelopment efforts. These activities will include presentation of public education sessions/workshops and community visioning sessions to inform and engage the Wellston community in environmental assessment activities as well as the overall redevelopment plans. The county LCRA will also be engaging the expertise of Kansas State University to

assist with technical issues and community outreach.

While certain mechanisms—seminars/workshops—have been identified for communicating with the Wellston community and some grass roots organizing is now occurring in Wellston, how can the county LCRA best go about engaging Wellston residents and insuring their participation in the process?

## Roundtable Questions

What should be the community's role in the brownfield redevelopment process?

How do you elicit "real" community concerns?

When in the process is the citizen/resident informed of the project? Why?

What level of understanding is necessary for effective community involvement?

How do you integrate the stakeholders' visions for their community into achievable goals?

How does the community define success?

Based on your discussion, diagram your strategies for creating partnerships among stakeholders.