



COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN BROWNFIELD REDEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

One of the most important aspects of brownfields redevelopment is the call for active involvement by a variety of stakeholders—investors, developers, financial institutions, city/county/state officials, and community members. Garnering significant and meaningful public participation in these projects presents a challenge. In an effort to educate a variety of stakeholders on issues and strategies involved in engaging communities in brownfield redevelopment, a four-hour workshop was conducted at the Annual Conference on Hazardous Waste Research. The workshop hosted nationally known experts in the area of community participation as well as local representatives working on similar issues in the host community. The workshop focused on various perspectives and a myriad of practical examples from the Wellston, Missouri Community. A panel of community involvement activists and experts discussed concerns of relevance to their particular communities. 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.

Key words: *brownfields redevelopment, communities, community involvement, outreach services, workshops*

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. The 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 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 Communications; 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.

WORKSHOP GOALS

The workshop was intended to focus on various perspectives and a myriad of 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 the Wellston Technology Park, a brownfield pilot site. The workshop demonstrated how the development of an open, consensus-based community participation program that addresses stakeholder concerns about potential impacts to the community, can streamline the brownfield redevelopment process.

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 understand the substance (issues) and procedures (rules) involved in any process or decision. He 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. The largest challenge in securing meaningful community participation is making certain that the community understands the technical and complex nature of the issues.

EXPLORATION OF COMMUNITY CONCERNS

A panel of community involvement activists and experts, facilitated by Donna Ducharme, executive director of Chicagoland REDI, discussed concerns of relevance to their particular communities. 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 will contribute to 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 strate-

gies 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 non-technical terminology on relevant issues, engaging the residents in the 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.

A more detailed publication documenting this workshop is available from the Technical Outreach Services for Communities (TOSC) Program. Please call the TOSC Hotline at 1-800-798-7796 for more information.

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