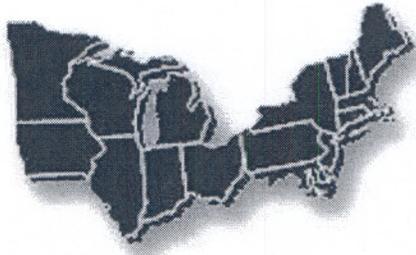


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**Community Involvement at Brownfield Sites:  
Proven Strategies and Current Issues**

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## **Community Involvement at Brownfield Sites: Proven Strategies and Current Issues**

Community involvement is a critical part of any brownfield re-development strategy. These strategies require more stakeholder participation than the typical real estate transaction, due to complex site history, concerns about human health and the environment, difficult financing issues, and various desires for site reuse. The process for involving stakeholders in brownfield redevelopment, built on credible and usable information, can forge a community vision for brownfield reuse that links key public and private stakeholders together in partnerships to achieve a common mission.

In countless communities grappling with brownfield situations, the process for reaching decisions about addressing environmental concerns and planning for site reuse can either have a galvanizing effect on a community or drive wedges of division and disharmony right through it. In dozens of project examples, the Northeast-Midwest Institute has seen that active and inclusive community partnerships—based on critical information used to promote active involvement—can be effective in helping to address brownfield barriers such as these:

- Fear of uncertainty that landowners or prospective purchasers may have over their investment
- Reluctance of owners and lenders to assume perceived higher levels of risk associated with contaminated land
- Distrust of those living in the areas adjoining brownfield sites targeted for reuse.

Success in getting community support for brownfield reuse and establishing critical partnerships devoted to sustainable development and reuse depends on a complicated mix of factors, which often are project specific. These factors include:

- The degree of development pressure in the community.
- A determination of when the public should be involved, which partners are best suited for that involvement, and how often their involvement should be sought.
- The choice of who should carry out the public participation process, and how it should be done.
- Realistic identification of the nature and extent of the direct benefits—such as job opportunities and access to retail or recreational services—that the neighborhood will realize if the project goes forward.
- The determination of who will decide "how clean is clean" for the site, and how that decision will be reached.

- The potential for displacement through gentrification following redevelopment.
- How and to what level the quality of life in the community will be impacted during the project construction and redevelopment phases.

### **Questions to Consider in Engaging the Community**

Brownfield projects vary in the issues to address, opportunities to pursue, and approaches to take, but for all projects the key questions on process and practice for effective public involvement are the same.

- When should the public be involved, and how often?
- How much outreach and public relations should be carried out, and what is the best way to do it?
- What will the impact of stakeholder involvement be on project costs, and who will pay for it?
- Do potential site reusers perceive that involvement as causing any delays, and what will this mean for the project?
- Who drives or “owns” the public involvement process, and what are the implications of that ownership for the overall project?
- How should the media be constructively involved?

These questions should be considered by the people, institutions, and organizations that are most likely to be affected by existing and future conditions at the site, and those in the best position to influence its sustainable reuse. This means consciously designing a communication plan and building outreach strategies that will bring in all essential stakeholders.

The extent to which they can be satisfactorily addressed will influence how successful a public outreach strategy ultimately is.

### **Defining a Community Vision**

A community’s vision for brownfield reuse provides a vital framework for stakeholder involvement. The community vision is a critical element of brownfield reuse partnerships, as well as a key ingredient in alleviating any stigma associated with the site. Local leaders need to make sure that the appropriate climate for defining the right vision exists. Although this climate will vary depending on each situation and each set of project partners—and it will need to be developed in the context of the culture and circumstances of each area—it will likely include these building blocks:

***Availability of needed information:*** Stakeholders need basic information on sites, cleanup technologies, public health concerns, and other issues, in a usable form that various stakeholders can understand and use. Particularly in the case of innovative remediation technologies, which can save hundreds of thousands of dollars and really make the project numbers work, it is critical to provide solid, objective, and understandable information to all stakeholders, including community participants. In a few cases, developers have paid for consultants—chosen by the stakeholders themselves—to verify these public health and safety projections.

***Availability of staff and other resources to formulate a vision and a plan for carrying that vision out:*** Stakeholders need basic support, which may include help from city planning staff; maps, computer, and access to geographic information systems that link community features and assets; or simply a place to work. Cities or developers that help provide such support often find that the process runs more quickly and more smoothly.

***Responsiveness of local officials:*** Local officials need to be responsive to community concerns over planning, zoning, community needs, and the allocation of resources and incentives as they apply to brownfield situations.

***Responsiveness of state officials.*** State officials need to help stakeholders understand, access, and use the state's voluntary cleanup program and its resources, and clearly convey how it operates in terms of both determining and then providing assurance about the health and safety of specific cleanups. States also need to show what they can do in terms of help in allocating resources and incentives to the project.

## **Partnerships and Frameworks for Participation**

Communities use a variety of partnerships and frameworks to support the kind of public involvement needed to define and carry out their sustainable development visions. The most optimum depends on community needs and traditions. They include:

- Task forces, panels, and “blue ribbon committees.”
- Institutions with tradition and acceptance in the community—such as churches, community development corporations, or Chambers of Commerce—that can publicize, host meetings, and attract residents and other stakeholders to meetings.
- Focus groups charged with defining key community concerns and identifying acceptable approaches.

- Role-playing exercises or planning charettes, complete with maps, models, and information on current zoning provisions, regulatory constraints, possible incentives, and other factors.
- Cable-access television, which can broaden the dissemination of planning, financing, and other processes—especially in rural areas where distance and time-of-travel can inhibit participation.

These methods can be used in various combinations, based on determinations of how to involve various constituencies in various ways that take the greatest advantage of their interests and expertise; establish a foundation for trust; and enable them to take an active role in the reuse process that is consistent with developer and investor parameters.

### **Community Roles in the Redevelopment Process**

Once the redevelopment process begins, the community can play an important role in working with local governments, developers, and others. Their participation not only provides insights and historical knowledge about the site, but also resolves any outstanding concerns that might lead to opposition to cleanup and redevelopment decisions late in the process.

At the pre-development stage, local stakeholders can do the following:

- Support the preparation of environmental assessments—for example, by corroborating information on the site's past uses or business practices.
- Review environmental documents to gain comfort with their findings and let others know of that comfort.
- Help to determine—up front—key project elements, such as acceptable site uses, standards for cleanup, uses of institutional controls, and long-term monitoring needed.
- Work with the developer to finalize design plans, which in some cases has enabled the developer to gain unexpected support because of the trust generated by the public participation process.
- Participate in public meetings—for example, before zoning boards or development and finance organizations—where a stakeholder presence will send a strong, positive signal and may lead to tangible benefits, such as reduced approval times or access to public funding.

- Secure additional community benefits that are compatible with the overall project, which is helpful in marketing the project and building trust in the wider community.

After the project has been approved and site work is underway, community members can be valuable participants in various aspects of site monitoring, which can bring comfort to the neighborhood and credibility to the developer. Stakeholders can also help with community outreach by carrying out information and education efforts and promoting the project's community benefits.

During the construction phase, information is essential to effective stakeholder involvement. Community members should be encouraged to ask questions about how construction will affect their day-to-day quality of life, and any concerns they raise should be quickly addressed. Usually, developers who respond quickly and sensitively to community concerns have experienced few problems and minimal delays. Typical questions include:

- When will the job start, and how will the neighborhood be notified?
- How long will cleanup take?
- Will there be a lot of noise during the cleanup?
- Will any of the waste be treated on site? What process will be used, and will any chemicals be released during the brownfield cleanup?
- Will waste be trucked through the neighborhood? What happens if some of it spills or falls off the truck?
- Where is the waste being taken?
- Will the brownfield site be dusty during cleanup? How will the dust be controlled? Is it dangerous?
- What kind of signs will be posted while work is going on? Will they have pictures? Will children be able to understand them? Will they be posted in languages suitable for the ethnic composition of the area?
- Will there be guards at the street crossings to help with truck traffic?

- Will there be a night watchman at the brownfield site to control access during off hours?
- Will the site be fenced off?
- If something is wrong, who should neighborhood residents call?

Other site or process-questions will likely arise as a project evolves, and communities that have seen the most success generally in brownfield reuse are those who are prepared to work with neighborhood residents and project developers to get answers in a sufficient and timely manner.

### **Models of Successful Community Involvement**

Whatever a community's size, character, or traditions, brownfield projects show that redevelopment efforts can be improved by engaging the community and tying reuse projects together with sustainable development strategies. In the following cases and countless others, the community's involvement enhanced or facilitated the redevelopment project, creating a win-win situation for stakeholders and developers alike.

- In **Rosalia, Washington**, the entire town of 600 people rallied around to plan for and carry out the transformation of an abandoned gas station in the center of downtown and transform it into a visitor center serving the area and the nearby Steptoe Battlefield Historic Site. Town residents planned for its cleanup and reuse, and rallied together to pursue a plethora of resources to make it happen -- everything from state Department of Ecology funds to donated supplies and sweat equity on cleanup and renovation. In the nation's first ever partnership with a department of corrections, the mayor of Rosalia persuaded the warden at the state penitentiary to have the inmates manufacture commemorative license plates honoring Rosalia's efforts -- which were sold as part of the financing efforts to secure funds for cleanup. This project was a 2005 Phoenix Awards community impact winner.
- In **Bridgeport, Connecticut**, plans for a minor league ball park on the Jenkins Valve site—where no other feasible use had been identified—were incorporated into a number of transportation improvements already in the planning stages. Strong public support helped to expedite the cumbersome state transportation planning process and broadened access to the Harbor Yard redevelopment project by commuter rail, ferry, and Interstate highway.

- In **Trenton, New Jersey**, the Circle F housing development reflected the city's desire to work with local neighborhood groups and encourage more residential activity downtown—where for decades no housing had been built. The city worked with the property owner to devise plan to divide the site, developing light industry on one half and seniors' housing on the other. For the residential portion of the project, the city selected Lutheran Social Ministries, an experienced local nonprofit developer.
- In **Milwaukee, Wisconsin**, a whole neighborhood pitched in to help a small developer transform a long-abandoned gas station into a small coffee shop. Despite its designation as a local historic landmark, the gas station was in such disrepair that the city condemned the property and scheduled it for demolition — until a group of residents presented city officials with a redevelopment plan. A community-based developer stepped forward and raised enough money for remediation and restoration, spurring enactment of a state law that waives back taxes on projects that go through the state's voluntary cleanup program.
- **Greenfield, New Hampshire** linked neighborhood wishes for a new park with the town's need for a new, community septic system. The community drummed up support for a bond issue for the project, raising a total \$2.1 million to pay for a host of projects in Greenfield. The bond issue provided \$300,000 for the purchase and cleanup of the property, and about \$450,000 for the installation of the leachfields.

Finally, in **Minneapolis, Minnesota**, community participation was central to the redevelopment of the Johnson Street Quarry into a neighborhood shopping center. The center is anchored by a supermarket, which the community wanted, but includes a great deal of additional commercial space that the developer needed to make the project economically viable. Neighborhood residents were skeptical about the project size until a neighborhood task force began meeting monthly with the city and developers, in a televised public forum, to discuss project plans, track progress, and address community concerns.

This approach had a number of benefits: those who were unable to attend the meeting could still follow the process on TV or obtain videotapes of it afterward. This not only kept the public informed, but also gave the developer more assurance that there would be no surprise opposition as the project unfolded. The televised meetings also allowed city officials to document the process, so that latecomers to the process could see which issues had already been addressed.

This project and process worked well. Neighborhood ideas for access to the center and the site configuration were incorporated into the design. In addition, the developer realized an unanticipated benefit from the community's comfort with the project when local residents went to the zoning board on his behalf to support a set-back variance that allowed more parking on site. In this instance, neighbors allowed the buildings to be placed closer to the lot line—adding a full row of parking spaces—in exchange for the developer facing the buildings with attractive brick.

### **Community Involvement: Lessons from Brownfield Successes**

In addition to demonstrating the benefits of community involvement, an examination of various types of brownfield projects reveal shared elements of success.

***Broaden stakeholder involvement:*** City leaders must break old patterns of behavior. Dealing with familiar people and organizations; succumbing to political impulses; protecting control of the situation; and allowing old animosities to undermine new projects, all work against opening up involvement for the maximum benefit.

***Know your community and its leadership at all levels.*** Project organizers need to literally go door-to-door, searching for critical partners and building a network of stakeholder constituencies. Engaging the public requires early and active recruiting of representatives and the ongoing nurturing of those relationships to create a collaborative environment that enhances respect for each perspective brought to the table.

***Make sure that key interactions take place.*** Stakeholders must communicate with the local political leadership; close communication links with the mayor, city council, and other chief municipal officials will keep political involvement, interest, and support at a high level. At the same time, interaction between local stakeholders and city officials with state and federal environmental agencies is critical to enhancing resources and shaping policies and practices that affect brownfield redevelopment. These interactions also can foster a higher-level of community understanding of the brownfield reuse process and opportunities.

***Recognize the staffing and resource requirements.*** Cities and developers often underestimate the substantial amount of effort needed to initiate and maintain effective stakeholder involvement. To the extent possible, projects should enlist a brownfields point person or ombudsman to coordinate and facilitate the community involvement strategy associated with a project work plan.

***Document milestones.*** Nothing succeeds like success, and defined indicators of success can keep tasks focused and help determine when to publicize project information.

Documentation should note the commitments made—and kept—by people and institutions, as well as who was responsible for various collaborations and achievements. The redevelopment process can extend over a long period of time, and maintaining excitement and support from stakeholders and the community at large is important. Promoting successes, even small ones, helps build the image of trust and comfort in working together that can pay important dividends in terms of future brownfields activity.