

# Thoughts on Effectively Involving the Community in Brownfields Redevelopment

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Meaningful community involvement is not only the right thing to do, but also essential for the success of any Brownfields project.

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Too often, relationships between communities and developers are characterized by skepticism and mistrust – with residents believing that developers care little about their concerns and visions for their communities, and developers thinking that communities have unrealistic expectations ungrounded in economic reality.

Such scenarios can be even more poignant in the case of Brownfields redevelopment. In addition to traditional development issues, communities and developers must contend with site assessments, remedial strategies and cleanup standards and their impact on the environment and public health.

Moving from a history of confrontation to a future of collaboration requires effort on both sides. After several years of working with communities and developers, both from the public sector and as private developers, we have been encouraged by the many instances in which communities and Brownfields developers have found common ground and worked effectively

together. These successes share several characteristics. What follows are some of our thoughts on a few of these.

Characteristic 1: Developers must work directly with community leaders and residents from the initiation of the project throughout all stages of the planning and development process.

Early and meaningful community involvement is critical to the success of a Brownfields development project. It mitigates potential obstacles and helps to ensure that communities derive the greatest possible benefits – environmental, economic, and social – from the development. In order for early and meaningful community involvement to work, developers must genuinely believe that it is not only the right thing to do, but also critical to the success of the project.

In a recent bid to cleanup and redevelop a 33-acre oil tank farm in South Boston, we sought to make the community a partner in our efforts, and despite some initial tensions, it proved essential to the project. Our development team committed to go beyond regulatory public comment requirements and establish a Citizen Advisory Committee. Comprised of environmental, public health and community leaders from the area, we

suggested that this Committee meet with our team and our environmental partners on a regular basis to ensure that we heard the community's concerns and interests directly.

Over a period of several months, our openness, with what was initially a highly skeptical and adversarial community, built a strong foundation of trust and collaboration. The community is now among our strongest allies in seeing this project move forward – not because we promised to meet every one of their requests, but because we committed to work with them honestly and to fairly consider their concerns.

Characteristic 2: Developers must help the community get the tools to become knowledgeable and to more effectively participate in the process.

Without the right technical support, communities are likely to become frustrated and distrustful. Local volunteer boards are typically overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of the development proposals that are flooding their towns. For example, the 50 communities in southeastern Massachusetts comprise one of the five fastest growing areas in America. Yet more than half of these communities do not have a full time planner, only 20 have master plans, and of those, only five have

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been updated in the last five years. In the case of Brownfields, few if any communities have the environmental expertise to effectively weigh in on the assessment and cleanup process.

With this in mind, in South Boston, we agreed to help the proposed Citizens Advisory Committee retain independent environmental engineering technical assistance. We committed to contribute some capital, but primarily to help the community secure a Technical Assistance Grants from EPA. Programs such as TAG and EPA New England's Brownfields Pilot and Sustainable Development Challenge Grant programs are just a few examples of the many public programs that are available to get communities the resources they need.

**Characteristic 3:** Developers should be prepared to offer the community equity interest in the project.

Developers often complain that communities have unrealistic expectations for development plans that are not grounded in economic reality. There is no better way to help the community understand the economics of a deal than to offer them an equity interest in the project. One way to do this is to assign an equity share to a local community group in return for in-kind services. This is an approach we took as part of a development proposal for the Modern Electroplating site in Roxbury, Massachusetts. This gives the community a voice at the table, while aligning at least some of their interests with those of the developer. While we were ultimately unsuccessful in landing this deal, we nevertheless greatly strengthened our hand by allowing

a community organization to earn an equity interest in the project.

Another approach is to ensure that a long-time resident or local firm is a partner in the deal. This is the path we took in St. Croix, where local residents are very skeptical about "outside" developers. As part of our development of a 1,244-acre former alumina plant, we engaged a St. Croix businessman as a full partner in the deal. Aside from his many project management responsibilities, he plays a critical role as our ambassador to the community. His knowledge of the local political and residential climate has proven invaluable to the project's early success.

**Characteristic 4:** Developers must commit to hiring local workers. Migration out of the urban core has not only generated Brownfields, but contribute to a cycle of disinvestment. As residents and businesses leave, so do tax bases and employment opportunities. What remains are decaying neighborhoods of Brownfields, generally characterized by high unemployment rates, poor community services, blight, and crime. Once burdened with these problems, these communities face tremendous obstacles in attracting new investment into their neighborhoods.

Brownfields development offers a solution to these problems, but only if the project meets the economic needs of the local community. To this end, developers should make every effort to employ local residents for the cleanup and redevelopment, and ideally for the end use. Residents will benefit from the jobs and the developers from the

local knowledge and commitment these workers bring to the effort.

**Characteristic 5:** Developers must try to incorporate environmentally sustainable building design, construction and management principals into redevelopment projects. By incorporating environmentally sustainable building design, construction and management principles into their projects, Brownfields developers can help to reduce the environmental impacts of their projects and ensure their long-term economic and environmental efficiency. Such measures not only often save developers money over the long term, but also send an important message to communities that the mistakes of the past that contaminated these sites in the first place and brought public health risks to their communities will not be repeated. ■

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John DeVillars and Elizabeth Carroll are the managing partners of BlueWave Strategies LLC, an environmental consulting firm that provides strategic planning and project support services to a variety of private and public organizations. Until January 2003, they served as principals with Brownfields Recovery Corporation, a real estate investment firm that focuses on the acquisition, remediation and redevelopment of environmentally impacted properties. Mr. DeVillars and Ms. Carroll continue to work with BRC on the firm's two signature projects in Stamford, CT and St. Croix, USVI. For more information, please contact them at BlueWave Strategies LLC at (617) 267-8585 or via e-mail at [jdevillars@brownrecov.com](mailto:jdevillars@brownrecov.com) or [ebennett@brownrecov.com](mailto:ebennett@brownrecov.com) respectively.

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