

# Community Participation is Key to Environmental Justice in Brownfields

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**B**rownfields expose many of the important environmental, social, cultural, and economic problems of urban America. These sites are a consequence of interrelated forces that have shaped the national landscape: urban sprawl, environmental degradation, residential segregation, disinvestment, persistent socioeconomic, racial, and class divisions.

Several reports have revealed the clear link between race, income, and the siting of hazardous waste and toxic waste facilities. The United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice landmark study in 1987 found that commercial hazardous waste facilities were most likely to be situated near communities of racial and ethnic minorities. In 1992 the National Law Journal reported that the Environmental Protection Agency took 20% longer to place abandoned, hazardous, and toxic waste sites in minority communities on the national priorities list than it took to list similar facilities situated elsewhere. It also found that polluters in those neighborhoods paid fines 54% lower than polluters in white communities. In a 1995 study, the Center for Policy Alternatives estimated that minorities are

47% more likely than whites to live near a commercial toxic waste facility and 170% more likely to live in areas with multiple toxic facilities.

This pattern of unequal exposure is the primary reason that brownfields clean-up is a core environmental justice issue. In 1995, EPA and the National Environmental Justice Advisory Committee (NEJAC) co-sponsored public hearings for environmental justice advocates and residents of brownfield-affected communities to contribute their views on clean-up and redevelopment issues. The critical importance of meaningful community participation in decision-making for brownfields remediation and development was a major conclusion of the hearings.

The EPA's National and Regional Brownfields Pilot Projects Program emphasizes the link between environmental justice and community participation. Since 1994, the program has provided \$24 million to 228 communities for brownfields clean-up and redevelopment. The application process requires a community participation/environmental justice component in each project. Specifically, awardees must provide the means for minority, low-income, and other disadvantaged commu-

nities in affected areas to contribute to decisions on the revitalization of brownfields. Recipients are expected to describe how their plans will ensure that impacted communities benefit environmentally and economically from the assessment, cleanup, and reuse of brownfields.

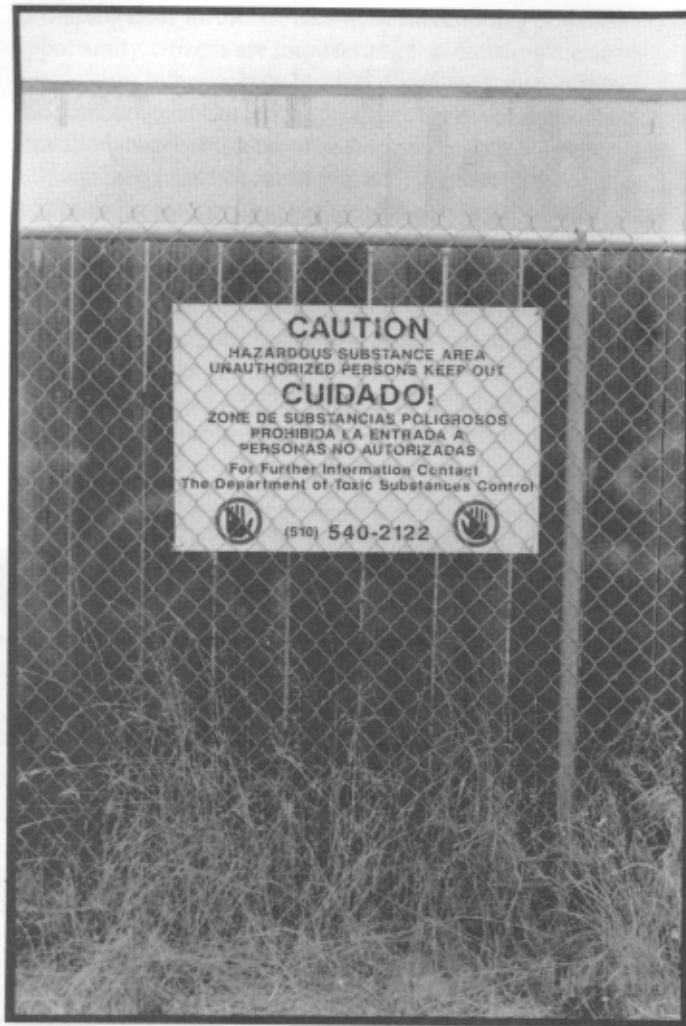
In 1997, the University of Delaware's Center for Energy and Environmental Policy (CEEP), together with the Urban Environmental Center, a Delaware community-based environmental organization, initiated a study of environmental justice and community participation in brownfields projects throughout the country by analyzing EPA National Brownfields Pilot Projects. From the 64 National Pilots designated as of 1997, CEEP screened over 30 pilots with respect to community involvement. Ten sites were selected for in-depth analysis based on their geographic, racial, and ethnic diversity as well as the variety of community approaches undertaken. The ten sites studied in depth were: Baltimore, MD; Bridgeport, CT; Burlington, VT; Cape Charles-Northampton County, VA; Charlotte, NC; Cleveland, OH; Kansas City, KS and MO; New Orleans, LA; Portland, OR; and Trenton, NJ. Four of these sites

(Baltimore, Kansas City, Portland, and Trenton) were named EPA Brownfields Showcase Communities.

The ten selected pilot projects were analyzed according to seven key factors:

- Inclusiveness of a community participation component
- Mechanisms for community involvement
- Obstacles encountered to community involvement
- Community perspectives on needs assessment
- The existence of an environmental justice component
- Promotion of community/industry partnerships
- Overall strengths and achievements.

Interviews were conducted with three organizational layers for each project: the project's Regional EPA Office, the local government administering the award, and community members and organizations involved in the pilot project. The interviews were supplemented by documents from EPA and local project administrators. Follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify information and relevant issues that had not been addressed in the study. The CEEP team also solicited feedback on the



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ter equipped than their reactive counterparts. This finding underscores the importance of community involvement in brownfields planning. In many pilots, residents of affected communities did not know how to affect the process of redevelopment. It is clear from the 10 cases studied that awareness-building must be included in the brownfields planning process.

Finally, community participation, regardless of how successfully it may be implemented, will have little lasting

social needs that are essential for planning just and sustainable development.

2. In order that affected communities can benefit from brownfields redevelopment, clear, community-based goals must be defined, with economic, environmental, and social benefits.
3. A community clearinghouse and support office is important for building awareness and community capacity to select development options that are consistent with environmental justice.
4. Linking the goals and resources of other programs, such as empowerment zones and enterprise communities, to brownfields redevelopment can improve community participation and environmental justice outcomes.
5. A "Brownfields Case Study" information system is needed for communities to learn from each other. ■

study's conclusions from each case study and revised its analysis where appropriate. The findings are a snapshot of the national brownfields and environmental justice experience:

Although an environmental justice component is required, none of the ten brownfields pilots studied contained formal mechanisms or centrally located offices for these issues. In addition, pilot administrators had little knowledge of how to get help with EJ issues, and handled them on an ad hoc basis. In most cases, regional monitoring for environmental justice and community participation did not take

place largely because EPA had not spelled out measures for evaluation.

A second major finding was that citizen involvement varied greatly from pilot to pilot. In the projects with the least citizen participation decisions were made among government and business partners and communities were included after the fact, in an advisory role. In cases where the community was pro-active, communities were involved continuously from the start. The differences in capacity to address environmental justice issues were predictable: those with a pro-active citizen participation component proved to be bet-

value if the affected community does not see concrete results. Pilot projects need to deliver remediation and reuse plans that are endorsed by the community. However EPA's pilot projects award funds for site assessment and community participation and environmental justice activities only. CEEP's findings suggest that EPA should require formal community participation towards a consensus-based remediation and reuse plan.

CEEP's study identified a number of important lessons:

1. Community residents possess an understanding of their neighborhood's environmental problems and

For the full report, *The Role of Environmental Justice in Urban Revitalization*, contact: John Byrne (jbyrne@udel.edu)