

Community Day at the 2011 Florida Brownfields Conference

summarized by Lenny Siegel
November 15, 2011

Tuesday, November 15 was Community Day at the 2011 Annual Conference of the Florida Brownfields Association, and I had the honor of facilitating the Community Caucus in the morning and the Environmental Justice Listening Session in the early afternoon. Nearly 30 people attended the two sessions, representing local government, the private sector, non-profits, academia, and U.S. EPA. A majority of the participants were African-Americans. Nearly half were from city and county agencies.

The morning meeting began with round-the-room introductions. Several participants mentioned successful and pending efforts to establish health clinics in medically underserved communities. Not only do families and individuals in poor communities not have health insurance, but many of those areas do not have health services available. Communities have found that remediated brownfields can be ideal places to build needed health centers. It's not always easy, but there is money available to establish Federally Qualified Health Centers, and doctors have been recruited from cooperating universities. Still, in some counties agencies that currently provide health services do not recognize that existing health centers don't meet the needs of underserved neighborhoods.

The group discussed the difficulty in communicating about brownfields projects to their constituencies. While the Internet works for some residents, others don't use it. Some groups/agencies drop newsletters door-to-door. One uses a marquis-type signboard. Others circulate information through the churches. One participant emphasized that communications must be two ways, and the group generally agreed that multiple information streams are necessary to reach all of the people in an area. Food seems to be a way to attract people to meetings.

Participants discussed the growing interest in community gardens on brownfields. Such projects require land, but not much more investment. They are a good way to involve youth and bring communities together. And volunteers can be rewarded with a share of the crops. Many of these communities are food deserts, but healthy community-grown vegetables can be integrated into the nutrition programs of the emerging health centers. Gardens help folks understand where their food comes from.

The morning concluded with a discussion of the importance of empowerment and trust. Officials, such as the police chief in Tampa, can inspire trust simply by meeting with people. One local official said that it's important not to take it personally when people mistrust government or even each other.

The afternoon session began with presentations by Ed Johnson of Tampa, Lorna Alston of Saratoga, and Ken Pinnix, formerly with the City of Jacksonville.

Johnson discussed how Tampa, under the leadership of mayors who genuinely cared, was able to implement its Community Redevelopment Plan for East Tampa by leveraging funding from multiple sources. In an area where a Hope VI grant replaced two housing projects with newer subsidized housing, the city used a Brownfields Assessment Grant to promote commercial development. It used Community Development Block Grant funds to purchase a property to attract an apparel manufacturer. The city was able to combine three parcels to create a site for a health center, and its Congresswoman was able to include \$1.3 million of the initial \$3.8 million price-tag in the federal Stimulus Act. Finally, the city was able to use \$7 million in tax-increment financing funding to make road and other infrastructure improvement along the North 22nd Street corridor. These improvements have attracted commercial development, including the area's first supermarket. The city has used \$1 million more to accumulate properties in the area. He explained how the city has brought 17 neighborhood associations together. And he reported that the city now has a constant presence in East Tampa with the establishment of a new police substation collocated with the redevelopment office.

Alston discussed the North Saratoga Workforce Initiative, a partnership that includes the city, the county, the school district, the Housing Authority, Suncoast Workforce, and several construction firms, in an area with 33% unemployment. Contractors building projects such as mixed-income housing and a community center were able to specify exactly what skills they needed from the workforce, and the community task force helped establish local hiring preferences. As a result, trained residents found work. Though the Initiative was told that a 20% local hiring goal was unrealistic, they achieved 30%. She attributed success to four factors:

- 1) They removed barriers.
- 2) They raised the bar of expectation.
- 3) They served with excellence and transparency;
- 4) The community spoke with one voice, bringing together many neighborhood associations.

Ken Pinnix briefly described the establishment of a multi-use development in Jacksonville, in a area with no retail stores or service. Now they have a grocery store and bank. He explained that there was no need to hire a security service to protect the project because the community feels ownership over the project. They have created opportunities for graduates of the Jacksonville brownfields job training program, and they are embarking on a second project: a shopping plaza.

In summary, community-based brownfields redevelopment, coupled with targeted job training, is a valuable tool for improving living conditions and job opportunities in high-unemployment, medically underserved, food-desert neighborhoods in some of Florida's major cities. Success of such ventures depends on community unity, the formation of partnerships with multiple agencies and institutions, raising funds from numerous sources, and patience in each of those efforts. No project is too small, because beyond its immediate benefits it builds trust and empowers the community. And developments established by empowered communities build pride, and in turn proud communities protect those projects from vandalism and blight.