PROVIDING COMMUNITIES WITH ELECTRONIC ACCESS: BUILDING CAPACITY FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

The Department of Energy (DOE) is committed to promoting environmental justice and involving its stakeholders more directly in the planning and decision-making process for environmental cleanup. For this reason, DOE's Environmental Management Program has developed an environmental justice project to provide communities with the capacity to effectively contribute to a complex and technical decision-making process by furnishing communities with access to computers, the Internet, training and technical assistance.

DOE, in a partnership with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Howard University Urban Environment Institute, and the National Urban Internet, has donated computers to cities, community groups, public housing developments, and elementary schools, as part of its initiative to build community capacity through public participation. With this technology, residents can: access relevant environmental information such as toxic release inventory data, chemical impact analysis, risk assessments and use of Geographic Information Systems; obtain technical assistance from a variety of sources; conduct training workshops on the use of computers for technical and environmental research; and communicate with agencies, officials and other decision-makers.

Successful capacity building projects of this kind have been launched in the following cities: Augusta, Georgia; Prichard, Alabama; Savannah, Georgia; Alexandria, Virginia; Prince George's County, Maryland; and Washington, D.C. The effort to increase environmental justice through community capacity building via electronic access increases the breadth of public participation and holds potential for many communities that would otherwise be unable to participate in environmental decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Energy (DOE) is committed to promoting environmental justice and involving its stakeholders more directly in the planning and decision-making process for environmental cleanup. Public involvement benefits both government and concerned stakeholders; it can lead to faster, more cost-efficient and more just decisions. The challenge, however, is implementing public participation policies. Public participation becomes significant

only when stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process early—before the decisions are actually made and before actions have been taken that gives the impression that the decisions have been made—and when stakeholders are familiar with the subject matter under consideration and with the decision-making process.

Environmental justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all citizens in environmental decision-making. It demands that no population suffer a disproportionate share of environmental burdens. It is based on the idea that when everyone participates meaningfully in a process whose procedures and substance they understand, no group would be unequally affected by a decision.

DOE's environmental justice program goes directly to the lay-public in affected communities. It is based on the proposition that all populations have the right to influence decisions that could impact their lives and communities. While many of the decisions are technical and complex in nature, it is nevertheless important to the Department that all affected populations have a meaningful opportunity to influence decisions and decision-makers. In those instances where technical and complex issues retard meaningful community participation in the decision-making process, it is necessary that the Department provide means for these populations to overcome participatory barriers.

For this reason, DOE's Environmental Management Program has developed an environmental justice project to provide communities with the capacity to effectively contribute to a complex and technical decision-making process by furnishing communities with access to computers, the Internet, training and technical assistance.

CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH THE ELECTRONIC PROCESS: OVERVIEW

The goal of Department's community capacity-building project is to help various populations improve their ability to participate in Departmental decision-making. This goal is being accomplished by connecting small towns, historically black colleges and universities, regulatory agencies, and other groups located near the Department's facilities.

In a partnership with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Howard University Urban Environment Institute, and the National Urban Internet, DOE has donated computers to cities, community groups, public housing developments, and elementary schools, as part of its initiative to build community capacity through public participation. All computers were donated for a specific reason and use.

The rationale behind providing communities with computer and Internet capacity is to enable residents to access relevant environmental information, to obtain technical assistance from reliable resources found through email and Internet sites, and to reach decision-makers. Such cooperation between stakeholders and regulatory agencies, if provided in a cost-effective manner, can reduce overall cleanup costs in the long run.

Generally, projects that provide communities with technology centers involve the following steps:

- Creating community technology centers by providing excess DOE computers: By adding a modem and Internet access to a 486—or better—computer gives community groups access to EPA, DOE, and to a wide range of environmental information on the Internet. The use of email enables communication with decision-makers, sharing of information with similarly situated communities, and seeking of technical assistance.
- Conducting training workshops that focus on: conducting computer-based and Internet research; the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and LandView 3 computer tools; and access to toxic release inventory data, chemical impact analysis, risk assessment and other topics. In addition, other workshops and forums are conducted that focus on DOE and EPA public participation efforts.
- Supervising community use of the training and tools received.
- Providing continuous technical assistance from Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and from other resources, via the Internet and email.

Community centers, therefore, become tools for information gathering, capacity building, electronic communication and public participation. The effort to increase environmental justice through community capacity building via electronic access increases the breadth of public participation and holds potential for many communities that would otherwise be unable to participate in environmental decision-making.

THE AUGUSTA EXPERIENCE

One community that experienced great difficulty in environmental decision-making is the Hyde Park community in Augusta, Georgia. For decades, Hyde Park residents have been living alongside industrial facilities, salvage yards and other environmental hazards. Near the Savannah River, this community is upwind from DOE's Savannah River Site. Consisting primarily of low-income and minorities citizens, the community has focused attention on the pollution in their community. They have marched in the streets, petitioned the State, Congress, and the White House, and sought assistance from DOE and EPA. The chief complaint from these residents was that their cries for help were apparently falling on deaf ears. Alternatively, they did not seem to receive any assistance or relief.

In 1998, the DOE and the Howard University's Urban Environment Institute donated computers to the Hyde Park/Aragon Park Improvement committee in order to develop a community technology center. The technology center currently has the resources—computers, access to the Internet, training sessions, and technical assistance—to conduct research about chemicals and other technical environmental matters at the Savannah River Site, conduct basic computer classes for children and adults, communicate regularly with elected officials, and seek funding sources. In addition, the center has developed a website for the Hyde Park community, to illustrate their environmental condition.

Brownfields Pilot Grant

In the past decade, Hyde Park community residents have taken several steps to improve their living conditions. One of their successful efforts was celebrated in June 1999 when the Environmental Protection Agency announced that it had awarded a Brownfields Pilot Grant to the City of Augusta to focus environmental planning in the Hyde Park Community.

The EPA defines brownfields as abandoned, idled, or under-used industrial and commercial facilities where expansion or redevelopment is complicated by real or perceived environmental contamination. The Hyde Park community is impacted by several brownfield sites. Many such sites are located in inner cities and low income communities. Historically, in many of these communities, as with Hyde Park, local residents have lacked access to decision-makers and other resources necessary to yield meaningful participation in environmental decision-making.

EPA has developed a Brownfields Action Agenda to facilitate the cleanup and redevelopment of brownfield sites. A key component of the Action Agenda is a $200,000 competitive assessment grant to states and local municipalities to help them "prevent, safely clean up, and sustainably reuse brownfields." During the life of the Action Agenda, EPA has awarded Brownfield Pilot Grants to more than 300 states, cities, towns, counties and tribes. Residents of Hyde Park decided that a Brownfields Pilot Grant could provide the relief that had eluded them for more than a decade.

In January, 1999 Hyde Park residents met with the mayor, city council members, Howard University Urban Environment Institute, the National Urban Internet, Paine College and others to discuss community environmental concerns and EPA's Brownfields Pilot Grant Application. The community requested that Augusta submit a Brownfields Pilot application to EPA that focused attention on the contaminated parcels in Hyde Park.

The mayor agreed that a Brownfields Pilot Grant could solve numerous environmental and economic problems in the Hyde Park Area. The mayor realized that the community residents had been active in environmental justice and brownfields matters for several years. He therefore sought the community's assistance in collecting data and preparing the Brownfields Pilot Grant Application.

The Hyde Park community residents are like other residents. They work hard every day and come home to the typical problems faced by low-income minority residents in a majority-governed city. Many of the environmental issues are just as foreign to Hyde Park as they are to others who are not trained in engineering, science or other disciplines. The effort of working to prepare a government application presented additional responsibilities, but it also presented an opportunity. The Hyde Park residents seized the opportunity and took charge of drafting the Brownfields Pilot Grant Application.

Charles Utley, President of the Hyde Park/Aragon Park Community Improvement Committee, Inc., approached the grants-writing requirement with great excitement. He assembled a grant writing team that included representatives from the community, the city, Paine College, Howard University Urban Environment Institute, and the National Urban Internet. The team held a day-long planning meeting to discuss the approach and to allocate research and writing assignments.

According to Utley, "the community writing efforts were aided by two community capacity building projects that EPA and DOE conducted. First, DOE and EPA created a community technology center by giving the community six computers. Paine College contributed Internet access and email. Howard University Urban Environment Institute and the National Urban

Internet conducted a training session." These activities made the community technology center a useful entity.

The second community capacity building activity was a DOE and EPA-sponsored community empowerment research conference in Charleston, South Carolina. At that conference community residents from Hyde Park and other communities learned about various federal initiatives and sources of technical assistance from Howard University Urban Environment Institute and other Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

The grants-writing committee completed the application and submitted it to EPA in a timely fashion. Three months later, the EPA awarded a Brownfields Pilot Grant to Augusta. Charles Utley was elected Chairman, Augusta Brownfield Redevelopment Commission.

In a yet to be published article, Mr. Utley wrote that "one of the major reasons we were able to prepare the application and learn so much about energy and environmental matters is our community technology center. In addition to the computers and Internet access, we have a website that tells our story. After we developed the Brownfields Pilot Grant Application concept and gathered the background information, we developed the initial draft of the application. We placed that draft application on our website for public review and comments. We received technical assistance through Internet email, and literally coordinated comments and the final draft in cyberspace. There is no way we could have completed this application without DOE computers and our Community Technology Center."

Springboard to Economic Development and Environmental Justice

The City of Augusta intends to use their Brownfields project as a springboard to economic development in Hyde Park, Augusta and Richmond County. The City also intends to include Hyde Park community residents as equal partners in the Brownfields process. Their application states as follows:

> "One of the initial tasks of the brownfields effort will be to develop a public participation plan in conjunction with Hyde Park/Aragon Park Community Improvement Committee and Paine College. As with other planning documents, the initial drafts of the plan will be posted on the Hyde Park/Aragon Park Community Improvement Committee's website and Augusta's website. Citizen stakeholders will have an opportunity to provide comments to the plan electronically and through two town hall meetings that will be conducted to discuss the plan.
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> Other outreach presentations, seminars and workshops will be conducted throughout the two years of the pilot project and beyond. The sessions will educate interested parties on the process and how to take advantage of brownfields redevelopment opportunities. In addition, all public pilot documents will be available for review at the Mary Utley Center and on the Hyde Park/Aragon Park Community Improvement Committee's website. These activities will insure unlimited access to information and participation."

This is an example of a community that has used computers and the Internet to participate in environmental research and decision-making. The training session for the community residents

included instructions in basic computer skills, Internet email, web research, using a community technology center for fun and profit, Geographic Information System (GIS) and risk assessments. Some of the participants in the training had little, if any experience with computers, and no experience with the Internet. They were able to learn the basics, however, in the initial session and gained additional utility with experience.

The most rewarding aspect of the training was the technical assistance. This was provided in person at the center and by Internet email. For this project, Howard University Urban Environment Institute and the National Urban Internet provided technical assistance. Community residents posted questions and draft documents on their website and received answers and comments. They also presented brownfields-related questions to city and federal officials. The process allowed the community to work at their own pace and receive the assistance required to complete the application.

Environmental justice requires that no section of the population bear a disproportionate high burden of environmental risk. It is clear that an environmentally literate community that is active in environmental decision-making can better protect itself from disproportionate risk than it can through reliance only on local, state or federal government or any other entity.

Citizens who can read agency proposals in the comfort of their own homes, offices or community centers, and can respond to the proposals from the same location, are more likely to participate than those who must go to meetings and participate in discussions. Similarly, citizens who sit at a computer terminal will probably find it easier to get answers to technical and complex questions from sources they know and trust than by going to an official's office, public library or by asking questions in an open meeting. Computers, Internet access, training and ongoing technical assistance can help environmentally active communities gain and maintain the required literacy to guarantee protection against disproportionate environmental risk.

OTHER EXAMPLES

The community capacity-building project has been implemented in several communities, including the following:

- *City Planning Department, Prichard, Alabama.* Computers are used for Network city Services, responding to public concerns, and completing and implementing a geographic information system.
- *Citizens for Environmental Justice, Savannah, Georgia.* Computers enable the community organization to access environmental information.
- *Bucknell Elementary School, Alexandria, Virginia.* Computers are used to enhance the reading skills of elementary school students.
- *Prince George's County Youth Training Center, Maryland.* Computers are used to establish a mini-computer lab for low-income and minority children that uses golf information and Internet access as a springboard for academic achievement and support.

- *Highland Additions Community Center, Washington DC.* Computers are used to assist community residents to access environmental information and to facilitate environmental decision-making that impacts the community.

CONCLUSION

Informed participation in environmental decision-making can lead to environmentally just decisions. Effective public participation can lead to more efficient cleanup of the Department of Energy's environmental remediation sites. The effort to increase environmental justice through community capacity building through electronic access increases the breadth of public participation and holds potential for many communities that would otherwise be unable to participate in environmental decision-making.

Electronic access has provided communities with a means to obtain and understand technical information, communicate with agencies, officials, universities and other similarly affected communities. Communities have also begun to use electronic access to seek funding sources and to train its members in computers. The way communities use electronic access is just beginning to unfold and holds great promise for the future.