

**SMALL TOWNS AND UNIVERSITIES COLLABORATE FOR CAPACITY BUILDING,
WASTE MANAGEMENT, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SMART GROWTH**

M. Downing
Office of Legacy Management, Department of Energy
1000 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20585

J. Rosenthal
National Urban Internet
5808 Bush Hill Drive, Alexandria, VA 22310

M. Hudson
Science Applications International Corporation
1710 SAIC Drive, MS T3-7-3, McLean, VA 22102

ABSTRACT

Capacity building programs help municipalities improve their ability to participate in environmental decision-making processes, chart their own courses and determine their own destiny. These programs encourage active involvement in Federal programs, and provide the tools that enable them to do so. Capacity building enables municipalities that would otherwise be excluded to participate in the process, leading to better, and more just, decisions.

The Department of Energy (DOE) continues to be committed to promoting environmental justice, public participation and involving its stakeholders more directly in the planning and decision-making process for waste management and environmental cleanup. As DOE cleans sites and returns them to local authorities, the Department has an interest in supporting economic development and smart growth activities in the jurisdictions that will receive the former DOE sites. Through environmental justice and public participation projects, DOE provides municipalities with the capacity to effectively contribute to a complex and technical decision-making process by furnishing access to computers, the Internet, training and technical assistance, and by supporting citizen based advisory boards. The Dr. Samuel P. Massie Chairs of Excellence Program (Massie Chairs) functions as technical advisor to many of these municipal projects. The Massie Chairs consist of nationally and internationally recognized engineers and scientists from nine Historically Black Colleges and Universities and one Hispanic Serving Institution.

DOE also supports the concept that the cleanup and revitalization process should be completed in a manner that minimizes the potential for waste generation at the reclaimed site. Once a site is cleaned and returned to the local government, local authorities have the responsibility to determine how the property will be used in the future. The revitalization process should include economic development and smart growth considerations in addition to waste management considerations. Permitted activities that generate little or no waste including open spaces, designated green spaces, environmentally protected areas, park spaces and other non-manufacturing uses may constitute preferred uses. In some instances, the best interest of the community may dictate that other uses such as light industry or manufacturing activities occur on

the reclaimed property. In any instance, the local authorities have the responsibility to insure that selected activities are conducted in a manner that minimizes waste generation, or that waste is managed in a manner that prevents contamination to the property.

Frequently, small towns and rural communities with contaminated sites within their borders lack the capacity and resources to restore the sites to useable conditions. In similar manner, many small towns near DOE facilities lack the capacity to participate in the economic development activities that flow from a facility once it has been cleaned and returned to local authorities. In these instances, small municipalities can get aid and assistance from DOE and other sources to take advantage of the opportunities that accompany the return of a cleaned property to the local economy.

Capacity building programs are presented in several forms. Technology supports all programs in some respect. As Federal agencies move closer to an electronic government, there is growing concern that small towns and rural areas will need additional technology support in order to take advantage of the Federal programs that have been designed for their benefit. DOE supports small town capacity building with computers, training, technical assistance, inter-agency collaborations, workshops and conferences. All DOE capacity building activities are designed in association with local communities to yield efficient management, sustainable development and smart growth.

The Department of Energy has joined a coalition of other Federal agencies, small towns, colleges and universities, the Massie Chairs of Excellence, non-profits and private sector entities to build capacity in small towns for waste management, economic development and smart growth. The initial activity for this coalition was the National Conference on Community and Academic Partnerships presented in October 2004. The conference brought together the coalition and others to hear the challenges small towns face and to discuss alternatives and means to meet those challenges. The goal of the conference was to form partnerships of coalition members to tackle and solve specific challenges in individual small towns. The solutions developed and implemented for each challenge will be documented and collected to present a best practices manual for small town use.

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Energy (DOE) is conducting several capacity building projects around the country. Some of these projects help host communities near DOE facilities participate in environmental management decisions that impact their neighborhoods. Other projects help a professional association of small towns increase their individual and collective abilities to participate in energy and environmental decision-making at all levels. Regardless of location, each project helps the target population recognize the issues, understand the range of remedies, and select the solution that is in its best interest.

A key component of each project is computer technology. Each project employs technology to facilitate planning, resource development, communication and project management. In some cases, the target population requires assistance obtaining computers and access to the Internet.

Others require training and technical assistance. Each project includes online technical assistance to help community groups, small towns and rural communities address energy, environmental and economic development challenges. The guiding principle of each project is to conduct a series of activities that build community capacity for environmental cleanup, waste management and sustainable development in a manner that permits the local host community to grow and develop with little or no additional DOE assistance.

Expanding electronic government is one of the five key elements in the President's Management Agenda. The main goals outlined by the President are to improve information technology planning through the budget process, and to champion citizen-centered electronic government resulting in a major improvement in the Federal government's value to the citizen. There is a need to help small towns gain access to computers, training, technical assistance and connections to the Internet or the efforts to improve the Federal government's value to these municipalities and their citizens through technology will fail.

The digital and economic divide between urban, small-town, and rural America and the rest of the Nation is widening on a daily basis. These conditions are due in major part to a lack of resources and a lack of economic development and advancements that are vitally needed to obtain the training and technological equipment necessary to help bridge the divide.

There are nearly 40,000 units of local governments in America. Nearly 85% of these local governments have a population of less than 10,000 and nearly half of the local governments have a population of less than 1,000.

Many small, low-wealth jurisdictions have a mayor-council form of government. The mayor is essentially a volunteer position, and the town has few employees. In many instances the town clerk supervises the day-to-day operation of the town. Frequently, office staff is limited to one and sometimes two persons.

Many small, low-wealth municipalities lack adequate resources to take advantage of the wealth of opportunities now available through the Internet. They lack basic technology such as computers and access to the Internet. Many small town employees are unaware of the benefits of computers and the Internet to their daily operations because they are not computer literate. The cost of Internet services prohibits small, low-wealth municipalities from connectivity, particularly high-speed connections. Taken together, the small, low-wealth municipalities described above operate at a severe disadvantage.

Many small, low-wealth municipalities do not have a web site. There is a need to work with small, low-wealth municipalities to build, update and maintain web sites. The sites will allow the jurisdictions a means to provide demographic and other information to state and Federal agencies and others interested in providing assistance to these jurisdictions.

There are numerous small towns in the immediate vicinity of DOE facilities. As these facilities become inactive and no longer serve a Federal purpose, they become vacant properties that are returned to local control. In many instances, these properties cover vast acres of land and present new assets and opportunities for local government. Land, buildings, and in some cases, equipment are released to the local host municipality. However, many small towns lack the

capacity to receive and manage the assets and opportunities. Capacity building programs and partnerships are designed to help small towns meet the challenges presented by the requirement to manage new assets.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING

Environmental Justice

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as “fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, income, or education level with respect to development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.” Fair treatment means that racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups should not bear a disproportionate share of negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations, or from the execution of Federal, state and local laws, regulations and policies. EPA’s definition of environmental justice further states that no population should suffer a disproportionate share of environmental burdens.

Public Participation

The Department of Energy is committed to meaningful and active public participation in decisions that impact the general public. There are several forms of public participation in energy and environmental decision-making. No single form works in every situation. A combination of factors, including regulatory requirements, community interest and community ability must be integrated to produce the most effective form of participation. Some of the most common forms of public participation are public dialogues, advisory boards, electronic access and work groups.

Public dialogue is an excellent form of public participation because it gives the community participant a way to express views to public officials and to receive instant feedback. The secret to a successful public dialogue is to plan adequately prior to the actual session. Questions to address during the planning process include:

- Who will conduct the session?
- Where will the session be conducted?
- Who will be invited to participate in the session?
- What public officials will participate in the session?
- How will ground rules be developed, explained, implemented and enforced?

Advisory boards are comprised of citizens who come together to provide policy, technical and practical advice to decision-makers. Board members view plans and procedures at regularly scheduled meetings, and make recommendations to the deciding body. Usually, advisory boards provide a forum for the public to discuss issues and concerns and are a direct vehicle for the community to communicate its views. An effective advisory board is diverse and a true reflection of the community, whose members have time and skills to review, documents and present advice in the best interest of the community.

Computers and access to the Internet affords a creative form of public participation. Messages posted to an electronic bulletin board can quickly and efficiently solicit views from a large segment of the population. Citizens who can read agency proposals in the comfort of their own home, office or community center, and respond to the proposal from the same location are more likely to participate in a planning process than those who must go to meetings and participate in open discussions. While electronic access can supplement other forms of public participation, it is not yet practical, since a large segment of the population still lacks access to computers and the Internet.

Work groups can also facilitate public participation in agency decision-making. Made up of community representatives who work with a Federal agency to address specific issues, work groups, unlike public dialogues, remain intact until a recommendation or a set of recommendations is delivered to the agency. Work groups meet regularly with the agency to discuss issues. These meetings are usually open to the public and provide an opportunity for visitors to make comments. The effectiveness of the work group depends on the community representatives, their relationship with the community, their willingness to commit time and resources to the task, as well as their ability to master technical and complex issues.

Community Capacity Building

Community capacity building is the process that gives local community groups the necessary tools for meaningful participation in agency decision-making. Citizens who come into a decision-making process with little or no information about the process or the subject matter under consideration will find it all but impossible to make a meaningful contribution to the process. Despite the emphasis that Federal agencies have placed on public participation, numerous low-income and minority groups remain out of the process due to an inability to navigate the process or understand the subject matter under consideration.

Capacity building programs help poor and disadvantaged communities to improve their ability to participate in environmental decision-making processes. They encourage citizen involvement, and provide the tools that enable them to do so. Capacity building enables communities that would otherwise be excluded to participate in the process, leading to better, and more just, decisions.

DOE Partnerships and Programs

For the past decade, DOE has conducted environmental justice, public participation and community capacity building programs. Some of the programs provide environmental justice training to DOE employees and community groups. Some programs provide public participation training to employees and citizens. There are advisory boards and work groups that help DOE make decisions. Other programs provide computers, environmental training, technical assistance and other resources to community groups and municipal jurisdictions. The common theme in all of the capacity programs is a desire to help the target population gain the necessary tools to make meaningful contributions to environmental decisions and to better protect themselves from environmental contamination.

Often, communities, particularly small towns, rural areas, minority and low-income communities, are limited in their ability to participate in decisions relating to the environment and other matters due to the lack of access to information, technology, expertise and decision-makers. The Department of Energy has promoted extensive programs to build the capacity of these communities to participate effectively in the environmental decisions that impact their community. Here are some examples.

DOE promotes **Citizen Advisory Boards** at many of its sites. These Boards actively solicit the involvement of all stakeholders, and reach out to poor and rural communities, minorities and other traditionally under-represented groups. The Boards make recommendations to DOE on issues affecting their communities.

DOE developed a community capacity-building project in partnership with **Howard University** in Washington, DC, to provide disadvantaged citizens with electronic access to computers and the Internet. By creating community technology centers and providing excess DOE computers, this project offers citizens the opportunity to explore environmental cleanup information and obtain technical assistance using internet-based information sources and computer-based information systems and models.

Another activity initiated through the Howard University partnership involves working with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other environmental professionals to ensure community stakeholders receive the best technical assistance available. The HBCUs provide technical assistance online and in person through conferences, workshops and direct one-to-one interaction. This puts stakeholders in a position to make positive contributions to environmental decisions, and to make sure that environmental decisions are made in the best interests of the community.

DOE has expanded the community capacity building partnership to include **Tennessee State University** to provide technical assistance to the communities around DOE facilities at Oak Ridge (Scarboro Community) and the Savannah River Site (Augusta and Savannah, Georgia). The partnership with Tennessee State has enabled these communities to gain access to computers, the Internet, training and technical assistance in order to expand and develop capacity to participate in environmental decision-making.

Another DOE community capacity building partner is the **Medical University of South Carolina**. The Medical University of South Carolina convenes the Community Leaders' Institute to introduce small, rural and minority community leaders to resources and information that will help them address environmental and other issues in their communities. Community Leaders' Institutes have been held in South Carolina towns for communities near the Savannah River Site.

The Department is working with the **Citizens For Environmental Justice** of Savannah, Georgia to further develop the Academic Institutions, Communities and Agencies Network (ACA-Net). ACA-Net is a collaborative approach involving communities, academia, and the government that helps develop the capacity of environmentally impacted communities to solve environmental problems through education and technical assistance. ACA-Net promotes dialogue among all stakeholders and helps communities respond to short and long-term environmental problems by

using specially designed response teams with expertise drawn from academic institutions and the community. This community-driven approach to problem solving provides teams of experts to visit a community and help it develop and implement solutions to specific problems. Normally a team includes one or more university professors, representatives from other communities, medical and/or legal experts, and other experts as needed in the impacted community.

DOE is one of the anchor Federal Agencies that has teamed with the **Small Town Alliance** and the Dr. Samuel P. Massie Chairs of Excellence to produce the National Conference on Community and Academic Partnerships. This national conference addressed issues facing small towns and rural areas in light of the Federal government's growing reliance on E-government. Current plans call for follow-up by a series of conferences with the same focus and intent in small towns across America. Other Federal agencies that served on the planning committee include the United States Departments Agriculture, Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the United States General Services Administration.

In the initial session of the conference, small town mayors described the challenges they face with regards to the ability to participate in Federal programs. Their challenges are intensified by the Federal agencies growing move towards an electronic government. Many small towns lack access to computers, high speed Internet and technology-trained staff.

To address the concerns stated above, the conference took three actions. First, it decided to address what appears to be a disparity in economic development funds directed towards small towns and rural areas through a legislative initiative and direct communication with Federal agencies with economic development portfolios. Second, the conference will formally seek an Interagency Working Group on Small Towns to coordinate Federal efforts directed towards small town and rural area economic development and to advocate for small town and rural area economic development. Third, it adopted a Technology for Small Towns Strategy that will concentrate on providing access to computers, high speed Internet, training and technical assistance to municipal employees. The Small Town Alliance will be asking Federal agencies to support the technology initiative through their excess and surplus equipment programs.

All activities of the National Conference on Community and Academic Partnerships were designed to give small towns the tools and assistance for more effective participation in Federal programs.

DOE'S CAPACITY BUILDING EFFORTS PRODUCE RESULTS

There are several benefits to be gained from helping stakeholders improve their ability for greater participation in decision-making processes. Some of these are:

- Meaningful involvement can lead to better and more just decision-making as well as cost-efficient decisions.
- Stakeholders gain a working knowledge of the subject under consideration, as well as the procedures driving decision-making processes.

- Communities and other stakeholders are given the tools they need to participate more effectively in decision-making processes and are better equipped to provide for their own health and safety.
- Many communities would otherwise be unable to participate if not for these programs.
- Stakeholders develop better relationships with Federal agencies, and that facilitates problem solving.

DOE can see numerous results from its capacity building efforts. Some of these results are:

- Augusta, Georgia residents have gained resources to clean a contaminated site and start the process of relocating residents.
- Augusta residents have increased their participation in DOE Savannah River Site (SRS) decision-making activities with an improved understanding of the SRS decision-making process.
- Augusta residents who are leading the Augusta Brownfields effort are now providing technical assistance to others in Augusta and the surrounding area that are faced with environmental contamination issues.
- Augusta Brownfields Commission has received a second Brownfields grant to assess additional contaminated sites and to develop redevelopment strategies.
- Scarboro community residents in Oak Ridge, Tennessee have a community technology center and are now communicating with officials at the DOE Oak Ridge Operation Office on a regular basis.
- Scarboro community residents have access to technical assistance to help them understand environmental, engineering and technology issues.
- Savannah, Georgia residents have a community technology center to address workforce development and environmental contamination issues.
- The small town of Roper, North Carolina has a technology center and the ability to provide technical assistance to small towns in northeast North Carolina.
- Many small towns now have computers, access to the Internet and access to technical assistance through the Massie Chairs of Excellence Program.
- Numerous communities across the country have gained access to technical assistance providers and to new approaches through ACA-NET.
- Small towns and community groups across Georgia and South Carolina have gained access to resources and assistance through the Community Leaders' Institute.

CONCLUSION

DOE takes the position that citizens who are active in environmental decision-making, and have a working knowledge of both the procedure and substance of an issue, can better protect themselves and help produce decisions that reduce conflict and save limited resources. Helping communities reach their environmental, economic development and revitalization goals is the objective of this community capacity building project. Environmental Justice means that all people who are impacted by a decision have an opportunity to meaningfully participate in the process that leads to the decision. When this is accomplished Federal agencies will make more just and cost-effective decisions.