

Report on the Brownfields 2011 Environmental Justice Caucus With a Focus on the “Debrief”

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With more than 300 people in attendance, the Sunday evening, April 3, 2011 Environmental Justice Caucus at Brownfields 2011, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, achieved record attendance. Opening in the auditorium at the Academy of Natural Sciences, the Caucus provided U.S. EPA with an opportunity to affirm its commitment to environmental justice and community groups in the Philadelphia area to showcase their accomplishments. I facilitated a breakout discussion among about 30 participants, focused on “working with government.” At this 45-minute session, community activists shared their frustrations in confronting polluters in their communities and trying to get contaminated sites remediated. They offered media and organizing strategies to each other, and most speakers agreed that to achieve any level of environmental justice requires years of homework and activity.



The following night, at the Marriott Hotel, I facilitated another discussion among 50 people, most of whom had received EPA-funded hotel scholarships through CPEO. We had advertised this informal meeting of the Environmental Justice/Community Caucus as an “informal debrief.” While perhaps half of those present were African-American, participants included whites, Latinos, and at least one tribal representative. They not only came from the Mid-Atlantic region, but from New England, the Pacific Coast, Texas, the Deep South, and the Carolinas. With a full two hours set aside for discussion, this session was able to delve more deeply into the challenge of pursuing environmental justice at Brownfields sites.

Most of those in attendance reported that this was their first Brownfields conference, and they expressed appreciation for the subsidies that helped enable them to travel to Philadelphia. The conference was providing them with opportunities to learn

about a wide variety of topics, to meet with government officials with responsibilities in their communities, and to network with peers. Some, however, expressed frustration that there was too much happening at once.

On the whole, participants wanted to know how to make Brownfields projects in their communities serve their neighborhoods. Most, whether from small towns or big cities, felt that their local governments did not adequately represent their interests. They discussed two models for responsive brownfields revitalization: one that strives to influence projects led by a corporate developer and another in which a community-based organization owns and develops projects itself.



Photo by Bahram Fazeli

Tim Lopez, from the Voluntary Cleanup Advisory Board in Denver, Colorado described how a broad coalition of community groups leveraged city subsidies, such as tax-increment financing, to negotiate a community benefits agreement at the large, former Gates Rubber factory. Neighborhood associations, unions, and other community organizations were able to win promises of local hiring, job training, land uses of their choice, extra subsidized housing, and other benefits. Most of those promises have not yet borne fruit because the national economic slump slowed and almost derailed the project, but Tim believes that the promises will be kept.

June Jones, of the Morris Canal Redevelopment Area Community Development Corporation, in Jersey City, New Jersey, described more than a decade of activity fighting to construct affordable housing on parcels it now owns as well as efforts to segregate polluting uses from neighborhoods. Relying heavily on volunteers, the CDC is constantly seeking additional resources. Having overcome one obstacle after another, it expects to break ground on its first residential project this June.

Inspired by these and other emerging successes, participants agreed that the following ingredients are essential components of community success:

1. People need to fight for their rights and interests.
2. Organizers must be patient and persistent.
3. To influence government, activists must do their homework and speak the truth.
4. Technical assistance is often required, both in achieving cleanup and planning development.
5. While faith-based organizations, retirees, and other community-based resources are valuable, activists need more financial and staffing support.
6. It's important to give input at the state or national policy level as well as to "fight in the trenches" locally.
7. Community groups benefit, as they did at the April 4 Caucus, from opportunities to network, share their difficulties and successes, and learn from each others' experiences.

Attending a Brownfields conference along with thousands of government officials, consultants, developers, and lawyers of all stripes is daunting, particularly for environmental justice activists at their first such event. Caucus participants walked away from the April 4 meeting feeling that they could determine the destinies of their communities and shape redevelopment to serve their needs. No one left with the illusion that it will be easy, but everyone seemed energized to take on the challenge.