Environmental Justice

Environmental Justice and Public Participation Through Technology – *Building Community Capacity*

Table of Contents

Melinda Downing
Office of Stakeholder Relations
Office of Legacy Management
U.S. Department of Energy

Introduction

The Department of Energy (DOE) is committed to environmental justice and public participation. DOE is working to involve citizens early and often in its decision-making process. Meaningful public involvement can lead to better and more just environmental decision-making. Involving the public, however, is not always easy. This publication discusses one way to increase meaningful public participation: through electronic access.

Environmental Justice and Public Participation

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. Environmental justice is based on the idea that, in a democracy, when everyone participates meaningfully in a process whose procedures and substance they understand, no group should be affected unequally by a decision.

Making Public Participation More Meaningful

Participation becomes meaningful when concerned stakeholders get involved in the decision-making process early—before decisions are made (or actions are taken that may give the impression that decisions have been made)—and gain a working knowledge of the subject under consideration, as well as the procedures driving the decision-making process. With meaningful participation, the views and concerns of the public are identified and incorporated into DOE's decision-making process. Ensuring public participation involves the following:

- Identifying public concerns and issues;
- Providing opportunities for the public to assist DOE in identifying environmental management-related issues and problems, and in formulating and evaluating alternatives;
- Listening to the public;
- Incorporating public concerns and input into decision-making; and
- Providing feedback on the ways that decisions do or do not reflect the input received.

What is Environmental Justice?

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency defines environmental justice as the "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." The definition furthers states that no population should suffer a disproportionate share of environmental burdens. The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, convened in Washington, D.C., October 24-27, 1991, issued seventeen principles of environmental justice. These principles describe ways to ensure environmental justice and promote economic alternatives that will contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods. Two of the principles state that environmental justice:

- Demands the right of citizens to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement, and evaluation.
- Affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and providing fair access for all to the full range of resources.

The Department of Energy's Office of Environmental Management has an overall goal to create an open and accessible decision-making process, resulting in decisions that are technically and economically feasible; environmentally sound; health and safety conscious; address public values and concerns; and that can be implemented. Providing for public participation in the decision-making process is one important way to achieve this goal.

Electronic Access and Public Participation

Historically, DOE and other federal agencies have used advisory boards to assist in decision-making. Site-specific advisory boards and community advisory boards are used to review specific proposals and to provide advice. Lay citizens are asked to review proposed actions and, in some cases, to make recommendations that are adopted by the decision-making body. Serving on advisory boards, however, can be time consuming. It requires members to attend meetings, often following a hard day's work. It can require the average citizen to understand technical and often complex matters, and to serve without compensation.

Is there a way to make public participation easier for the lay public? We think so.

One way is through electronic access. Citizens who can sit at a computer terminal in the comfort of their home, office or community center, who can read and respond to agency proposals, and

who can get answers to technical and complex questions, are more likely to participate in the process than those who must go to meetings and participate in discussions.

Increasing electronic access to build public participation is the goal of a community capacity-building project that Environmental Management has developed in partnership with Howard University and other partners. The goal is to increase meaningful public participation in environmental cleanup decision-making.

Federal Facilities Cleanup Advisory Boards

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, in 1992, chartered the Federal Facilities Environmental Restoration Dialogue Committee (FFERDC) to consider issues in environmental cleanup at federal facilities. Environmental Management represented the Department of Energy on the FFERDC. Among its recommendations, the Committee stated that any efforts to improve stakeholder involvement in the federal facility cleanup decision-making process should:

- Strive to create a process in which communities and agencies are seen as equal partners in the dialogue on clean issues;
- Develop linkages among communities and public stakeholders across the nation, to share information about how priorities are being set and decisions are being made at federal facilities;
- Produce results that restore the environment, while maintaining local community needs; and
- Provide access to resources, information, and training, so that all stakeholders are able to participate in decision-making.

The Committee also recommended that this be accomplished through advisory boards, and that those who do not have the time, resources or inclination to participate on advisory boards, be given adequate information and involvement in cleanup activities. Although many citizens are represented on these boards, a large number do not have access, through established channels, to provide input to Environmental Management. The community capacity-building project is one way to increase such access.

Creating Community Technology Centers

Improved community-based public participation can be accomplished through access to computers and to the Internet, exposure to environmental cleanup information, and access to available technical assistance. With computer access, citizens can benefit from unique Internet-based information sources and from valuable computer-based information systems and models.

The methodology for the capacity-building project is straightforward. It calls for the following steps:

1. Create community technology centers by providing excess DOE computers. Simply adding a modem and Internet access to a 486 or better computer, connects community groups to all aspects of DOE and the vast array of environmental information available on the Internet.

2. Conduct training workshops that consist of computer-based research, Internet research, geographic information systems, risk assessment, and other subject matter; establish a series of training classes to enable community residents to use computer-based tools and the Internet as information and communication resources; and present other workshops and forums relevant to DOE public participation efforts.
3. Supervise community use of the training and tools received in the second step above.
4. Provide continuous technical assistance from Historically Black Colleges and Universities and other sources, in-person and through Internet e-mail.

Implementing the Project

The partnership will work with towns and community groups to fully develop the community centers as tools for information gathering, capacity building and public participation. Specifically, the partnership will help community groups design and implement training programs that focus on:

*   Basic Computer Skills Training
*   Internet Research
*   Access to Toxic Release Inventory Data
*   Chemical Impact Analysis
*   Risk Assessments
*   Use of Geographic Information Systems for Community Decision-making
*   Use of E-mail to Communicate with Decision-makers

Excess computers (486 or better) will be upgraded to meet community requirements. Environmental professionals from around the country, who have agreed to provide assistance to communities through the Internet, will provide technical assistance. Howard University will work with other Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other environmental professionals to ensure that community stakeholders receive the best technical assistance available. With access to relevant environmental information, reliable and trusted technical assistance, and appropriate environmental decision-makers, community stakeholders should be in a position to ensure that environmental decisions are made in the best interests of the community.

> "It is important that we learn more about potential risks to human health and environmental safety issues presented by the generation, storage, and release of chemicals at the Savannah River Site. Your generous donation has helped us provide the much-needed computer access for our residents."
>
> Reverend Charles N. Utley, President
> *Hyde and Aragon Park Community Improvement Committee*
> *Augusta, Georgia*

The Ultimate Goal

The ultimate goal of this effort is to give community groups the tools they need to participate more effectively in environmental decision-making. As the Federal Facilities Environmental restoration Dialogue Committee Report states, "examples from communities around the nation demonstrate that involving communities early and often in the decision-making process enables public stakeholders to help agencies make cost-efficient decisions that lead to faster cleanups.

However, the effectiveness of most of the earlier recommendations in this report regarding community involvement, advisory boards, and including other stakeholders in the budgeting and priority-setting process are dependent on the various stakeholders having the capacity to participate effectively."

Success in meeting the ultimate goal of this project will help to turn apathy and anger into informed participation. Community technology centers will enable community stakeholders to get the instant access to information, decision-makers, decision-making tools, and technical assistance they need to become informed participants in DOE decision-making.

The results? More meaningful and more just environmental decision-making.

Expanding Access

Expanding Access During 1998, the Environmental Management/ Howard University partnership donated more than fifty computers to various groups around the country. Some computers were donated to small towns for management enhancement and to local organizations for children's programs. Others were donated to community groups to establish technology centers for environmental justice and public participation. In any case, all computers will be available to strengthen K-12 programs. The partnership donated computers to each of the following towns or community groups:

Community Technology Centers
Citizens for Environmental Justice:
    Savannah, Georgia
Hyde Park/Aragon Park Improvement Committee:
    Augusta, Georgia

Towns
Prichard, Alabama: City Management
Hayti Heights, Missouri:
    Hayti Heights Boys and Girls Club
Glen Arden, Maryland:
    Martin Luther King Youth Center
East St. Louis, Illinois:
    East St. Louis Youth Center
Frederick Douglass Dwellings: Washington, D.C.

Elementary School
Bucknell Elementary School: Alexandria, Virginia

Community Centers
Highland Additions Community Center:
Washington, D.C.
Frederick Douglass Dwellings:
    Washington, D.C.
Mt. Zion Baptist Church: Oak Ridge,
Tennessee
Palmer Road Youth Center:
    Prince George's County, Maryland
East St. Louis Computer Learning Center:
    East St. Louis, Illinois

Public Housing Developments
Alexandria Public housing Authority:
Alexandria, Virginia
Fairfax County Community Learning Center:
    Fairfax County, Virginia

Impacts

Hyde and Aragon Park Community Improvement Committee: Augusta, Georgia
Primary Use: Computer training classes for children; research in human health risks and environmental safety issues at Savannah River Site.

"These computers will be the basis for our community computer center. In addition, the computers will be used to do research about the chemical matters at Savannah River Site. Your generous donation has helped us provide the much-needed computer access for our residents."
Reverend Charles N. Utley, President

City Planning Department: Prichard, Alabama
Primary Use: Network city services, respond to public concerns, and complete and implement a geographic information system.

"Now the workload is so simple...We can generate daily reports on a database to tell us who's constantly complaining and how they're getting help. We're able to do a heck of a lot more than we were ever able to do before-and get it done in less time."
Mayor Jesse Norwood

Citizens for Environmental Justice: Savannah, Georgia
Primary Use: Enable community organizations to access environmental information.

"The purpose of setting up a computer center at CFEJ is to enable community organizations to develop the skills necessary to access the use of the computer in their work related to the environment. The computer will be used to communicate, distribute information, and access critical data on environmental laws, regulations, program activities, scientific and health data, as well as DOE updates and Environmental Impact Statements status...we do thank you for all the work you do on behalf of the communities with government."
Dr. Mildred McClain

Bucknell Elementary School: Alexandria, Virginia
Primary Use: Enhance the reading skills of elementary school students.

"We want to express our gratitude for your donation of a computer to be used as a door prize at our Families Learning at School and Home program… Your donation made a significant contribution to the reading success of the students at Bucknell."
Juanita Trapp, Principal, Bucknell Elementary, Alexandria, Virginia

Prince George's County Youth Training Center: Maryland
Primary Use: Establish a mini-computer lab for low-income and minority children that uses golf information and Internet access as a springboard for academic support and achievement.

"The Center intends to use software to teach the children about the history of golf, rules of the game, and how the game is played. Eventually, the Center would like to have its own golf website...we will use golf as the hook for educational activities."
Rodney Lathern, Golf Instructor

Highland Additions Community Center: Washington, D.C.
Primary Use: Assist community residents to access environmental information and facilitate environmental decision-making that impacts their community.

"Since that time, uses of the Center have been extended to include children's use after school, computer classes for children and adults, and screen printing training, where designs are drawn on the computer and transmitted to a hot press...This is only the beginning."
Gloria Thurman, Managing Director

Success Story: Prichard Goes Digital

"We always suspected we were doing a good job. Now we know." The thing that gives Prichard, Alabama Mayor Jesse Norwood such confidence is something most cities outgrew around 1996-a 486 computer. Due to a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Energy's Environmental Management (EM) program and Howard University, Prichard, Alabama has received six computers and is still counting. "Once we got the word out about DOE's computer donation, computers started coming out of the woodwork. I told the DOE story to top executives at Alabama Power, and they've donated 30 computers to Alabama mayors all over the state," said Norwood.

Roughly 35,000 people live in Prichard, Alabama, and more than 40% of these people are below the poverty line. In close proximity to Gulf Coast beaches, State Parks, and other tourist attractions, Prichard should benefit from the tourist industry. However, while tourism provides much of southern Alabama's income, Prichard does not share in the wealth.

Prichard suffers from widespread dilapidated housing, incomes far below the poverty level, high unemployment and underemployment, flooding, and poor sanitation drainage systems. City officials attribute Prichard's economic woes in large measure to deindustrialization and economic migration during the past 30 years. Additionally, while Alabama paper mills are located just outside Prichard's city limits, the smells and air pollution from the mills bombard the city. Prichard receives no tax revenues from the mills, yet it absorbs specific air pollution and aesthetic impacts. DOE is interested in this small Alabama town for the very reason tourists and industry are not-the environmental injustices engrossing it.

These environmental issues have, over time, helped to create a city rich in commitment yet poor in resources. Before the DOE donation, Prichard's city Planning Department had only two computers and one printer. The Department of Community Affairs had a vintage 1968 typewriter on which it hammered out the National Brownfields Showcase Proposal which gives aid to Brownfields sites once home to industries such as dry cleaners, factories, or body shops and now in need of cleaning before being redeveloped. In early 1998, a ballpark assessment of Prichard's computer needs suggested the city should acquire at least thirty 486-level computers to be fully functional.

To get the ball rolling, DOE delivered six computers to Prichard in May 1997, and they were then installed in key city offices in an effort to connect Prichard's resources. The computers have allowed the city to network its services, respond to public concerns, and complete and implement a geographic information system. Mayor Norwood's office received two computers; the Office of Public Works received two computers; and, the Environmental Inspections building and the new Brownfields site golf course each received one computer. "Now the workload is so simple," said Norwood snapping his finger. "We can generate daily reports on a

database to tell us who's constantly complaining and how they're getting help. We're able to do a heck of a lot more than we were ever able to do before-and get it done in less time."

Informational Links

http://riskcenter.doe.gov
The U.S. Department of Energy Center for Risk Excellence (CRE).

CRE was developed to support the Office of Environmental Management's National Risk Policy Program. The site, created in January 1998, features:

- Current news and changes to the web page
- CRE information, such as directories, mission statements, and a CRE brochure
- Definition of risk assessment
- Information on creation of a CRE Referral service
- A schedule of upcoming events

ORNL is a DOE multi-program laboratory managed by Lockheed Martin Energy Research Corporation. This web server is host to the following information resources:

- Risk Assessment Information System (RAIS): contains risk assessment tools and information
- Center for Risk Excellence (CRE) Tools
- EPA Soil Screening Guidance: provides a tool for performing soil screening calculations.

Acknowledgements

Thanks and appreciation for this effort goes to:

Robert Degrasse and Deborah Swichkow for their tireless effort to make excess computers available for this project;

Faye Zimmerman and Helen Mosbough for providing computers for this effort;

Fred Qoogle for packing, loading and unloading computers, monitors and printers for this effort;

Christopher Rosenthall and Derek Thrall for stepping away from their music-making long enough to drive from Alexandria to Germantown to pick up, transport, inspect, upgrade, package and ship computers to points across the country; and

Howard University and the National Urban Internet for the hard work they contributed to this effort. Without their contributions, this project would not have been successful.

> Melinda Downing
> Office of Intergovernmental and Public Accountability
> Environmental Management Program
> U.S. Department of Energy

Additional Information

- The web-site of the Back to the Blanket Journal highlights the work of this Cherokee/Native American publication, as well as related sites. (**http://www.angelfire.com/biz/BackToTheBlanket/**)
- A chapter from Dr. Robert Bullard's book Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality can be found at (**http://www.ciesin.org/docs/010-278/010-278chpt2.html**)
- The website for Howard University's Urban Environment Institute highlights tools for environmental justice and public participation in environmental decisionmaking. (**http://www.con-ed.howard.edu**)