From Brown to Blooming:

Groundwork USA's Field-Tested Guide for Getting from Brownfield to Neighborhood Asset

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Introduction:

Why Build a Park, Anyway?

Have you ever walked or driven past a long-vacant or abandoned property and wondered "what's the deal with this? Why isn't our community making better use of this land? I really would like to see housing/a community center/park/community garden/___(fill in the blank)___ here." If you have, you're not alone!

All over the country, community members, nonprofit organizations, and local governments are working together to transform underutilized land into community assets such as affordable housing, community centers, maker spaces and, of course, parks! If you've got a plot of land in mind, or if you're looking to find one, this guide will help give you a high-level overview of what it takes to reclaim underutilized, contaminated land and transform it into quality open space.

There are dozens of fantastic uses for underused land, but this guide specifically addresses transforming contaminated urban property into open space: think fields, parks, playgrounds, trails, wildlife reserves, community gardens, a place to exercise outside, cool off in a splash pad, or sit and ponder the world. We at Groundwork USA are big believers in the power of parks. Open spaces, when designed well, with robust and meaningful community engagement, can have a ton of benefits!

LOOKING FOR BROWNFIELD-TO-PARKS INSPIRATION?

Looking for inspiration or evidence of the mental, physical and community health benefits of open spaces? Check out our Green Space in Action stories to learn about how teens restored and built an outdoor rock climbing wall in Richmond, Virginia, a Lawrence, Massachusetts community that came together to transform a contaminated site into a riverside park, or a rail-to-trail greenway project in Yonkers, New York!

PARKS:

1. Create space for the community to gather and share cultural events and experiences;
2. Reduce the heat island effect by providing shade and using greenery to bounce back heat from the sun instead of absorbing it like pavement and rooftops do;
3. Can help mitigate urban flooding by providing lots of soil, tree roots, plants, and shrubs to soak up water and keep it from spilling into the street or peoples' homes;
4. When developed according to EPA standards, can reduce neighbors' exposure to contaminants;
5. Give residents access to nature and its mental and physical health benefits;
6. Provide a space to safely recreate, which can encourage healthy habits such as exercise and socialization.

How to Use This Guide

Rather than write a list of steps to take you from site identification through ribbon cutting, we've created a guide that is best reviewed with a partner. Transforming a site that is or is suspected of being contaminated (**the EPA's definition of a brownfield**) into a community-designed open space is no easy task. it won't be done overnight—years is a more realistic timeline—and it certainly won't be done alone.

In any type of transformative work, you'll need to have a "back table," a trusted group of colleagues, friends, and community members with whom you can bounce off ideas and receive direction and guidance. They may be members of your nonprofit's board of directors, colleagues interested in parks, or residents and neighbors who are invested in seeing a specific lot come to life. And don't discount bringing new organizations, allies, and partners to your back table. Regardless of who sits with you, this guide is best reviewed alongside a trusted thought partner.

The most important part of your brownfield transformation process will be meaningfully engaging residents and nonresident stakeholders. Without significant input from the community, there is no way to ensure that the (re)development of the land will truly benefit everyone—a hallmark of equitable development. We spend a bit of time below discussing exactly what we mean by equitable development and what makes community engagement "meaningful." Additionally, you'll find several tried-and-true community engagement strategies that you may consider implementing in your neighborhood.

Who Is This Guide for?

This guide is primarily written for nonprofits or well-organized neighborhood associations partnering with other institutions to transform a site into a community asset. However, as we mentioned above, you're not going to be able to do it alone, so we discuss the role of (and encourage you to engage) other partners such as neighborhood associations, your municipality, the state, the EPA, technical experts (such as Technical Assistance to Brownfields Communities (TAB) providers, landscape architects, and engineers), and local businesses.

Make sure to skim the headings first, and of course, reach out to Groundwork USA for free brownfield technical assistance by filling out our **Technical Assistance Request Form**.

Good luck! Let's get started!
—The Groundwork USA Brownfields Team

Acknowledgments

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Thank you to the team at Groundwork Lawrence, whose nearly 20 years of successful parks development and community engagement have deeply informed our understanding of brownfield-to-parks best practices.

Is the Site Contaminated?

So, you have your eye on a plot of land. Before you begin talking rain gardens or swing set installations, you've got some seriously important homework to do. Some of these activities you may be equipped to do on your own, while others may require you to draw on an expert's knowledge or find qualified professionals for hands-on assistance.

First, you need to know the site's public and private history (both for the specific site and surrounding plots of land) to find out if past activities or uses may have caused contamination. If the site ***is*** contaminated, then very specific cleanup strategies may be required and what you can safely use the land for might be restricted. For example, if the land is to be used for urban farming, it will need a more rigorous clean-up plan than for a playground because you'll be digging into and consuming the products of the soil. Before you engage a professional, how do you begin to get a sense of whether or not the site is contaminated?

Well, there's nothing like a good old-fashioned field trip to get you started!

Take an in-person visit to the site and mark off what you see from the checklist below. Note that if you don't own the site, or have permission from the owner to walk around on the property, you should get permission first. If that's not immediately possible for some reason (property has been abandoned, unsure of who the owner is), consider reviewing your checklist from the property's border to avoid trespassing. Additionally, since the contaminants are completely unknown at this point, you may want to review your checklist from its edge, anyway. If you do decide to enter the property: avoid picking up or moving anything, touching or kicking up water or soil, and it's a good practice to cover your footwear with disposable shoe covers so that you don't take any contaminants home with you.

If any of the following boxes are checked at the end of your visit, then **a site investigation to determine what contaminants you're dealing with** is probably required. If none of the boxes below are checked, there may still be harmful, non-brownfield classified contaminants (such as lead) in the soil and/or environmental hazards that you cannot see. With any plot of land where prior uses are unknown, it's important to research and **implement safe land-use practices**, test the soil for common contaminants, and turn to the experts for help.

DO YOU SEE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING?

- ☐ Cars parked on site long term (leaking oil or fuel, or signs of dumping)
- ☐ Apparent owner abandonment or long-term neglect/deferred maintenance of site, such as overgrowth and boarded up windows
- ☐ Visible or burnt building foundations, pipes, tunnels, canals, underground storage tanks, etc.
- ☐ Standing or partially standing industrial, commercial, or residential structures with pretty clear hazards such as a collapsing roof or tilting walls
- ☐ Drums filled with unidentifiable materials/liquids
- ☐ Former residential home burned; post-demolition debris folded into the land (asbestos, heavy metals, or other hazards may be present from damaged construction materials)
- ☐ Lots of pigeon poop or dead animals—a biohazard that requires special protection to deal with due to the risk of viruses, mold, or other hazards
- ☐ This can't be done on site, but swing by City Hall, your public library, or the municipality's planning office to see if you can review the site's **Sanborn Maps**—a record of the site's prior uses, including existing or former structures. As historical fire insurance records, these site maps may flag former and/or recent commercial or industrial uses such as dry cleaners or construction material manufacturing. Historical societies also may have useful information such as city business directories, maps, or telephone books to aid in your search.

Who Owns the Site?

You can't test the site for contaminants until you have ownership or written permission to access the site, so you need to figure out who owns the land. Is it a private owner? Does the city government control it? Has it been abandoned? Can you buy the site outright? Rent it? Is someone willing to gift it to you? Are you prepared to accept it (and aware you should never accept property without ensuring it isn't contaminated to protect yourself from site liability)? Can you get permission for access to make improvements if you don't own it? Who can give you permission to do soil testing in the interest of taking next steps?

The step to answering any of these questions is to definitively figure out who (if anyone) owns the site. Once you have that information, you can begin to build a tailored strategy for approaching the site owner.

Visit your local Registry of Deeds/Recorder of Deeds to look up the parcel in question. You might find that the parcel is owned by the municipality, a private individual or company, or is in a state of neglect or abandonment. Here's what to do in each scenario:

MUNICIPAL OWNERSHIP

- Approach city about site concerns
- Present potential as open space
- Illustrate support of local stakeholders (residents living nearby, local business owners, youth, etc.)

Strategize with city about investigating site contamination concerns, financing for site redevelopment as park/open space, etc.

PRIVATE OWNERSHIP

Determine if owned by private citizen or bank, holding company, etc. (Sometimes this step can be extremely difficult to figure out and can add significant time to a project's timeline.)

ABANDONED OR UNKNOWN OWNERSHIP

Does the property appear neglected or abandoned?

Are taxes paid in full and current, or is there a tax lien on the property?

If title is NOT in good standing, this may be a point to negotiate site ownership with city

Approaching the Site Owner

Perhaps after you learn a bit more about the property, you decide to approach the site owner about the need for parks or open space and to express the potential of (and interest in) the site becoming a community asset. Or maybe you consider negotiations with the municipality to have your organization take ownership.

What should you keep in your "back pocket" for advancing these conversations and negotiations productively? The recommendations below are loosely divided by the type of owner, but you may find that these strategies work well when speaking to folks in all sectors.

Private Owner:

- **Appeal** to site owner's sense of giving back to the greater common good. How is this good for the site owner personally and professionally?
- **Figure out** the site owner's "skin in the game," or what motivates them (Positive press? Negative press? Tax deduction? Desire for new business among residents in the neighborhood? Environmental improvement? Concerns about being liable for contamination on the site?). Work to achieve a "win-win" scenario that involves the land coming into public hands for open-space use.

Public OR Private Owner:

- **Fight *for* the good stuff** rather than against the bad stuff. It is much easier to mobilize people around a vision of positive change than around blame and blight. What potential exists in this property? Who would benefit from a transformation? What stakeholders might be interested in seeing the lot change? Who are your allies that "buy in" to a positive vision of change? Are they willing to show up with you? Are they willing to write/call in support?
- **Talk Numbers**: Collect resources and facts that help justify the value of this work in real dollars.
- **Build Local Capacity**: Present information to anyone you meet. Being armed with resources means you're adding value, building capacity in the community, and advancing your project. Most people appreciate those who are resourceful, respectful of their time, and have done their homework. Remember to keep your information simple and to the point.

Government-Owned or Abandoned

- Help the municipality figure out its challenges and add value where possible. Municipal budgets across the country are being slashed as a result of "either/or" discussions (police or parks? fire department or illegal dumping enforcement?). Show your local government how you can "enlarge the pie" by bringing in-kind services (grant writing, organizing a community cleanup day) to match or compliment their investment. Help establish creative programs that transform the site's challenges into opportunities for personal and professional growth and upward mobility, thereby countering the forces of gentrification —investing in both place and people (i.e., create youth corps conservation job-training programs that double as maintenance strategies for public lands).

- Consider offering to do community engagement around the site as a fee for service to the municipality. The **Neighborhood Voices Curriculum** created by Groundwork USA is an intergenerational engagement strategy led by community youth. Groundwork USA's Brownfields Technical Assistance Team can help you launch this engagement strategy (for free!) in your community, or help you develop a different one that is better suited to your needs. Reach out to us via the **technical assistance request form on this page**.

Site Ownership Strategy

Good work! You now know if the owner is open to an open-space vision for their property. Now it's time to figure out your strategy for gaining control of and managing the site moving forward.

> Important note! Before buying or taking ownership of any property, make sure that you consult a professional to understand how to protect yourself and your organization from liability. Learn more by checking out the EPA's page on **All Appropriate Inquiries**. Also known as AAI, it's the process of figuring out the environmental conditions on the site and who is liable for any contamination.

CITY-OWNED	PRIVATELY OWNED
Cities are eligible to apply for EPA assessment or clean-up grant funding. They may already have some funding in hand). Cities can also work with the state (Voluntary Cleanup Program or Economic Development program) to see if resources are available.	Property owner may be approached about donating land and giving the title to city for a small amount. The city or nonprofit can ask the EPA for **targeted brownfields assessment (TBA)** to perform a Phase I assessment on behalf of the owner. The process of city legally acquiring ownership of a site takes far longer than anyone thinks it will. Stick with it! Busy your staff and volunteers with other things during "down time"— lead tangible, on-the-ground improvements (trash removal, ecological assessments of site's existing and potential habitat, development of greenway and/or trails connecting the site to broader open spaces across the neighborhood and community) and adjacent projects and programming in public spaces to generate excitement and anticipation about your project, the site's ultimate end use, and the value it will add to the community and quality of life. If property is privately owned but site owner is unwilling to engage in negotiation or donate it, you may consider talking to city about taking the site by eminent domain (assuming city has cash and willingness to pay fair market value for it. Note that this step may be difficult to achieve and can add years to a project's timeline).

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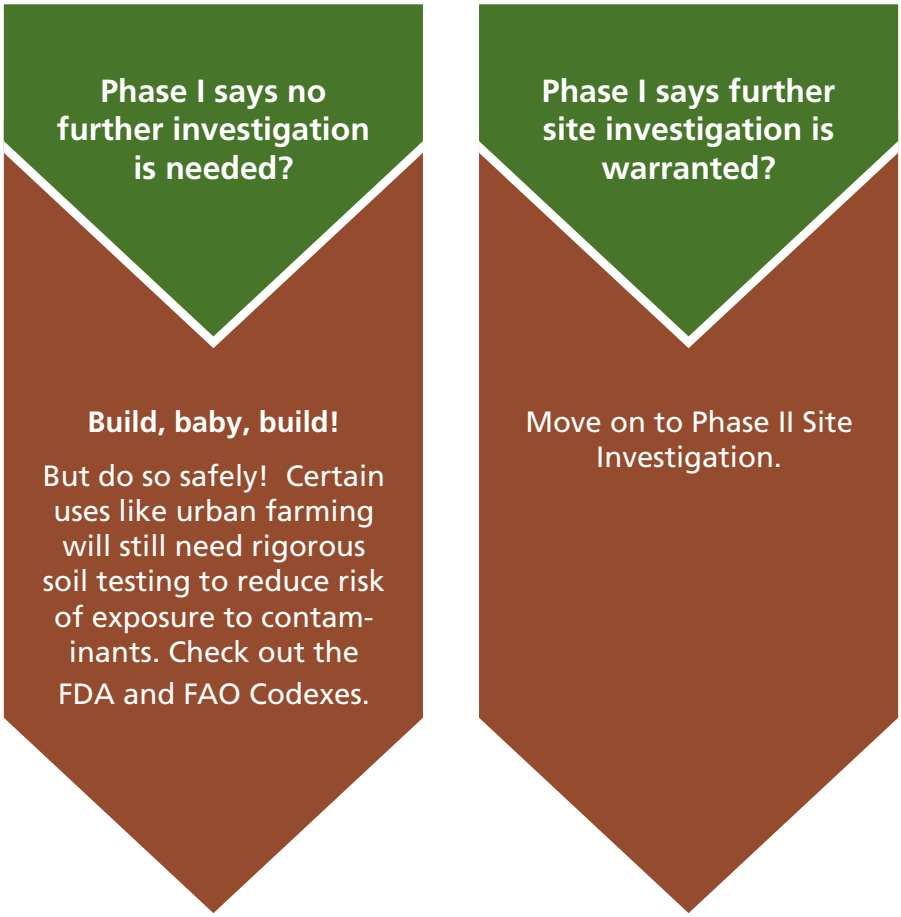
Phase I Site Investigation

Now that you've figured out site ownership, it's time to move on to **Phase I Site Investigation**. This process helps determine whether contamination is known or likely, and whether soil and/or groundwater sampling is necessary to identify and isolate the sources and locations of contaminants.

If this is happening at the city's expense (and/or supported by EPA grant funds), a "procurement and contracting" process may be required to hire an environmental engineering firm to do a Phase I site investigation in accordance with AAI standards, which is a research process to help you figure out what the land was once used for. The site investigation will use historical maps, site observations, interviews, etc. A certified environmental professional will have to sign off on the results.

Conduct Phase I Site Investigation



Phase II Site Investigation

The results of Phase I may indicate a potential contamination of the site or may come back as inconclusive. Either way, the environmental engineering firm will likely recommend that you move on to Phase II site investigation. Usually a continuing contract allows the firm that you've engaged to continue on to a Phase II. This may involve soil and/or groundwater sampling which is done by digging and installing several wells across the property. These wells are periodically sampled and tested over a specific period of time to identify contaminants. This process allows the engineer to figure out what the contaminants are, identify their location, and figure out the best way to remediate.

This is the first place where "value engineering" is likely to come into play. Depending upon the contaminant, the original land-use plan you had in mind may not be possible. Ask the engineers leading the site investigation to identify a list of possible remediation strategies (and their estimated cost!) based on a planned end use.

For example, if you wanted to use this site as a raised-bed community garden, what cleanup strategies would be required? How long would it take, and how much would it cost?

Having those options in hand will give you, your back table, and the community (which you should now be working with, see below for more on community engagement) the ability to strategize about how to best use the land, given your budget. You'll want to have a clear and confirmed understanding of the cleanup guidelines required for your desired land use.

Site Cleanup!

Once a slate of possible cleanup strategies has been identified and associated costs itemized, it is helpful to engage the services of an engineer and/or landscape architect. This professional will develop the design plans for your future park or open space! Through a collaborative back-and-forth process between environmental engineer, landscape architect, and the community, site amenities requiring footings (benches or playground equipment, for example) can be located in areas of the site that have fewer limitations (i.e., some sites are so contaminated that they require an Activity and Use Limitation (AUL) label, which can range from "no shovel in the ground" to "permanently cap and leave soil in place and untouched beneath concrete"). Such a technique can help make your project more cost-effective while limiting potential human exposure to contaminants in keeping with environmental regulations.

The strategy for cleaning up a site will depend on what you want to use it for and what contaminants are found on site. These standards may differ by state/tribe, so you'll want to seek out state or tribal voluntary cleanup programs to oversee the process.

Check out the **EPA's handy guide** to local agencies equipped to help you meet cleanup requirements.

Preparing for Resident-Driven Planning and Design Process: Doing Your Homework

A key question to ask (and get answers to) early on is: What uses are allowed on site given the current zoning? If the site is zoned for "industrial use" given its historic use, but there are residential lots adjacent or nearby, you may be able to convince the city to re-zone the site to residential or open space. Learn how the site is zoned (and the sites surrounding it). What uses are allowable here? Is a zoning amendment possible? This step will likely involve a vote of city council, zoning board, planning board, or other local governance body.

Once you determine what zoning will allow—or you campaign to change the zoning so it is more favorable for your desired end use—build some consensus on the site's end use. What should this site be—a park? Affordable housing? A community center? A community garden?

Engaging the Community and Equitable Development

Before we dive into community engagement, let's take a minute to discuss why community engagement is such an important part of this process.

Traditionally, American development has a crummy track record of meaningfully engaging community members. People of color, low-income communities, people with disabilities, and immigrants, for example, are often only engaged at a very basic level, if at all. Open spaces that can enrich, elevate, and nourish a community can only be created if those spaces are developed in response to the community's self-identified needs.

If your park or open space isn't what the community needs, who is it really for?

Mistakenly, many people believe that community engagement is successful enough if:

- Community members are told about meetings through flyers, word of mouth, calls, Instagram, etc.;
- People show up to meetings held in central locations;
- Community members are informed about proposed or ongoing activities;
- Community members contribute ideas about how to use the space.

While the measures listed above are a great start, they are not strong enough to be considered a complete and good-faith effort at meaningfully engaging the community around the equitable development of a brownfield.

You might be wondering a few things, including, "Why are the above community engagement milestones not good enough?" And "What does equitable development even mean?" We acknowledge that depending on who you talk to, "equity" has a number of definitions, but for this document, here's what we mean by "equitable development":

Equitable development is an approach for meeting the needs of communities through actions and programs that reduce inequalities while creating physical spaces that are healthy and vibrant.

> Equitable development is driven by **community-identified priorities and values** as well as clear expectations that the outcomes from development must be responsive to populations who face systemic and racial oppression, in addition to using innovative design strategies and sustainable policies. Acknowledging and understanding both is necessary for sustaining **environmental justice**.

That's a bit of a wonky definition, so what does equitable development look like in practice? At Groundwork USA, we employ the following community organizing principles when pursuing equitable development:

- **Center the community**. Everyone benefits from land development, re-use initiatives, and investments when local communities define those benefits for themselves and their surrounding neighborhoods, and, together, hold municipal leaders, developers, and residents mutually accountable for realizing those benefits.
- **Seek out and develop relationships** with residents and constituencies.
- **Listen deeply** for community needs, hopes, visions, and dreams.
- **Anticipate, address, and minimize barriers to participation**—and think broadly about what those barriers might be: access to childcare, physical barriers, language barriers, etc.
- **Provide multiple and varied points of entry** for participation. Ditch the idea that a single community meeting format will get you the participation you need- be creative and use all of the physical, social, structural, and digital tools that are at your disposal.
- **Value local residents** as neighborhood experts (and compensate them accordingly).
- **Find common ground by amplifying the voice of marginalized communities** and balancing community vision and priorities alongside developer and financing needs and regulatory imperatives.
- **Honor and acknowledge painful legacies and the present realities** of systemic racism, disinvestment, marginalization, violence and trauma.
- **Work humbly** by sharing information, resources, and credit.
- **Nurture long-term relationships** based on earned mutual respect and trust.
- **Build unlikely cross-sector partnerships and coalitions** to develop a common vision and an action plan for achieving it as a coalition.
- Recognize that developing equitable, inclusive, healthy communities is a long-term proposition. **There is no "finish line."**

So now that we have a sense of how Groundwork USA defines and seeks to practice equitable development, why are the steps mentioned earlier not complete enough to constitute effective community engagement? And how do you make those steps part of a more effective community engagement strategy? Remember, robust community engagement that produces the fairest and most equitable results should reflect, at a minimum, the following:

1. **The community should be in the driver's seat**. The folks who live in the community know best what they need—you're going to have to work hard to make sure that they have the opportunity and space to share their vision. Give residents the opportunity to comment on existing plans, with the power to scrap, re-design, add, respond to, reject, and embrace all of the ideas on the table. As one of the people organizing the effort to transform a brownfield into an open space, you need to make space in your conversations, community meetings, conversations with officials, etc. for resident voices to drive the project's direction as much as possible.
2. **Meet people where they are (physically, emotionally, socially, etc.)**. Folks are busy. Expecting all of the people that you need at the table to both hear about you and come to you on their own is unrealistic. Flyers at the town hall are helpful but will not result in the breadth and depth of participation that you need. Knock on doors, engage the local public schools and social clubs, and enlist community members to get the word out with you.
3. **Be flexible in your agenda**. The people who may contribute the most to the project's success may not have a background in parks development, so you might have to catch them up on what the political, financial, and implementation processes look like. Additionally, folks may come to the table with community concerns (such as crime, a desire for good jobs, community health worries) that need to be acknowledged and addressed before they're ready to engage in details about the park.
4. **Make sure your space is accessible**. We use "accessibility" in the broadest sense of the world. Pay attention to the many seasons of life community members are in and plan accordingly. Meeting spaces should be physically accessible for persons with disabilities. Pay attention to timing. Those with young children aren't going to be able to make community meetings that begin too late in the evening, and providing on-site childcare makes it more likely that they'll stay. Language matters: consider how to reach those with limited hearing or who primarily speak languages other than English.
5. For more thoughts on what makes for meaningful community engagement, see our **Best Practices for Meaningful Community Engagement Tip Sheet**.

Achieving deep and meaningful engagement with the community requires that you figure out a few important things:

1. Who should be at the table?
2. How do you get stakeholders to come to the table and stay?
3. How will you keep the community involved from idea through ongoing site maintenance?

So, Who *Should* Be at the Table?

Anyone who has the potential to be impacted by a space's redevelopment should be included in your community engagement plan. Identify direct abutters and other vital partners. And consider the following: Who might benefit from the land's reuse? Who might see the development of a park or open space as a problem? You want to know who is already in your corner and who might need some persuading.

At a minimum, you should include the following people and groups in your community engagement process.

1. Neighbors, abutters, neighborhood residents, parents living nearby
2. Neighborhood youth and youth-focused clubs
3. Owners of nearby businesses and properties
4. Community institutions—such as schools, clinics, and libraries—and their leaders
5. Neighborhood civic groups, community-based organizations, faith-based groups, churches, temples, and mosques
6. Municipal leaders (city councilors (also known as alder(wo)men), the mayor, heads of relevant municipal departments, including: Parks and Recreation, Health, Code Enforcement, Planning, Community Development, Public Works, etc.

Once you've brought these folks to the table, be sure to ask them who is missing from the room and how to get them there.

How to Get Stakeholders to the Table

It makes sense to come up with a meeting topic, advertise it, and host your community meeting in a centralized location— all of which you'll certainly do at points in the engagement process. You might provide food (excellent idea!) or childcare (also an excellent idea!), but it's very unlikely that you'll get everyone that should be part of the meeting in the room if that meeting is the first time you've engaged stakeholders face to face. So what should you do before you hold that community meeting?

Lawrence Street neighborhood residents review drawings and schematics at a pop-up community engagement fair on the site of the planned Yonkers Greenway in Yonkers, New York. The Greenway will wind through several Yonkers neighborhoods over brownfield parcels that lie along a spur of the former Putnam Railroad line. (Photo: Groundwork Hudson Valley)

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Meet Them Where They Are
AKA: Go to them, don't expect them to come to you.

- Door-knocking by trained community organizers—especially with folks who are already known and well-liked in the community—can help start a conversation ("what things concern you /do you love about your neighborhood?").
- "Piggyback" on other meetings or events in the neighborhood/community (especially neighborhood association meetings, civic group events, etc.). Just because people are gathered for a different reason doesn't mean they aren't interested in talking about the future of green spaces in their neighborhoods.
- Tap existing networks—assuming those networks are willing to work with you. Take time to cultivate personal relationships in order to have space to tell your story and willingness on the other's part to listen. Personal connection is where real partnership begins. (This takes time!)
- Partner with other groups connected to your audience and/or those who have expertise in outreach, established community relationships, strong reputations, and trust within the neighborhood. Typically, partnership means joint fundraising to support your collective efforts, or at least provides sub-contracted funds to support staff to work on this project with you. (An all-volunteer effort is unlikely to be successful and sustainable over a long period of time).
- Municipal and institutional leaders should be approached individually through a request for a formal one-on-one meeting. (Note: to do this well takes time and cannot be rushed.)
    - Be prepared for each meeting by bringing site plans, diagrams, title information, etc., and preparing your remarks and an agenda in advance. Be on time, and be respectful of others' time by sharing your agenda in advance and keeping to it.
    - Bring residents, youth, and stakeholders with you, particularly those who will help advocate for the project with pre-planned remarks highlighting the financial reasons for the site. It is especially powerful if residents can give personal testimony about their experience with and vision for the site.
- Visit the site with your stakeholder recruits. Walk to the site, and be sure to brief everyone on how to visit the site safely (avoid touching the soil or structures on site, and cover your shoes) explore maps together, get ice cream at the corner store near the site—anything interactive to help break the ice and begin to build relationships.
- Strive to find common ground in every interaction, and then build on it. Everyone wants a safe and clean neighborhood. Most people like parks. Many like to sample home-baked goodies you made using your grandmother's storied recipe.

Get Attention for the Site and Project

Getting attention for the site and project is valuable for a few reasons. More visibility means broader stakeholder reach, and involving community members in building and implementing a vision for the site creates a sense of ownership that will help folks stick around for the long-haul. Community members need to physically see you out there at the site. Here are a few recommendations for how to get attention for your project and drum up support.

- Hold informal on-site events to attract visibility (BBQ, picnic, National Night Out event) or organize and lead a walking tour of "potential neighborhood assets" that includes your site.
- Work alongside local stakeholders to make some type of tangible and visible impact on site (vacant lot illegal dumping cleanup, invasive plant removal, pull tires out of the abutting waterway, etc.).
- Celebrate that tangible, visible transformation, however large or small, on site. Invite others to join in celebration as a way to build relationships and garner further interest and participation.
- Develop relationships with reporters who you can call to pitch stories. Be available—offer (and then answer) your cell phone number and personal email address so they can contact you as a resource on the ground.

Build on momentum by transitioning outreach and direct, hands-on action into a resident-driven site planning and design process. Now that people are bought into the site's value and potential, you can engage them in dreaming big about it!

You're Going to Need Money

If you haven't already considered this, remember that transforming a brownfield into a park won't be free. The work that you'll be putting into this park is work, and you should be compensated (if you aren't already) through your employer. Community meetings require a space, materials, and potentially babysitting and translating services. You may be able to get many of these things in-kind from excited community members, but look for resources from a few major buckets:

- Donations of cash and in-kind resources (for example: childcare donated by YMCA staff or donations of cleaning supplies from a local hardware store) from local champions, local businesses, local banks, civic groups (Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce, Main Street organization), etc.
- Buy Nothing, barter exchange and other local individuals and regional organizations may donate time, services or equipment without charge or in exchange for other services, perhaps a community meal.
- Small philanthropic grants from local or county-based community foundations, your local United Way agency, etc. (look at New England Grassroots Environmental Fund as an example).
- Local Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) dollars. Many low- and moderate-income communities across the US receive an annual allocation of these dollars from the federal government. For small communities, funds are provided to the state, and the state disperses funds to each community

based on a formula (factoring in concentration of people in poverty and more). Local governments can decide how this money is spent—some (much) of the allotment is discretionary (i.e., the local Community Development Department spends as it sees fit with its budget) and some of it must be distributed through a competitive local community-based process. Rural development programs from the US Department of Agriculture are another potential source.

- Site assessment and cleanup grants (look into local and state environment departments and US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) grants).
- Planning grants offered through state, municipal, or local foundations.
- Community engagement funds (these can be tricky to come by, but look to foundations, state agencies, and anywhere you can source unrestricted grants).
- Search for unrestricted funds to support your time and efforts to hold meetings and begin brainstorming ideas and specifics about the site.

The EPA uses an annual competitive process to award grant funding for brownfields assessment and clean-up. The **Brownfields Assessment, Cleanup, Revolving Loan Fund and Multipurpose grants** can be tremendous resources for organizations that have a close or growing relationship with their municipalities and are willing to apply together.

Brownfields Assessment and Multipurpose grants can be used for **important planning activities** that will inform your decisions about how to design and implement your brownfields-to-open space project.

If your grant application is successful, use these funds to examine an area or neighborhood filled with vacant parcels, a similarly situated corridor, a watershed, etc. (An "area" must have a rationale and defined boundaries.) Utilize the community engagement strategies described above to gather participants for your planning process. Tenets for inclusive and meaningful community planning processes include:

- Meet people where they are (hold your meeting in a community center near the site, in a neighbor's living room, in a nearby church basement, etc.) rather than expect them to come inside City Hall.
- Consider holding meetings outdoors on site in good weather so everyone can get a good look first-hand at what you're talking about.
- Providing support (such as childcare, dinner, holding evening meetings instead of during working hours) means that "average residents" who are often left out of such processes are more able—and more likely— to attend your meetings. Note that it can be tough to get these important services funded through federal dollars, so consider also looking to other grants and in-kind services from local businesses.

If your grant application is unsuccessful, or if you need to start from a place where you must get city buy-in and support for the project, consider a grassroots approach:

- Request a debrief from the EPA to understand why your grant application was unsuccessful—they're friendly and very helpful! Consider applying again during the next application cycle.
- Work to cultivate individual donors (local benefactors who care about the community, local

"celebrities") or local foundations to provide seed funding that could help kick off your initiative.

- Consider starting a Kickstarter campaign online.
- Find a good writer/editor if you're not one yourself—grant proposals and business plans require competent writing!
- Tell your story—you've accumulated some valuable information, unique insights, and community support in the process. Perhaps community and area leaders need to hear about what you already have accomplished to get this far and what additional support you need to make the community vision a reality.

Visualizing the Community's Thoughts: Bringing a Landscape Architect Onboard

When community consensus is reached, assuming a park or garden space is desired, retain the services of a landscape architect or other design professional. (Note: Reaching consensus may take a while, especially if residents' desires run counter to what city hall has in mind or if city hall isn't interested in the site in question or its future use.) If you're still raising money, a landscape architecture graduate student volunteer may be able to create some conceptual drawings based on feedback heard at meetings. Alternatively, you may want to contact a nearby college or university planning or design program to enlist a professor and their class in building a design studio around your project. In design studios, students, under the guidance of their professor, provide professional services for clients—in this case, you! (Your local city planning program might also be a good resource for other needed services, such as community engagement and outreach planning.)

Your landscape architect should attend these meetings to interact with and hear from local residents about their ideas, take good notes, and then translate those ideas into drawings. Subsequent meetings can be held for the landscape architect to share their "first pass" drawings created in response to first meetings, and onward through an iterative process. This gives stakeholders something to react to in the interest of further refining their ideas and desires for the site.

Make sure that you bring on a landscape architect who listens and receives feedback well, has a track record of successful partnership with communities, and is able and willing to follow the lead and desires of local stakeholders. A landscape architect should be able to understand stakeholders' preferences and work to fulfill that vision instead of bringing their own vision to the table. Landscape architects worth their salt will create a few scenarios that "speak to" various themes picked up over a few community design meetings, and then bring them back to the group for consideration and refinement.

Reminders for Engaging Professionals in Your Project

Use talent wisely. Retain professionals like landscape architects or engineers on a contractual basis rather than as employees on your payroll. Their work is specialized and only required in certain phases of a given project, so the work (and funds to support it) is not continuous.

Be choosy when selecting your contracted professionals—especially landscape architects or engineers. They must have experience working with brownfields. Additionally, these folks should be able to comfortably converse with non-professionally trained residents (and also youth!) about the particulars of site design and cleanup processes. It is even more helpful if contracted professionals are from the neighborhood, work with culturally competent team members, and have prior experience working with diverse populations and laypeople.

Especially on a brownfield-to-park project, a good product will result from much interaction between your landscape architect (park/playground/open space designer) and your environmental engineers. Depending on the location, the types of contaminants, and whatever local remediation rules apply, a cleanup strategy may treat, stabilize, remove, bury, or cap (cover with a hard, immovable substance like concrete or asphalt to prevent exposure to soil) contaminants. In this scenario, professionals know where such limitations exist on a site. That knowledge will help inform the location of various site amenities (for example, locating trees or playground equipment that requires buried footings elsewhere), such as a basketball court or an outdoor amphitheater/performance space, which would suit a concrete pad area nicely.

In It for the Long Haul

Continuity and institutional memory are important for sustaining long-term focus on brownfield-to-open-space projects. Keeping a person on the same project (if possible) over time will enhance your efforts, especially because so much of this work relies on relationships and partnerships (which require ongoing nurturing to remain productive).

Brownfield-to-open space projects are typically multi-year and do not offer continuous, full-time project management; rather, they tend to proceed in "fits and starts." What this means is:

1. A project like this should be one of several on a person's list in order to broaden the pot of funding necessary to support that person's payroll.
2. Working up front to build a vision for a larger context within which your brownfield project lies means your staff can work on various pieces of a larger campaign, so when one project temporarily slows down, another is likely to be more active and require more attention. This means the variety of funding sources that support your projects can share the load when it comes to making payroll.
3. You need to work over the long term to build rapport and trust among residents, municipal officials, business owners, institutional leaders, etc. so they can come to cooperate and rally around the project/vision for your community as a whole unit.

Additionally, while you are going to meet many exciting milestones when transforming a brownfield into a community asset (such as securing funding, developing a community-driven plan for the space, getting a shovel in the ground, etc.), the work of creating an open space will never be completely done. Make sure you consider (and plan for!) the fact that open spaces require maintenance to keep them safe, beautiful, welcoming, and in use. Someone will need to mow the grass in the summer and fix the fence when the hinges rust. Trash will need to be removed and cracked pavement repaired. Trees will need to be watered and pruned for many seasons before a dense tree canopy forms. This is why deeply involving the community is so important. If residents have a sense of ownership over the space, then they're more likely to support and participate in the long-term work that's required to keep an open space active and vibrant. If the space is well-planned and well-used, the municipality is more likely to spend resources caring for this precious community asset. There's a lot of up-front work to get through, but don't forget about planning for upkeep.

Groundwork RVA Green Team and community members in the completed North 25th Street Pocket Park, built on a formerly blighted vacant lot. Photo: Groundwork RVA

I'm Ready to Get Started, but Could Use Some Help.

Well, you're in luck! The EPA has a few programs you should look into.

Technical Assistance to Brownfields Communities—also known as "TAB Providers"—gives technical assistance to communities looking to transform brownfield sites. These regionally based professionals can help you understand:

- How to acquire, assess, clean up, and redevelop properties;
- The health impact and risks associated with brownfield sites;
- What science and technology are available for site assessment, remediation, redevelopment, and reuse; and
- How to comply with voluntary cleanup requirements.

Check out their website to find the TAB provider who covers your region, and reach out. They're a super helpful and friendly resource.

Groundwork USA! Through the spring of 2020, Groundwork USA is funded by the EPA's Brownfields office to offer free technical assistance on the equitable development of brownfields. From community benefit agreements to meaningful stakeholder engagement, we're here to help make sense of equitable development.

Fill out a technical assistance request form on our website, and we'll talk to you soon!

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COVER PHOTO: Groundwork Lawrence staff and Officeworks volunteers plant trees at Ferrous Park in Lawrence, Massachusetts, a former brownfield site transformed into an urban wild. (Photo: Groundwork Lawrence)

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