



Breaking Down Barriers to Community Engagement and Participation

Deconstructing Technical Jargon + Acronyms

The Groundwork USA team developed this tool for community-building practitioners in brownfield-affected communities who seek best practices for engaging local stakeholders in visioning, planning, and implementation efforts.

Most citizens are completely unfamiliar with industry-specific terminology, planning jargon, and governmental acronyms. To set an inclusive tone with any community engagement effort and to help build trusting relationships with community members, it is critically important to take intentional steps to eliminate language-based barriers. Our field observations have shown that teams whose members seek to proactively remove language obstacles tend to see more robust and sustained patterns of participation and engagement among their intended stakeholders over time.

What do we mean by “language-based barriers”? These are easy-to-overcome obstacles to certain stakeholders’ participation that may be presented by:

- A stakeholder’s preferred spoken language differing from the language in which a community engagement meeting is conducted
- Limited English language literacy
- Presence of highly technical or industry-specific terminology, jargon, or acronyms

Community organizers we interviewed to create this tool repeatedly asserted the value of demonstrating to community members an understanding of the ways that language can make people feel—whether included and valued, excluded and unwelcome, or somewhere in between. Choosing to use (or not use) inclusive language and methods of communicating can have a significant impact on the depth, frequency, and duration of each stakeholder’s involvement in your planning or visioning process.

Below are some tips to enhance stakeholders’ experience in a community engagement event and increase the likelihood of their repeat participation in the future:

- **Build short trainings and mini-workshops** into community events and meetings to build stakeholder capacity for understanding a development project’s technical aspects.
- **Create small break-out groups** at meetings to foster interpersonal conversation that create “safe space” where people feel more comfortable asking questions.
- **Break down all subject matter** at community meetings into straightforward language.
- **Create interactive, participatory activities** to help personalize technical concepts in the planning process, and include them in your meeting agenda.
- **Create and distribute a glossary of relevant terms** that may be encountered in discussion of topics on your meeting agenda.

As a resource to help you get started, the following pages contain a glossary of terms and acronyms commonly encountered in brownfield and equitable development work. Additional references and resources for further study are offered at the end of the glossary.

Glossary of Common Brownfield and Equitable Development Terms

ADA – Stands for “Americans with Disabilities Act,” a federal law that requires businesses, public facilities, and conveyances to be fully accessible to individuals with disabilities.

Adaptive reuse – Converting obsolete or historic buildings from their original or most recent use to a new use. For example, an old manufacturing site could be converted into apartments or retail space.

Affordable housing – Housing capable of being purchased or rented by individuals or families whose income level is categorized as very low, low, or moderate (threshold standards set by state or federal government).

Agenda – A document that specifies what will be discussed at a meeting.

Ageing in place – The ability to live in one’s own home and community safely, independently, and comfortably, regardless of age, income, or ability level.

Activity and Use Limitation (AUL) – AUL is a legal or physical restriction on the use of or access to a brownfield site to eliminate or minimize potential human exposures to chemicals of concern, or to prevent activities that could interfere with the effectiveness of environmental engineers’ remediation actions completed on a brownfield site (see also: Brownfield).

BID – Stands for “Business Improvement District,” a public-private partnership among property owners and commercial tenants who collectively contribute to the maintenance, development, and promotion of their commercial district.

Bioremediation – A method of using plants, mushrooms, or soil organisms to filter, consume, and break down environmental pollutants in order to clean up the soil on a contaminated piece of land (see also: Brownfield).

Bioswale – Landscape element designed to concentrate or remove silt and pollution from surface water (see also: Runoff).

Brownfield – The US Environmental Protection Agency defines a brownfield as “real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant.”

Capping in place – A brownfield cleanup technique involving the placement of a cover (could be concrete, or 18 to 24 inches of soil) over a confirmed contaminated area in order to prevent digging in and human contact with contaminated soil (see also: Brownfield).

Census tract – Small portions of populated areas in which data is collected for statistical purposes during a census.

Combined Sewer Overflow (C.S.O.) – When a combined sewer system (designed to collect rainwater, household sewage, and industrial wastewater in the same pipe) becomes overwhelmed by a large surge of rainwater, an overflow of combined raw sewage and stormwater spills into a public waterway.

Commercial use – Real estate property that is used in a business operation; may include offices, retail stores and services.

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) – A government program run by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that provides funding to low- and moderate-income communities for things like blight elimination, youth programs, and community development projects. Funding amounts for each community are determined using a formula, and there are rules attached to how the money can and cannot be spent.



Community engagement – A process of reaching out to and bringing together members of a community, involving them collaboratively in visioning, advocating, shaping and/or implementing projects, programs, or activities.

Community vision – An aspirational description (and/or image) for the future of a targeted community, neighborhood, area, project, or initiative that is created collaboratively by stakeholders across a community.

Complete Streets – Streets designed to accommodate all modes of travel and enable safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and bus riders of all ages and abilities (see also: Pedestrian-friendly).

Connectivity – The ease of travel between two points. The degree to which streets or areas are interconnected and easily accessible to one another by direct routes (see also: Complete Streets).

Curb cut – A ramp opening in a curb where vehicles or wheelchairs may enter or leave the roadway.

Density – The amount of development per acre permitted on a parcel. Common measures of density include population per acre or dwelling units per acre.

Disinvestment – The withdrawal of invested funds or the cancellation of investment plans for a property, neighborhood, or community.

Displacement – The movement of people from an area, their place, or position; a phenomenon typically understood to take place in longtime low-income neighborhoods and communities of color following new investment (see also: Gentrification).

Empowerment Zone – Areas designated by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) where businesses may be eligible for tax credits and other financial incentives for hiring local residents.

Environmental due diligence – The process of examining the official records associated with a parcel of land to uncover information about the potential presence of environmental contaminants in the soil or groundwater beneath it; typically takes place before a property is purchased by a potential buyer.

Environmental justice – The fair treatment of people of all races, cultures, and incomes with respect to the development, adoption, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

Environmental Site Assessment (ESA) – An official research and reporting process led by environmental engineers which officially documents the potential presence of environmental contamination on a piece of property.

Environmental stewards – People who conserve, manage use of, and care for land, water, and other natural resources for the benefit of the earth, its ecological balance, and its inhabitants.

EPA – Environmental Protection Agency, a federal agency established in the United States in 1970 to protect human health and the environment.

Equitable development – A development approach that reduces disparities among people and groups by creating healthy, vibrant communities of opportunity accessible to all.

Food desert – Area characterized by poor access to healthy and affordable food, that may contribute to social and spatial disparities in diet and diet-related health outcomes.



NIMBY – An acronym for “Not-In-My-Backyard” used to characterize opponents of development projects, with the implication that opposition is based on personal self-interest instead of the interests of the larger community.

Open space – Any piece of land accessible to the public and undeveloped (no buildings or other built structures); may include parks, playgrounds, community gardens, public plazas, public seating areas, conservation land, and schoolyards.

Open space, active – Land that is used for organized sports, exercise, or active play.

Open space, passive – Space for types of recreation or activity that do not require the use of organized play areas.

Parcel – Lot or plot of land.

Pedestrian-friendly – A street, neighborhood, or agency that supports, through planning and zoning, the location of stores, offices, residences, schools, recreational areas, and other public facilities within walking distance of each other and oriented to promote pedestrian access. Pedestrian-friendly areas feature narrow streets, street trees, awnings, covered transit shelters, benches, sidewalks on both sides of the roadway, and safe street crossings (see also: Complete Streets).

Phase I Environmental Site Assessment (ESA) – A search and study of all known records of a property’s current and historical uses (typically led by environmental engineers) in order to determine the likelihood that soil, groundwater, and/or air contaminants exist on-site. More simply, this is a “property background check” to assess whether or not brownfield contaminants may be present (see also: Sanborn Map).

Phase II Environmental Site Assessment (ESA) – The collection, laboratory testing, and documentation of soil and groundwater samples from a property suspected to contain contamination (based on the findings of a Phase I ESA); typically led by environmental engineers following a specific methodology.

Phytoremediation – The use of living green plants to remove contaminants from the air, soil, and groundwater (see also: Brownfield; Remediation).

Plan – A statement of a set of decisions and goals for actions to take in the future.

Policy – A general guide for decision making relative to specific goals that includes the means for achieving them; usually stated as legislation or administrative procedure.

Redevelopment – Building new construction on a site that has pre-existing uses, or renovating existing uses on a site; a strategy to rehabilitate blighted urban areas through renovation.

Remedial Action Plan (RAP) – An official clean-up plan created by environmental engineers for a brownfield property (see also: Brownfield).

Remediation – The removal, cleanup, or sealing off of a soil or groundwater contaminant on a brownfield site so that the piece of property may be used again without concern for human exposure to health hazards (see also: Brownfield).

Residential use – Land that is used for housing; may include single-family dwellings, multi-family dwellings, buildings, and/or mobile homes.

Revitalization – The process of restoring infrastructure, aesthetics, perceptions, health, and/or economic investment activity of a neighborhood, area, or community (see also: Gentrification).



Runoff – Water from rain or snow that is not absorbed into the ground, but instead flows over paved surfaces into streams and rivers (see also: Low-Impact Development; Bioswale).

Sanborn map – Illustrative and historical land-use map (available at most municipal planning departments or public libraries) developed by fire insurance companies beginning in the 1800s to record detailed information about buildings and land uses in order to help quantify risk of fire; typically consulted in a Phase I ESA process (see also: Phase I Environmental Site Assessment; Brownfield).

Select soil remediation – A process used to treat soil contaminated by heavy metals or other pollutants by removing or transforming them into less harmful materials (see also: Brownfield).

Site plan – A plan showing uses and structures proposed for a parcel of land.

Site reconnaissance – A visit made for the purpose of conducting an investigation—a visual observation—of a site and its conditions, in light of its historical land uses, to determine the possible presence of contamination or pollution (see also: Brownfield; Phase I Environmental Site Assessment).

Smart Growth – A broad concept that describes the change in community design from post-World War II development principles (which prioritized movement of motor vehicles) to development that assures a balance of the economic, environmental, and social needs of communities (see also: Complete Streets; Infill development).

Stakeholder – Any person or group that has an interest in the outcome of a project, proposal, or planning process (see also: Community engagement).

Sustainability – Avoiding the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain balanced ecosystems, meeting the resource needs of the current population without compromising the needs of future generations. Usually referred to when discussing a combined concern for environmental, economic, and social well-being (see also: Smart growth).

Tax abatement – An agreement made by cities or counties that reduces or exempts property owners from their tax liability in order to spur new investment and economic development.

Tax Increment Financing (TIF) – A tax incentive offered to businesses by municipal government to attract investment or relocation to a particular area. TIFs dedicate the new property tax revenues that come from redevelopment to be spent on things within the project area (see also: Disinvestment).

Topographic map – Maps that show the shape of the land surface form using a variety of symbols to describe both natural- and human-made features such as buildings, quarries, lakes, streams, roads, and vegetation.

Traffic calming – A strategic set of physical changes to streets that reduce vehicle speeds and volume of traffic. Street design techniques may include curb extensions, widened sidewalks, traffic circles, and speed humps, to slow and control the flow of motor vehicles (see also: Complete Streets; Pedestrian-friendly).

Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) – Development located within easy walk of a major transit stop, generally including a mix of residential, employment, and shopping opportunities designed for pedestrians without excluding motor vehicles (see also: Smart Growth; Sustainability).

Underground Storage Tank (UST) – Underground tank used to store petroleum, home heating oil, or other fuels, identification and cleanup of which is a common practice in brownfield assessment and cleanup process (see also: Brownfield; Remediation).



US Census Bureau – Federal statistical agency responsible for gathering and producing data about the US population.

Urban forestry – The planting and care of trees across city neighborhoods and communities in parks, schools, centers, and along city streets.

Urban heat island – Refers to the tendency for cities to have warmer air temperatures than the surrounding rural landscape, due to the extensive surface area of streets, sidewalks, parking lots, and buildings. Surfaces absorb solar radiation during the day and release it at night, resulting in higher temperatures.

Vacant – Lands or buildings that are not actively used for any purpose.

Walkability audit – An evaluation a community can do to identify concerns and solutions for pedestrians related to the safety, access, comfort, and convenience of the walking environment.

Wetlands – Transitional areas between land and water bodies where groundwater is usually found at or near the surface, or the land is covered by shallow water.

Xeriscaping – Landscaping with slow-growing, drought-tolerant plants to conserve water and reduce yard trimmings (see also: Low-Impact Development).

Youth development – Engaging and teaching youth through academic or hands-on means to develop skills socially, ethically, emotionally, physically, and cognitively; helping young people grow into their full potential as adults.

Zoning – Regulations that divide a city or county into areas, or zones, where allowable land uses for real property and size restrictions for buildings are specified.

Zoning, exclusionary – Development regulations that result in the exclusion of various groups of people, such as low- and moderate-income individuals, families with children, particular racial or ethnic groups, or residents of a certain age from a community.

Zoning, Inclusionary – Development regulations established to diversify the range of housing choices constructed or offered to meet the needs of low- and moderate-income families. Often such regulations require a minimum percentage of housing for low- and moderate-income households in new housing developments and in conversions of apartments to condominiums.

Attributions

American Planning Association, *Creating Community-Based Brownfield Redevelopment Strategies*, https://planning-org-uploaded-media.s3.amazonaws.com/legacy_resources/research/brownfields/pdf/brownfieldsguide.pdf

Institution for Local Government, *Glossary of Land Use and Planning Terms*, <http://www.ca-ilg.org/document/glossary-land-use-and-planning-terms>

Sum Of Us, *A Progressive's Style Guide*, https://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.sumofus.org/images/SUMOFUS_PROGRESSIVE-STYLEGUIDE.pdf

