Cities in Transition - Interview

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Deeohn Ferris

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Profile

As the President of Global Environmental Resources, Inc. located in Washington, D.C., Deeohn Ferris brings more than 20 years of experience to her work in communities of color on issues of environmental justice, brownfields redevelopment, and now sustainable communities. Through a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Brownfields Office, she currently is building a peer learning network of black mayors around sustainability strategies for small and rural towns, primarily in the South. Prior to forming this small town sustainability network, Deeohn represented communities in many EPA environmental justice forums and initiatives, working closely with community leaders and environmental regulators.

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Understanding, Trust, and the Power to Change the Conversation

By *Joe Schilling, PhD and Natalie Borecki, AICP*

From Environmental Justice to Equitable Development

Although the concept of equitable change for distressed neighborhoods originally emerged with both environmental and economic dimensions in the 1970s and 1980s, it was institutionalized by the EPA and an executive order as environmental justice, with the economic piece dropped, recalls Ferris. "People don't view environmental justice as a community-economic development tool," which is why the connection between equitable development and environmental justice still must be made. Ferris describes how community and economic development has become ever more important as a frame for equitable development and credits. "This is why my organization, my work and thinking transitioned from environmental justice to more of sustainable community's framework," she states.

Building Understanding, Rebuilding Trust

Understanding the context of a neighborhood—the people and their concerns—is a critical first step toward working to effect real change. Many of the neighborhoods Deeohn Ferris works with are "double declining and triple distressed." Already struggling against poverty, poor health, substandard housing, and environmental degradation, these neighborhoods are vulnerable to further concentrations of blight and distress within cities in transition. Yet the solutions to their most pressing issues lie within these communities as well as outside of them. Ferris sees the process of equitable and sustainable development as transactional, collaborative, and reliant on finding facts and building relationships.

"You have to ask, how do things get done in these communities? And what is the level of preparedness and the capacity to deal with the broad planning and systems planning that are ongoing in the city? I am not just talking about academic preparedness or technical expertise, but also whether resources are available to those communities to facilitate their engagement. What needs to be done to engage in a long-term, civic process to improve the quality of living in a distressed neighborhood within a distressed city? "Communities by comparison have to raise the resources and capacity, as well as engage, a double challenge. This reality is very time intensive. For already distressed communities, these folks are extraordinarily disadvantaged to participate in the zoning and planning processes."

Ferris goes to the heart of the matter: "First thing, we really need to know what we are talking about, which is: rebuilding trust. There is little hope to then finding common ground when there's no trust." Many, many low-income communities have made more than one effort to intersect some issue or work with some set of agencies to address some issue or set of issues. Community leaders in these

neighborhoods who tried to engage were disappointed time and time again, says Ferris. Sometimes community members were deliberately misled or misinformed. In other cases, "disappointment doesn't necessarily mean a corresponding agency or corporation was trying to purposely not help or misleading, but that it may have been disconnected" or not focused on addressing the obstacles to change—which goes back to Ferris's first point about understanding a neighborhood's context.

Creating Common Ground for Engagement

"Even where you are just building trust from scratch for the first time, you are still talking about building it," says Ferris. A lot of work has to be done to succeed in this: education on all sides, agreement on common ground and the terminology to use so that everyone is comparing apples to apples, making sure that the correct agency is working with the right neighborhood actors, and filling in missing links, be they communication links, an articulation of needs, or identification of barriers to change. "Trust is a not just a valued facet in all of this, but in the end its foundation," says Ferris. "It's hard and time consuming, but essential. It is time consuming, resource intensive and receives very little attention in the public participation process across the board."

Many times government officials and local residents are not speaking the same language, especially when planners and regulators consistently use technical terms. Other times, the local residents do not understand how the bureaucracy works or the particulars of the development or environmental cleanup process. Having a mutual understanding of the language and the process becomes critical to building trust and building relationships.

The expertise and experience of the nonprofit groups in these communities is often a good measure of capacity. These organizations have far more money and resources than communities to engage the public. In other words, institutionally there is a greater pot of resources to pull, versus the community itself, which does not have access to the same resources and money.

Photos courtesy of Ian Beniston, Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation (YNDC)

Furthermore, Ferris noted some positive signs in providing engagement resources. For example, HUD's 2011 capacity building grants, while limited in amount, provide support and technical assistance for communities to work closely with the Federal Interagency Partnership for Sustainability Communities. She further states that the government needs to move where it "becomes more accountable in ensuring that these funds or portion get to the ground level/community level; so resources that are distributed are involved in both regional and local planning initiatives and processes."

Ultimately Ferris believes that "it's a matter of understanding which organizations are effective or could be effective with a dedicated level of resources." She suggests that planners and policymakers should engage in a "sort of comparative analysis" to help

identify which community groups have staff and resources to pay attention to those issues, while also having a participatory mechanism to engage the community and stay connected.

Diversity Within

"Communities are not monolithic," Ferris reminds us. The actors and agents for change are rarely located in just one organization or group of residents, but rather in a multitude of diverse nonprofit and neighborhood-based groups. Planners and policymakers must commit to knowing a neighborhood's rich complexities to engage and connect with all stakeholders. The community-based organizations that are "on the ground coordinating and managing a structure to involve community folks when they need to be involved" are the bellwethers in these neighborhoods, says Ferris, "Organizations that are networking resources and connecting in multiple-stakeholder processes to ensure folks have a way to participate."

Where to begin? "Go to church," says Ferris. "That's where a lot of good work is going on. You'll find capacity there, which may be susceptible to then use and aggregate on to build energy to deal with issues in the community. Find those groups mobilizing on issues. Connect with them, find the actors, the movers and shakers, the issues, and who's working on them. Get to know the lay of the land. Build relationships! In civil and governmental process, relationships are so undervalued but are essential."

Successful Examples

Organizations that are working to these ends include the Environmental Health Coalition based in San Diego, California. With 25 years of experience, the EHC connects across all levels of government and locally with community engagement. EHC also weighs in on state and federal policies. They are located within the community and maintain employee

Photo courtesy of Ian Beniston, Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation (YNDC)

ties with community. Their example "belies the common notion that you can find technically astute people in the community. The experts don't all need letters behind their names," says Ferris.

The KC Green Zone in the Kansas City region is another prime example of the success an organization can generate with a reliable set of resources, partnerships, and money. The organization has a budget line item from Congress through the state and is hosted by the regional council (the Mid-American Regional Council), which passes on the money to the KC Green Zone to help run the local organizations' work on its issues.

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