



Background

This case study provides an overview of a community-port collaboration pilot project conducted in New Orleans over roughly a one-year period starting in 2016. In addition to New Orleans, [pilot projects](#) were conducted in Savannah, Seattle and Providence and were collectively known as the Near-Port Community Capacity Building Project. Pilot communities received technical assistance and utilized the draft Community-Port Collaboration Toolkit developed as part of the [EPA Ports Initiative](#).

The [Port of New Orleans](#) (Port NOLA), in collaboration with the [Deep South Center for Environmental Justice](#) (DSCEJ) and the [Lower 9th Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development](#) (CSED), applied to participate in the pilot program to build collaborative relationships between the port and near-port communities. Together, these partners hoped to work with the local near-port communities to identify issues of significance to both community residents and the port and to rebuild trust and effective working relationships between nearby residents and port leaders.

Technical Assistance

In April 2017, EPA convened a series of in-person Needs Assessment meetings. The Needs Assessment included separate facilitated dialogues with port leadership and community leaders, a joint tour of the port and near-port neighborhoods, and a collaborative working session with community leaders and port representatives. EPA and its contractor provided neutral facilitation for the Needs Assessment to help create safe spaces for information exchange and learning.

In the separate facilitated dialogue meetings, port leadership and community leaders used the Self-

Assessment tools provided in the toolkit to assess the status of their relationship to each other and identify key needs and goals for the pilot. Having these confidential conversations allowed each group to candidly assess themselves and discuss potential roadblocks and opportunities for progress. Participants then jointly toured the port and near-port neighborhoods, which allowed for relationship building and shared learning.

At the closing working session, participants shared insights from the facilitated dialogues and tours and identified focus areas that could guide the pilot including:

- building trust and a positive relationship between the port and near-port communities,
- addressing impacts from truck traffic,
- improving air and water quality for residents, and
- developing a mechanism to influence port-related decisions that affect near-port neighborhoods.

Participants also identified the types of collaboration and technical assistance that might best support advancing these goals including:

- improving access to information,
- tools and trainings to improve two-way communication, and
- support for formalizing a community engagement policy and processes.

The self-evaluation tools that we used in those first couple of meetings were just excellent. There was a lot of energy and excitement from the community members who were involved in the meetings about identifying their concerns.

– Mary Williams, DSCEJ Assistant Director of Community and Student Engagement



Pilot Highlight: Creating Positive Change through Joint Tours of the Port and the Community

Port and community leaders identified taking tours of their respective spaces together as a key element that should be included in the Needs Assessment process. Community leaders had not previously seen the port from the water, and port staff were less familiar with areas of the port and surrounding industrial property that are adjacent to or within residential areas. Both groups worked diligently to coordinate and design tours that would highlight things they were proud of, challenges they have faced and current projects.

Port staff developed a narrated boat tour and put together information packets for participants that included a map of property ownership and leases at the port as well as current port initiatives. Tour participants were particularly struck by how complex land ownership and maintenance responsibilities are at the port and in surrounding industrial areas. Port staff also shared information about the port's economic benefits to the region, the port's relationship to ongoing projects in the area being led by other agencies, and the port's ongoing internal shift from a closed-door decision-making process to a new openness to public engagement and transparency.

Community leaders developed a narrated bus tour that highlighted the history and assets of near-port communities as well as the ways port, industry and goods movement activities negatively impact the residents. Tour participants saw areas where the port interfaces with the community that they had not known about. During the tour, participants identified two properties that were creating particular nuisances for near-by residents due to open access to dangerous areas on an unmaintained site and dumping on property that was perceived to be abandoned.

The tours provided time for bonding over shared experiences such as how difficult it can be to identify the many entities who own, lease, or are otherwise responsible for decision-making for various port and near-port properties. It also allowed for organic insights such as the opportunity to clean up specific properties through collaboration and open communication between port and community leadership.

The open dialogue and relationship building that happened throughout the tour inspired real-time problem-solving as tour participants looked at the two sites with maintenance challenges. Port staff offered to help solve the access issue on the port-owned property by communicating with their lessee that a hole in the fence needed to be addressed. Port staff also reached out to the City of New Orleans regarding the illegal dumping and secured city resources to clean up the second property.

These collaborations between community and port leaders were made possible by the shared understanding generated through the joint tours. Transparent dialogue about points of pride and points of frustration for both the port and community resulted in the ability to take positive action together to solve problems with property maintenance.

Taking action on the blighted buildings across from where people live was monumental! We saw it on the tour, all agreed it's a problem and worked towards resolving the problem together.

- Arthur Johnson, Director of CSED



Pilot Challenges

Based on the participant needs and goals identified during the Needs Assessment, the EPA technical assistance contractor developed a draft community-port collaboration plan to guide pilot support. However, reaching agreement on how to move forward with the pilot proved challenging. After a series of facilitated conference calls with pilot participants as well as one-on-one calls with individual partners to help determine a path forward, Port NOLA withdrew participation in the pilot.

At first, the community partners decided to proceed without port participation. DSCEJ and CSED identified community resilience and infrastructure investments as two key community focus areas.

However, resource constraints proved challenging for the community-based non-profits. DSCEJ faced competing demands on staff associated with a major grant award to expand its capacity to address equity considerations related to climate justice, health and environmental issues in the region. CSED faced similar challenges as their board was forced to make tough choices about where to prioritize staff time. Since the pilot project did not include direct funding to support community-based partner participation, and Port NOLA withdrew from the pilot, both organizations ultimately decided to withdraw from the process to focus on funded work.

Outcomes and Accomplishments

Despite ending before planned, the New Orleans pilot project resulted in several successful outcomes for the participants. The pilot:

- Introduced community leaders to Port NOLA's new community engagement staff and executive director, which developed new relationships and lines of communication.
- Increased understanding of both the complex responsibilities for property ownership and maintenance and the negative impacts of unmaintained properties on near-port communities.
- Helped bring about improvements at two properties affecting the near-port communities – one through leasing agreement negotiations and a second through city resources to clean up illegal dumping.
- Initiated direct communications to CSED from Port NOLA about issues that impact community residents such as bridge closings and CSED promptly shared these announcements with neighbors through their monthly newsletter.

Toolkit Spotlight: Using the Self-Assessment Tools

The [Community Action Roadmap](#) and [Environmental Justice Primer for Ports](#) both contain Self-Assessment tools that can help community leaders and port leaders determine where they are currently and what kinds of change they would like to see in their relationships over the long-term. Each tool is tailored to the audience:

- The [Community Action Roadmap](#) outlines six key steps for communities to effectively engage in local decision-making.
- The [Environmental Justice Primer for Ports](#) outlines six key steps for effectively engaging communities in port decision-making.
- The self-assessment tool in both documents helps users determine which step would most benefit their community or institution at a particular moment in time.

While the steps in both tools follow a set order, users are encouraged to start with the step that best fits their needs and circumstances. The tools recognize that timeframes for each step will vary depending on the local context and that ports and communities may cycle through the steps several times as they address new issues and strengthen local partnerships.

In the New Orleans pilot, the Self-Assessment tools were used in a senior port staff meeting and a community leaders meeting to jump start conversation about past challenges and successes with engagement around decision-making and to help refine goals for pilot outcomes. In both settings, participants were asked to review the six criteria in the Self-Assessment and share with each other whether they felt they had completed none, some or a lot of work relative to each statement. Sharing their individual experiences sparked dialogue that led to new insights for improving relationships between port staff and community leaders over the long-term.

Additional Educational Resources

As a result of the pilot projects, new resources have been developed that complement the Community-Port Collaboration Toolkit being hosted on EPA's Office of Transportation and Air Quality website.

[Click here](#) to explore the new resources!



Lessons Learned

The pilot resulted in the following set of insights that could be helpful to other ports communities.

Property maintenance improvements can be low-stakes and high-reward collaborations.

The pilot partners' help with initiating two property maintenance projects underscores that collaboration between near-port community leaders and port leaders is both necessary and highly achievable. Community leaders are often the first to know when maintenance and dumping problems arise or recur at properties located adjacent to or in their neighborhoods, and port staff can help identify the correct channels, resources and decision-makers for effecting change at a particular property. Property cleanups can make an immediate difference in the quality-of-life in near-port communities and can be low-stakes, high-reward projects to tackle early in the collaboration and trust building phase.

Have frank and transparent discussions to set realistic expectations among partners.

Ports face internal and external pressures and constraints that they must balance as they consider making changes in approaches to community engagement. When starting collaborative efforts in communities with a history of contention between the port, industry and near-port communities, a first step can be having frank and transparent discussions to set realistic expectations among the partners.

Community resource constraints can hinder participation of near-port community partners.

Non-profits and other community-based partners often face significant resource constraints that influence decisions about where to focus staff and volunteer time. Projects that do not include equitable resource support for community organizations may not be able to reach their full potential. Often, these organizations do not have the resources to provide for the additional staff

time, meeting spaces and meeting supports such as food and childcare that allow for effective and meaningful community involvement with a project. Rather than devote time to uncompensated initiatives, community-based organizations often prioritize their efforts to funded work.

Next Steps

Looking ahead, project partners are committed to continuing to invest in improving collaboration between the port and near-port communities.

- Port NOLA conducted community engagement efforts to inform development of the Port NOLA Strategic Master Plan and the Port Inner Harbor Economic Revitalization Plan.
- DSCEJ is continuing to lead community-based efforts to address climate, health and environmental issues for Gulf Coast community residents and historically black colleges and universities, including those in the communities near Port NOLA. DSCEJ is also engaging in conversations about zoning changes along the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet in an area of New Orleans East that flooded significantly as a result of infrastructure failure during Hurricane Katrina.
- CSED is continuing to support an open line of communication from Port NOLA to community residents by making space in monthly newsletters for relevant announcements from Port NOLA and remains in communication with decision-makers about future improvements at one of the properties identified through this pilot project.

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