



Photo by Ayla Fox for the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program

Background

This case study provides an overview of a community-port collaboration pilot project conducted in Providence, Rhode Island over roughly a one-year period starting in 2017. In addition to Providence, [pilot projects](#) were conducted in Savannah, New Orleans, and Seattle 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](#).

Through this pilot project, EPA supported the [Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island \(EJLRI\)](#), the [City of Providence](#), the [Port of Providence \(ProvPort\)](#), community stakeholders, and other interested local entities in Providence, Rhode Island. Together these local partners aimed to develop a multi-stakeholder working group to facilitate long-term conversation between near-port residents, businesses, government agencies and port-related stakeholders.

Technical Assistance

To begin, EPA, with support from a technical assistance provider, conducted a needs assessment via phone and in-person interviews with a wide range of stakeholders. EPA also reviewed key documents related to port, agency, and community initiatives. The needs assessment helped the project team better understand community, port business, and other stakeholder priorities. Additionally, the assessment helped shape the first series of in-person meetings.

Following the needs assessment, EPA organized three site visits that included meetings and tours of the Port of Providence and near-port neighborhoods.

First Site Visit

The first site visit took place in May 2018 and included

three meetings over two days: (1) a conversation with near-port residents and tribal representatives, hosted by EJLRI and held at a local public school; (2) a meeting with ProvPort and other business stakeholders, held at ProvPort offices; and (3) an all-stakeholder meeting held at the Narragansett Bay Commission.

The first meeting, hosted by EJLRI, surfaced a wide range of community priorities for improving health and quality-of-life in near-port neighborhoods and for building a sustainable economy that works in harmony with community residents and the environment.

The second meeting held on the following day with ProvPort and other business stakeholders aimed to better understand port and business priorities, their current initiatives and their willingness to participate in future multi-stakeholder conversations.

Later in the day after the second meeting, EPA convened a multi-stakeholder meeting with community representatives, businesses, agencies and environmental advocacy organizations. Participants identified a preliminary list of shared interests and confirmed the value of continuing to meet.

Second Site Visit

The second site visit began with a waterside tour of the Port of Providence providing community members, port business interests and government stakeholders with a waterfront perspective that highlighted active and vacant port properties and other land uses that make up the Port complex. The meeting portion of the convening allowed participants to engage in a series of activities designed to establish a foundation for relationship and skills building, collaborative problem-solving, and identification of opportunities for collaboration on issues impacting near-port communities.

Third Site Visit and Ongoing Efforts

The third site visit, facilitated by EPA, began with



Pilot Highlight: Convening the Stakeholders Process - A Multifaceted Approach

Prior to the pilot, most stakeholders had not worked together on port-related issues, especially those impacting the near-port community. To build a stakeholder network around port-related issues, EPA staff conducted focused outreach to entities within the port sector, government sector and community. In the early stages, outreach to port and industry stakeholders was tenuous. Initially, there were challenges in recruiting and engaging with stakeholders. As one example, EPA perceived hesitation from private industry stakeholders about working with a regulatory agency like EPA in this non-regulatory context. Through numerous conversations and informal meetings, EPA followed through on an important commitment by helping recruit and prepare industry and state and local stakeholders to come to the table for productive discussions. These efforts helped develop positive working relationships, share information about relevant initiatives, and collect ideas for improvements in near-port neighborhoods.

On the community side, outreach and relationship-building required a different approach to address a different set of challenges. Outreach to community groups, organizations, and others got off to a slower than anticipated start due to several factors, including lack of an existing process for engaging with community stakeholders, limited staff resources, scheduling constraints, and other challenges.

Differing visions and capacities between EPA and EJLRI led to misunderstandings during the initial stages of the process. These tensions needed to be addressed before any productive collaborations could begin. EPA's technical assistance provider facilitated a frank discussion among the parties about power imbalances and barriers. This discussion resulted in a shared understanding around the need for funding to support community organizing and a need to consider compensating community members for their participation.

Due to resources, authority and capacity, federal, state or local agencies are often positioned and expected to be the primary convener in a multi-stakeholder process. To help ensure the community is an equally empowered partner in the process, agencies should consider the following recommendations.

- Recognize that even with community leaders at the table, a broader process is needed to hear directly from the impacted community residents to understand near-port community concerns and priorities.
- Try to identify funding for a community-based organization and ensure that organization has the infrastructure and resources to serve as a convener of the community members.
- Collaborate with the community-based organization on the purpose, approach and roles for the process before reaching out to other agency and industry stakeholders.
- Promote a leadership role for community-based organizations by collaborating equally in developing meeting agendas and communications.

The Washington Park Association has been an advocate for the residents living in the 'frontline' port areas for many years. Having the Port-Community Meetings, that were initiated by the EPA, has created a working relationship between the business port tenants, state and city agencies, and neighborhood groups, that have long been overlooked and desperately needed. With our new working relationships, we can now create the groundwork for a 'Green Justice Zone', that highlights the necessity of Social Justice, Environmental Justice, and Climate Change preparation. We look forward to a long-lasting seat at the table, that can facilitate positive change, toward a cleaner and greener Port of Providence, as well as healthier frontline neighborhoods. Thank you to the EPA!

-Linda Perri, Washington Park Association



a landside tour of port facilities and near-port neighborhoods (narrated by community leaders). A multi-stakeholder meeting followed the tour and focused on common interests and opportunities for collaboration, and a commitment by stakeholders to carry the effort forward.

Participants agreed that a representative subset of the multi-stakeholder group would meet as a “port-community working group” to continue this initiative past the EPA pilot phase. This working group, currently led by the city planning department, meets quarterly, is supported by EPA, and will report progress and solicit input from the larger multi-stakeholder group. The workgroup will address participation barriers faced by community residents and identify projects and resources that could help advance improved quality-of-life, including clean air through port-related emissions reductions in near-port neighborhoods.

Outcomes and Accomplishments

The Port of Providence pilot project resulted in a list of actions and priorities for the multi-stakeholder working group to implement collaboratively. The pilot also resulted in increased attention from multiple agencies at various levels of government and provided support to the port and near-port communities. Successes include the following:

- The City of Providence is convening the multi-stakeholder working group quarterly to share updates, set and prioritize goals, advance collaborative initiatives, and continue building relationships.
- ProvPort has joined Green Marine, an environmental certification program for the North American marine industry, to reduce its environmental footprint by undertaking concrete and measurable actions that are externally verified.
- Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) and the City of Providence are initiating an effort to map the port industrial areas. The map will identify active environmental permits and help build a clearer overall picture of the port area.

There's no one person or even one business, community-based organization or agency who can represent the whole. Relationships – person to person as well as within their roles, organizations and institutions – are so important to move work forward effectively.

The multi-stakeholder working group has allowed us to develop those kinds of relationships where they haven't existed previously.

*– Julian Drix, Asthma Program Manager,
Rhode Island Department of Health*

Toolkit Spotlight: Building a Shared Language around Environmental Justice

During the first convening of the multi-stakeholder working group, the EPA technical assistance provider led a training based on EPA's [Environmental Justice Primer for Ports](#), which covers foundational information about environmental justice (Section A) and outlines six key steps for effectively engaging communities in port decision-making processes (Section B). The training helped working group participants develop a shared language around environmental justice and covered:

- The history, principles and language of the Environmental Justice movement
- The history of inequitable policies and planning in the United States, the concept of equitable development, and the role ports and port-related stakeholders can play in advancing equitable development
- The business case for engagement between ports and near-port communities, and
- Strategies for effective community engagement and relationship-building across difference or perceived difference.

Facilitated dialogue during the training led to new insights for improving relationships between port-related representatives and community leaders over the long-term. Participants discussed topics including the history of strained relationships due to protests over development of a nearby liquified natural gas facility, and what it would look like to move from relationships conducted solely within professional roles to investing in relationships outside of those roles—including cultural awareness and efforts to maintain relationships across previous dividing lines.

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!



- RIDEM has committed resources to working with the City of Providence and near-port neighborhood associations on environmental justice priorities.
- EPA Region 1 led a now completed truck count and assessment on key roads serving the port and others adjacent to the community. The truck count is expected to help inform the characterization of emissions and other impacts. That work is an important precursor to identifying ways to reduce negative impacts from truck activity and also supports state sustainable freight planning efforts.
- Increased dialogue between government agencies has helped them to identify gaps in governance of port and port-related activities and has built momentum for investing in port-related initiatives.
- EJLRI was able to engage leadership from seven local tribes to participate in one of the early working group meetings, and conversations continue about how to build collaboration around ports issues through culturally relevant means.

Lessons Learned

The pilot project resulted in the following set of insights that could help other port and near-port community collaborations:

Invest in building trust-centered relationships. Prior to the Providence pilot, relationships between the near-port community, ProvPort, other port businesses, and some agencies had been largely contentious. Through the pilot, participants explored opportunities to interact and build relationships to sustain communication, care and trust across traditional and perceived dividing lines. Investing in these personal relationships can sustain the collaboration process through inevitable conflicts and shifting priorities. Notably, efforts to build and maintain trust between the port industry stakeholders, near-port communities and government agencies must be continued.

Develop a project timeline that reflects the community's pace and capacity. Early in the Providence pilot process, government agencies began networking to bring resources to the table, mostly during regular business hours. This structure turned out to be inconvenient for local residents and community representatives. Community-based organizations, many of which are already under-resourced, can often benefit from added agency support when taking on the role of liaison to multiple and diverse community interests. Despite best intentions, some community members during the pilot felt left out of the conversation. This highlighted the importance of collaborating with community leaders in developing the project timeline to ensure the community has time to organize and prepare to participate meaningfully in the process.

Compensate community members and organizations for their time. While governmental representatives and

industry stakeholders are typically paid to participate in a stakeholder process, community members and organizations are most often not. To create an equitable foundation for the process, build resources into the beginning of the project to provide financial support for both community-based organizations and individual community residents to participate. These early investments may provide a much more even and effective starting point for building relationships, inclusiveness, and collaboration between community residents and other compensated stakeholders.

Acknowledge inequities between community members and other stakeholders. When partners take the time during meetings to honestly acknowledge power and access imbalances, this transparency can help build awareness among participants who do not face these barriers and can increase the comfort level of community participants that their contributions and participation are valued. Efforts to support community equity can start to address some of these imbalances such as compensating community members and organizations for their time (as described above). Efforts to support equity during the pilot project included providing meals during meetings, scheduling meetings in the evening after work, and securing convenient meeting locations for the near-port community.

Build a collaborative network of stakeholders. Bringing all stakeholders together to discuss issues and problem-solve collaboratively results in more meaningful and effective outcomes than going it alone. Convening multiple state agencies and city departments can help identify gaps in environmental responsibilities and create more options for addressing issues. Working together across roles, organizations and institutions can resolve to address long-standing issues that had previously seemed insurmountable or had gone unacknowledged.

Next Steps

Looking ahead, Providence project partners are committed to continuing to invest in deepening the collaboration between port industry stakeholders and near-port communities. The multi-stakeholder working group will continue convening quarterly, and work to strengthen relationships, evaluate options for formalizing the group, set and prioritize goals, and advance collaborative projects to improve conditions at the port and in the near-port communities of Providence, Rhode Island.

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