

### **Case History: West End Revitalization Association's Rights to Basic Amenities Model**

- **Describe impacted community (population, neighborhood, general statistics, history).**

West End Revitalization Association (WERA)'s EJ communities are five low-income African American communities of about 500 houses, several 100-year old churches with cornerstones as early as 1868, Masonic Temple, and over 1,700 residents. The City of Mebane's population of 8,000 includes areas in Alamance County and Orange County. Mebane is sandwiched between the Triad (Greensboro, High Point, and Winston-Salem) and the Triangle (Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill) which total over three million people and about 30 percent are minorities. Mebane has doubled in size in ten years due to the Triad and Triangle planners searching for new and cheaper land for development on rural farm land and in small towns. The U.S. EPA Air Quality Campus in the Research Triangle Park, with 2000 employees, is just 25 miles from Mebane and part of this growth.

WERA was founded in 1994 when plans were revealed for construction of 119-bypass/interstate through the two historic African American communities, West End and White Level, just outside of Mebane. The highway corridor would take land for a new 27-mile four lane (to be expanded to 8 lanes in the future) interstate from I-85/40 to Danville, VA. North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) studies revealed that 87% of the property targeted would be low-income African-American houses, churches, and a Masonic Temple in West End and White Level. The City of Mebane, Alamance County, and NCDOT officials had approved the plans and sought funding from the Federal Highway Administration to use new infrastructure to destroy "home places", since slavery, that have been denied access to basic amenities which contributes environmental health hazards and health disparities.

- **What are/were the problems affecting the community?**

The highway planning had taken place for over fifteen years without public hearings and input from homeowners suffering for decades from the denial of basic amenities: a) safe drinking water, b) 50-to100% failure of backyard septic systems and no connection to sewage treatment plant block away, c) poor air quality and no stormwater management due to unpaved dirt paths rather than streets, d) furniture factory's underground storage tanks leaking toxic petroleum (cancer causing benzenes and xylenes), and city issued permits for construction of "affordable" housing on a 100-year old landfill contaminated with arsenic from chemically treated wood.

Alamance County along with several central North Carolina counties consistently fails EPA's Clean Air Act standards due to industry and diesel truck traffic on the existing I-85/40 'goods movement' corridor. WERA also documented the City of Mebane's non-compliance with the: a) Clean Water Act as a result of human sewage in community streams (over 300 times EPA minimal for E. coli and fecal coliforms); b) Safe Drinking

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Water Act when Mebane's municipal drinking water tested positive for E. coli and fecal coliforms numerous times over several years; c) Solid Waste Disposal Act due to the city issuing building permits on top of a landfill in West End community; and d) and the Toxic Substances Control Act when the result of underground storage tanks leaking petroleum (cancer causing benzenes and xylenes) was hidden from residents for over thirteen years and has yet to be cleaned up.

#### **• What partnerships were formed to address the problems and challenges?**

In 1999, WERA and community residents filed administrative complaints at the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) under Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Environmental Justice Executive Order 12898. This and other legal actions resulted in a moratorium being placed on construction of the 119-bypass/interstate corridor and implementation of steps toward mitigation. Plans for corrective action were driven by data that documented how environmental hazards impacted the quality of life African Americans as well as devalued their property.

A WERA lead research and management team documented public health disparities from substandard to non-existent infrastructure. WERA initiated partnerships in order to implement U.S. EPA Region 4 Environmental Justice Small Grant (\$15,000 in 2001) and a Project EXPORT pilot grant from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (\$10,000 in 2003). University professors and graduate students helped train impacted residents as community research monitors who collected water samples for testing and analysis, the university virology lab, under a double-blind procedure in order to protect confidentiality and personal data. WERA partnerships were expanded with the support of an U.S. EPA Collaborative Problem-Solving (CPS) grant (\$100,000 from 2004-2007) and other public and private grantors (N.C Rural Economic Development Center, Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, Fund for Southern Communities, Next Generation of African American Philanthropists, and the N.C. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commission).

WERA's CPS "Right to Basic Amenities" project supported development of new community-owned and managed research (COMR) methods (see COMR poster presentation for more details). CPS partnership consists of nine working groups involved in assessment, management, and corrective action. Working groups included representatives from impacted communities in Mebane, stakeholders from comparable N.C. communities, attorneys, environmental and public health research experts, and local/state/federal government officials.

#### **• What were the major challenges the community faced or faces in overcoming the problems?**

1. "Old south" fear was a barrier to mobilizing community action, without major civil rights organizations, black elected officials, or a major urban area media platform;

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2. Blatant racial and outspoken discrimination in city council meetings, transportation public hearings, and distorted media reports of non-compliances to environmental justice and civil rights laws by local, state, and federal agencies and elected officials;
3. Demographic, infrastructure, and environmental hazards databases were very inaccurate in low-income minority communities. Even the experts did not know where to look; and
4. Some major university professors attempted to control WERA's data and results in order to raise millions of dollars for university projects.

**• How did the community overcome the challenges? If the community wasn't able to address the challenges, what were the impacts on the project? How did the project move forward?**

After four years of angry outbursts at city council meetings, transportation hearings, and visits to the N.C. General Assembly where many of our state representatives refused to meeting with African American voters, WERA sought redress under constitutional law by filing complaints at the U.S. Department of Justice, in Washington, D.C.;

Maintaining complaints placed a moratorium on the 119-bypass/interstate which is reducing air pollutants, saving homes in environmental justice communities, while leveraging block grants and matching funds for first-time installation of sewer services, housing, and street improvements;

WERA sought technical assistance and grants to setup a website ([www.wera-nc.org](http://www.wera-nc.org)) that told our story. Power point presentations and large posters to display photo, graphics, and scientific data for community viewing were also produced;

WERA developed the Community-Owned and Managed Research (COMR) model in order to maintain long-term control of raw data, disseminate research results, and validate formal presentations; and

WERA's board, staff, community volunteers, and partners, planned, organized, and facilitated semi-annual progress reporting workshops on environmental hazards assessment, management, and reduction/removal.

**• What tools or methods did the community use that is transferable to other communities facing similar issues?**

WERA's board was not organized to be politically correct, rather to give structured and

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united voices to and for impacted stakeholders. It is still all African Americans from Mebane's environmental justice communities. WERA partners provide quality technical assistance, much like a loosely structured advisory board.

Filing administrative complaints, legal inquiry and petition, and can be very useful legal strategies without litigation. Seeking accountability on technical grounds can support legal remedies;

WERA Community-Owned and Managed Research (COMR) model provided more effective results for solutions implementation than the community-based participatory research (CBPR) method or the traditional university lead approach. It requires a community-based organization that is willing to develop the capacity to take charge with attorneys, government officials, public health, and research experts in the room;

GIS and spatial data mapping, government census data, and EPA's risk assessments are invaluable; however, "groundtruthing" is necessary to document community stakeholder "common sense" knowledge and "life experience priorities."

#### **• What were the major successes in the eyes of the community?**

1. The 119-bypass/interstate "good movement" corridor that would serve a proposed 2600 acres industrial park, anchored a Ford Motor Company distribution plant, is still on moratorium. The NCDOT's Draft of the Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), required by U.S. EPA, has been delayed since 1999 due to efforts to minimize environmental impact on residents. The petroleum plume from leaking underground storage tanks threaten groundwater and lied in the 119-bypass corridor;
2. WERA and collaborating partners leveraged environmental hazards into corrective actions: first-time installation of sewer service with block grants and matching city funds; widening, ditching, and paving dusty dirt streets that improved access, air quality, and stormwater management; stopping construction of an "affordable" housing subdivision on top of a landfill contaminated with arsenic and other chemicals and industrial furniture manufacturing waste;
3. WERA's "groundtruthing" documentation and research uncovered human waste contamination in the City of Mebane's drinking water when city engineers had not reported health code violations to users for years; and
4. WERA's board, staff, and partners have made presentations and conducted training workshops for the: U.S. EPA's Office of Environmental Justice; Minority Health Conferences at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; American Public Health Association (APHA) Conferences; Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH); and articles scheduled for publication by the Johns Hopkins University

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Journal's Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action (Fall Quarter <http://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/>).

5. WERA's President Omega Wilson has been selected to serve on the U.S. EPA's National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC), and Advisory Committee for the Environmental Leadership Program – Southeastern Regional Network.

AmeriCorps\*VISTA approved WERA as the only North Carolina sponsor site for volunteers/members with a focus on environmental health, awareness, and monitoring for low-income minority residents.

**Community Leader Bio Sketch:** Omega R. Wilson is President of the West End Revitalization Association – WERA of Mebane, N.C. Founding board chairman in 1994 when WERA incorporated as 501-( c)(3) non-profit community development corporation (CDC). Led board and staff through capacity building as a community-based environmental protection (CBEP) organization under U.S. EPA guidelines. Grant writer and project manager of community-own and managed research (COMR) model involving: University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill EXPORT Pilot study on health disparities; U.S. EPA Environmental Justice Small Grant – Region 4 on at risk well water from failing septic systems; and U.S. EPA Collaborative Problem-Solving Project on “Right to Basic Amenities” under public health statutes and environmental justice. Organized and facilitate several capacity building workshops on community-owned research, corrective actions for basic amenities, and legal strategies without litigation. Wilson is a current member of the U.S. EPA's National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC), and Advisory Committee for the Environmental Leadership Program – Southeast Regional Network. Wilson's educational background includes media and communications, community organizing, and environmental justice leadership.

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