

# **Evaluation of the Good Neighbors United Initiative**

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## Contents

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
II.	BACKGROUND.....	1
III.	BENEFICIAL FEATURES OF GNUI.....	3
IV.	STRENGTHENING GNUI: NECESSARY STEPS.....	5
V.	CONCLUSION.....	9
Appendix A:	REFERENCES.....	10
Appendix B:	INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	11
Appendix C:	INTERVIEWED PARTICIPANTS.....	13

## **I. Introduction**

As its two-year pilot period draws to a close, Southeast Michigan's Good Neighbors United Initiative (GNUI) is at a crossroads. The Wayne County Department of Environment (WCDOE), which has spearheaded GNUI efforts and provided staff and administrative support for related activities, is reevaluating its ability to continue its current level of involvement. Community representatives, industry, local government officials, and environmental groups, while still maintaining steady participation in GNUI, must weigh the advantages of their involvement against other demands on time and resources.

While GNUI's formation, structure, and activities have been well documented during the two-year pilot period in WCDOE annual reports, newsletters, and GNUI meeting documents and updates, there has been no in-depth examination of participants' opinions about GNUI's progress or the direction the effort should take in the future. To this end, GNUI participants asked the Delta Institute, which has assisted in facilitation and coordination of GNUI activities, to help in assessing the effectiveness of the GNUI effort and considering next steps. As the Delta Institute began this assessment, Michael Flowers, a graduate student at Central Michigan University and a WCDOE staff person, performed a formal survey to evaluate GNUI stakeholder perceptions. The Delta Institute's assessment and Mr. Flowers' study serve as tools to assist GNUI participants in making decisions about the future of the initiative.

This evaluation of GNUI is based on information obtained from interviews with current committee members conducted from April through September 2000. A schedule of interview questions focusing on the GNUI mission to "improve the environmental quality of life in the Lower Rouge River Watershed / Southwest Detroit area of Michigan" is reproduced in Appendix B, and a list of those interviewed appears in Appendix C.

## **II. Background**

In November 1997, WCDOE began a collaborative effort to address environmental issues in the Lower Rouge / Southwest Detroit area. Modeled loosely on other "good neighbors" efforts in which industrial facilities work with enforcement agencies and agree to make environmental improvements outside the regulatory framework, GNUI sought multi-stakeholder participation from industry, agencies, local government, community groups, and environmentalists. Working initially with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), and the City of Detroit, WCDOE's new GNUI effort targeted communities in Allen Park,

Dearborn, Southwest Detroit, Ecorse, Lincoln Park, Melvindale, and River Rouge and recruited participants from those communities.

At the outset, WCDOE designed an environmental matrix and asked representative participants to rank the most pressing environmental concerns in their communities. Environmental concerns were then ranked by WCDOE. Task Forces were formed to address the most pressing issues identified in the survey: Air (later broken into Odor, Dust, and Toxics groups), Brownfields, Public Information/Education, Solid Waste/Illegal Dumping, and Water.

GNUI participants nominated a Steering Committee, consisting of representatives from industry, local governments, community and environmental groups, and regulatory agencies. Each member of the Steering Committee was expected to participate in at least one Task Force as well. The role of the Steering Committee served to oversee the larger GNUI efforts and coordinate and evaluate ongoing Task Force activities to ensure the overall goals established by GNUI were being met. This group met on a quarterly basis shortly before each full meeting to review progress reports and plan the agenda of the larger GNUI meetings. The Steering Committee and all participants agreed on a GNUI mission statement:

*“The mission of the GNUI is to improve the environmental quality of life in the Lower Rouge River Watershed / Southwest Detroit area of Michigan by focusing on federal, state, county, city/local governments, community group efforts and local business/industry resources on selected environmental and economical concerns of the communities and the agencies.”*

During the subsequent 2 years, the each Task Force met with varying degrees of regularity, some on a monthly basis, each determining their own direction and approach. Reports were generated by each Task Force and submitted to the Steering Committee for review prior to each quarterly meeting, and reported on at the quarterly meetings by Task Force members. The full GNUI group met quarterly so that the Task Forces and the broader spectrum of participants could interact, share information and garner additional support, input and participation of members of the larger group. The work of each Task Force and the entire GNUI endeavor has been thoroughly documented in GNUI annual reports, WCDOE newsletters, and other informational material. Those interested in more detailed background on GNUI may contact WCDOE at 313-224-8284.

### **III. Beneficial Features of the Good Neighbors United Initiative**

Recent years have seen an increase in multi-stakeholder efforts that bring together representatives from industry, regulatory agencies, environmental groups, and community interests. Most of these efforts are focused on specific industrial sectors, with the committees taking on advisory roles to individual companies or facilities. GNUI is unique in that it is defined by geographic focus rather than by a link to a specific facility. However, in evaluating GNUI, it is valuable to look at case studies of community advisory committees working with facilities around the country (see Appendix A). Assessments of community advisory groups have identified a number of features that contribute to the success of these groups. GNUI possesses similar beneficial features, which include:

### **Open Communication**

GNUI participants contacted for this evaluation generally agree that GNUI has been successful in creating a forum of open, effective dialogue. While it took some time to develop a level of comfort, participants now feel that the mutual respect and shared commitment to the process result in an open, receptive atmosphere. As one participant put it, “People feel pretty empowered to say what they want.” In general, this results in uninhibited discussion and exchange of ideas. Business representatives, regulating agencies, and community representatives show little reluctance in voicing opinions and listening to what others have to say.

### **Multiple Stakeholders**

The collection of GNUI participants includes stakeholders from many backgrounds, offering different perspectives on the region’s environmental issues. This multi-stakeholder approach is an integral aspect of GNUI and is lauded as one of its most important elements. “Anything that gets business, agencies, and community around the same table is worth it,” said one participant. GNUI participants all gained insights about one another as a result of the effort. “They’re a little more human than I thought they’d be,” one member observed. GNUI also offered opportunities for residents from different neighborhoods to meet and share experiences: “When you put different communities that have something in common together, they communicate, laugh, and talk. That’s a positive from Good Neighbors right there.”

### **Leadership from Wayne County Department of Environment**

Across the board, GNUI participants tend to recognize and applaud the effort that WCDOE has made to get this process off the ground and to keep it going. While some mentioned Wayne County’s strong presence as one of the deterrents to more complete community participation, GNUI members acknowledge the leadership role that WCDOE has played. The staffing and resources that Wayne

County committed to the Steering Committee, the full GNUI committee, and the Task Forces have been a key factor in maintaining GNUI to date. As one participant stated, “Wayne County knocked themselves out.”

### **Pressure from Environmentalists and Community Members**

Locally-based environmental and community groups, including Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision, the Opportunity Center, Friends of the Rouge, the Kemeny Recreation Center Advisory Committee, United Citizens of Southwest Detroit, the Jeremiah Project, and others, have been actively involved in GNUI. Many members feel that the participation of these groups compels agency and industry representatives to produce results, as well as maintaining the group’s focus on issues important to residents of GNUI neighborhoods. As one member put it, “Their presence is crucial in getting things addressed.” Furthermore, through their involvement with GNUI, community members gained valuable insights, which allowed them to advocate for action.

### **Involvement from Industry**

One member noted: “GNUI was the first time that a lot of industry people were able to understand community frustrations and see the actual impacts of industry on communities.” The involvement of business and industry representatives has been a crucial aspect of GNUI, given the group’s goals of bringing community, agencies, and business together to find solutions to environmental problems. While many participants would like to see more commitment from local industrial facilities, (“GNUI needs better champions from industry,” one member noted), most members congratulate the businesses that have been represented.

### **Focus on Specific Locations**

GNUI’s geographic focus helps the group to plan actions and events targeted to addressing problems in specific communities. One participant noted, “GNUI’s greatest achievement was helping raise the awareness in various segments of certain communities. That in itself is a very big task.” While GNUI strives to concentrate on its target communities, collectively those communities comprise a segment of Southeast Michigan that gives GNUI a regional focus as well. Another participant observed, “We need to think on a region-wide level, instead of going ‘action-to-action’. But GNUI came as close as anyone to doing things on that level.”

### **Focus Actions and Events**

From early on, GNUI members recognized the importance of shared accomplishments, or what one participant called “getting some successes under our belts.” Several GNUI activities were cited by members as examples of successful achievements, including:

- Development and distribution of informational/instructional brochure for reporting environmental complaints to WCDOE's 24-hour Hotline, resulting in increased publicity and accountability;
- Cleanup organized by the Illegal Dumping Task Force;
- Dust survey and letters to facilities sent by the Dust Task Force;
- Fugitive Dust Workshop and Odor Workshop organized by the Dust and Odor Task Forces; and
- The GNUI poster contest.

These activities expanded the active involvement of the GNUI participants and community in the effort and many echoed the thoughts of one member who remarked on the “various ways [these activities] got people involved and educated people.”

#### **IV. Strengthening the Good Neighbors United Initiative: Necessary Steps**

Two years after its formation, GNUI is actively addressing issues and many of the original members still regularly attend meetings, indicating that participants continue to value the effort. However, while most participants see merit in the initiative, members want to be ensured of an effective process in order to justify further investment of their time and resources. The completion of the two-year pilot is an appropriate time for reexamination of GNUI. If GNUI can be strengthened and fine-tuned, with a renewed commitment among all stakeholders toward tangible, sustainable environmental gains for the target communities, “improved quality of life”, as stated in the mission, will more likely result.

##### **Clarify Roles**

From the outset, GNUI was designed as a multi-stakeholder, participatory process. Most members see the fact that so many parties and interests are represented as one of the elements contributing to GNUI's success. As one participant noted, “This was a first-time effort for many people. Agency, industry, and community people were able to hear each other's frustrations. As improved communication, it's been very successful.” However, with so many people sitting around the table, many participants expressed uncertainty about the roles of the various parties in GNUI. The functions and responsibilities of the environmental agencies (WCDOE, MDEQ, USEPA, City of Detroit Department of Environment) seem especially unclear, not only to community representatives, environmentalists, and industry officials, but to some within the agencies themselves. One member stated, “It's hard to understand the role of the state and 'feds'.” Another echoed that uncertainty, “What are the agency roles in this? Maybe we need to flesh out what roles should be, what commitments should

be.” The role of industry and business is also somewhat unclear, with varying expectations from industry and business participants and other GNUI participants. Clearly defining the roles of GNUI stakeholders is of major importance, as it is directly related to the nature and function of GNUI itself.

Possible steps:

- Seek consensus on the roles and responsibilities of GNUI’s industry and business participants. Guiding questions might include:
  - Can participating industry be expected to make meaningful and demonstrable contributions toward GNUI’s implied goal of “cleaner” business practices?
  - Does the GNUI mission include “good neighbors agreements”, which, in common usage, implies voluntary pollution reduction and prevention measures by participating industrial facilities? If so, how does GNUI seek such agreements?
  - Is it appropriate for business and industry to contribute funding to support GNUI activities? (One industry representative said, “We’d be willing to help fund this—do our fair share.”)
- Clearly spell out expectations specifically for regulatory agencies. Determine whether WCDOE continues as the lead agency for GNUI, and to what extent other agencies should play an active part and/or leadership role in GNUI Task Forces and activities. Determine how GNUI might assist or advise agency initiatives (i.e. providing recommendations for or helping to implement Supplemental Environmental Projects).
- Design a system to ensure accountability in ongoing activities. Clearly spell out expectations for all steering committee and Task Force members. Define a simple and clear process and set of rules (for attendance, etc.) for reassigning the duties of lapsed participants. Make that process available to all participants and carry it out as needed.
- Once roles and responsibilities are agreed upon, ensure appropriate mechanisms to inform existing and future GNUI participants and assess whether responsibilities are fulfilled.

**Streamline the Process**

GNUI’s Task Forces were created to meet the most pressing environmental needs in the target communities as identified in the original environmental matrix. Given the limits on participants’ time and resources, many now feel that GNUI might be more effective if its collective expertise were focused on fewer issues. As one member said, “If we just keep going as we are, there’s going to be a waning of interest.” The many meetings of the Task Forces, the steering

committee, and the full GNUI group are a drain on resources and have questionable use for some participants. Since most of GNUI's work is done in the Task Forces, many participants attending only the full meetings remain unengaged. A member stated, "People who attend the larger meetings and not the smaller ones couldn't see how they could fit in."

Possible steps:

- Examine each Task Force and determine whether it is meeting GNUI goals and objectives and continuing to draw participants. Suspend meetings for those Task Forces that have been less effective. One participant suggested that air and odor Task Forces could be effectively merged.
- Hold full GNUI meetings less frequently. One suggested scenario includes two to three full meetings per year, with one of those held during the evening.
- Make full GNUI meetings more participatory, rather than merely reporting-out on Task Force activities. Explore other ways to update participants on Task Force activities and keep people engaged, for example, through written reports, a website, or e-mail list-serve. Restructure full GNUI meetings so that they become a broader forum to educate attendees on environmental initiatives (members' suggestions include the Gateway Initiative, greenways, the City of Detroit's Brownfield Task Group, and the Detroit and Rouge River RAPs), discuss quality-of-life issues, and form new alliances to address pressing environmental issues.
- Develop a mechanism for regular assessment of GNUI and its Task Forces to determine participant satisfaction and whether GNUI goals and objectives still apply and are being met. As one member said, "We should learn from the last two years, and continually evaluate as we go along." Have the steering committee take a more active role in continually assessing progress of the Task Forces and the full committee and in helping to shape a more active participatory agenda.
- Further explore ways to fund the GNUI effort and its activities. Some community members suggested setting up a fund to help provide community groups with the resources to participate.
- Design a more fluid organizational structure, which could include ad hoc committees--similar to the poster committee--to carry out short-term projects (e.g., a household hazardous waste collection program, as suggested by one member).

## **Improve Community Involvement**

GNUI participants feel that GNUI lacks broad, active participation of residents from the targeted communities. One member noted, “There’s been a dramatic lack of community people in the entire process. Part of it was we weren’t able to articulate the purpose and goals to the community in a way that demonstrated to people that giving their time would be useful.” Community outreach, most participants acknowledge, is always a difficult task. As one member observed, “It’s by nature a huge, ongoing effort.” While GNUI has conducted public outreach and education activities, and has varied meeting locations and times in order to encourage more attendance from residents, participants from agencies, industry, city government, or a few special-interest groups predominate in most Task Force and full meetings. The major presence of the agencies may have been a hindrance to more community involvement. “It was identified as a county project,” one participant stated, “which was sometimes a negative for the process. The level of involvement, interest, and commitment were not what they needed to be.” Another long-time agency member said, “We meant to get communities taking the lead, doing this themselves, but we ended up taking the lead, which wasn’t the way it was meant to work.”

To better involve the community, GNUI needs to be able to convince local citizens that it is committed to real, tangible environmental improvements, and that these improvements are more easily attained with the active participation and input from local residents. GNUI must also demonstrate to local residents that other participants will *listen* and *respond* to their environmental concerns.

### Possible steps:

- Focus on engaging members of existing community groups, using existing community gatherings (churches, schools, etc.) to garner support and input from neighborhood residents. Some members suggested a GNUI “Speaker’s Bureau” that could, as one participant said “go to where people are and bring them the issue.”
- Target school-aged children in order to reach not only students but also their parents and families.
- Provide training and resources to help build the capacity of local community members to address neighborhood concerns. Members’ suggestions included workshops on how to improve local ordinances, FOIA training, etc.
- Continue and expand the WCDOE hotlines and brochures. Demonstrate to the public that complaints to WCDOE are important and are acted upon in a timely and effective manner.

- Design a structure to encourage what one member called “side-by-side leadership.” This could include electing and/or rotating Task Force chairs.
- Publicize GNUI meetings and activities in a more effective manner. Members’ suggestions included inviting “big name” speakers and presenters to GNUI meetings, putting “blurbs” in utility bills, and broadcasting GNUI events on local cable television.

## **V. Conclusion**

The Southeast Michigan Good Neighbors United Initiative has been successful in creating a multi-stakeholder process to begin to improve environmental conditions in its targeted communities. GNUI’s successes are especially important given the fact that this was a pilot effort with few models to look to for guidance. (One member noted, “It was kind of like riding a bicycle while you were building it.”) Many GNUI events and activities in its first two years of existence have been viewed as successful by those involved, and GNUI participants, including the staff at WCDOE, should be congratulated on their efforts. Beneficial elements that have contributed to these successes include:

- **Open Communication**
- **Multiple Stakeholders**
- **Leadership from Wayne County Department of Environment**
- **Pressure from Environmentalists and Community Members**
- **Involvement from Industry**
- **Focus on Specific Locations**
- **Focus on Actions and Events**

One member interviewed for this evaluation stated: “We’ve just started to touch on major problems, started to make an impact and build relationships and partnerships. I would hate to see it just lost.” Having successfully created a framework for effective collaborative efforts to improve environmental conditions in the target communities, the challenge now before GNUI is to continue to engage committed participants from all stakeholder groups and to demonstrate tangible improvements in the quality of life for local residents. In order to meet this challenge, GNUI could take several steps to:

- **Clarify Roles**
- **Streamline the Process**
- **Improve Community Involvement**

If successful in building on its two years of constructive, cooperative interaction, the Good Neighbors United Initiative could continue to be what one participant called “a useful way to get people around the same table, trying to solve

environmental issues,” which could lead to the quality-of-life improvements that were the motivation behind GNUI’s formation.

## APPENDIX A: REFERENCES

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United States Environmental Protection Agency. 1999. *Constructive Engagement Resource Guide: Practical Advice for Dialogue Among Facilities, Workers, Communities, and Regulators*. Washington, DC: U.S. EPA Office of Pollution Prevention and Toxics.

## **APPENDIX B: GNUI EVALUATION INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **ORIGIN:**

Are you aware of GNUI's origin? Are you aware of how the issues were selected in forming task groups? Did you participate in setting goals, objectives and in outlining GNUI's mission?

### **STRUCTURE:**

Describe your participation with GNUI. How long have you been attending meetings? How were you "recruited"? Are you active in a task group? Are you active in other ways? Do your task groups meet on a regular basis and are you adequately informed of the meetings?

How do you feel about the range of "stakeholders" represented in GNUI and on the task groups? Are all stakeholders adequately represented?

To what extent are you satisfied/dissatisfied with the role that the regulatory agencies play in GNUI? What's your perception of the support from those entities?

To what extent are you satisfied/dissatisfied with the role that industry plays in GNUI?

Does the process ensure that all stakeholders have the opportunity to be present at meetings and/or take part in discussions?

### **PROCESS:**

How does the process ensure that all stakeholders have the equal opportunity to raise questions, contribute ideas, help make decisions?

How effective are the task force chairs in helping GNUI meet its objectives? Are they neutral? Are they accountable?

How did your task group set goals and objectives? Did you feel like they were the appropriate goals and objectives? Was the task force successful in meeting goals and objectives?

### **Agenda:**

How does the process rate with regard to ensuring that there is agreement on the range of issues to be addressed?

How satisfied are you with the standard agenda that is carried out at the full meetings? How satisfactory is the process for setting task group agendas? Is there equal opportunity for deciding the agenda?

What do you think is the biggest environmental problem in your GNUI community? Are any GNUI task force groups addressing it? If not, then what do you think needs to be done to address it?

What important issues, if any, do not get discussed by GNUI that should? Why are they not discussed?

**Decision-making:**

How successful has GNUI been in solving problems and making decisions in a timely and effective manner? What is the decision-making process? How effective is that process? Did you feel like your input was taken into account?

**RESULTS:**

What specific environmental improvements has your task group made?

What other specific environmental success stories has GNUI been a part of?

Did GNUI and the task groups have adequate funding and/or support to accomplish its goals? Did it have adequate political backing/community support?

How successful is GNUI in its communications with the larger community, i.e.:

- increasing public understanding of environmental issues and what can be done about problems?
- enabling citizens to communicate environmental issues/concerns to area industries and to county or other regulatory agencies ?
- (do you feel aware of the communities' main concerns?)

How has GNUI performed as far as:

- influencing area industries?
- improving environmental conditions in the target communities?
- influencing county, city, state and regional agencies?

Do you think GNUI should continue and what changes would you recommend? What changes would you recommend to GNUI?

## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEWED GNUI PARTICIPANTS**

Greg Aldrich – Wayne County Department of Environment

Jeannine Ansley – Friends of the Detroit River

Wendy Barrott - Wayne County Department of Environment

Lynn Buhl – Michigan Department of Environmental Quality

James Chiles – United Citizens of Southwest Detroit

Mike Droze - Wayne County Department of Environment

Michael Flowers – Wayne County Department of Environment

Jackie Gant – Downriver Guidance Clinic, Opportunity Center

Jim Graham – Friends of the Rouge

Cindra James – Wayne County Department of Environment

Laura Lodisio – U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Otis Mathis – Kemeny Recreation Center Advisory Committee

Kathy Milburg – Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision

Josephine Powell - Wayne County Department of Environment

Dave Splan – Fritz Enterprises, Inc.

Don Windeler – Rouge Steel Company