

How to Help Resident Greeners: A Tip Sheet for Community Organizers

from **Baltimore Green Space**

Why a tip sheet just for community organizers? Helping residents with a greening project is different from doing the project yourself. You probably share with the residents a commitment to a neighborhood, but unlike the residents you probably don't live there, and you will likely have a different job in a few years. (Please see our publication "Start and Keep a Community Green Space" for general information on starting a community green space.)

What's the best place for a green space? It all depends on who you ask. If you ask a city planner, she will probably focus on odd-shaped lots, inner block areas, or other land that would be hard to develop. Many community green spaces are in places like that, but hardly all. To be successful a green space needs one or more resident champions – the people who are willing to put in the hard work to get the ball rolling, and keep it rolling. Inevitably that person or group is working toward a payoff. For example, they may want:

- reduced crime and grime
- a place to grow vegetables
- a fun way to interact with neighbors

If you are the person with the most energy who will get the biggest payoff, then please reevaluate the project.

What's the role of the community organizer? Paid community organizers master a balancing act: they need to help residents get their projects going, but they can't provide more help than the volunteer organizers are ready for. It's very easy for people to take on the role of a client when they feel that there is an expert around, or when they are nervous about taking on new roles. But when residents feel like clients they don't develop the skills and relationships they will need to sustain the project for the long haul. The challenge for the community organizer is to provide the right amount of support.

The pace of community projects can seem very slow. But remember – the goal is not really efficiency. It is to build ownership by the residents, and for residents to build their skills and connections to each other.

At the same time, it's good for people to feel some reward quickly – whether it is camaraderie, some lettuce and green beans, or a reduction in litter and drug use. All these rewards – the take-aways, the skill-building, the social connections – are what keep people giving their volunteer hours to make Baltimore beautiful.



The Yin/Yang of a Community Open Space

The people drive the vision, and the vision attracts more people. And then the people refine the vision, in a continuing cycle. This means that projects that are daunting at the beginning may feel much easier later on.

How can you best help aspiring greeners become successful leaders?

- Know the resources
- Connect your partners to broader networks.
- Share your enthusiasm.
- Be a sounding board. Help your partners see a way forward when they feel overwhelmed.
- Have an overview of the process. Understand how gardens develop: first you get people involved with quick steps. Later you deal with “infrastructure” like irrigation or fences. (For more on this, read “Start and Keep a Community Green Space.”)

More than anything, your job is to complement the strengths of the project leaders.

- For example, if they’re **good with their hands** and know some **carpentry** that’s enormously helpful. If they don’t then likely you will need to help locate some expertise.
- If they have **experience gardening**, that’s great! If not, they’ll surely need some mentoring from the Master Gardeners.
- If they **prefer to learn by reading**, you can point them to *Parks & People’s Guide to Greening Neighborhoods*. If they’re not big readers, give them CPHA’s tip sheet on greening (available at Baltimore Green Space’s website). If they’re REALLY not big readers, you can read these publications and tell them what you think they need to know.
- Are they **networked**? Web-savvy? Using the internet? The less they are networked, the more you may be needed to help locate resources.
- You can always help by being a good **sounding board**. We all fall into mental hamster wheels (when the mind is going round and round, but not getting anywhere). You can help folks recognize them and resolve the issues. As an outsider, you can offer solutions without having to adhere to a neighborhood dynamic.

What strengths do community greeners share? The most successful green spaces are cared for by people who are remarkably persistent and resilient. You may share these strengths, but you can’t quite share the point of view that comes with living in a particular neighborhood.

Strengths you may share with successful greeners

- Stamina to keep going year after year.
- Self-reliance, but also persistence in asking for resources.

Strengths of resident greeners that you probably do not share

- A strong, enduring commitment to a particular corner of a neighborhood.
- They are in a position to care for a patch of ground for the long haul.
- They get to define “success” themselves, with their neighborhoods. No boss to tell them what the deliverable is!
- The ability as an insider to understand how the neighborhood operates.

As a team, using your different strengths and different points of view, you and the residents you work with can do great things together. Good luck, and have fun!

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