

**Grassroots Reassuring OASIS Works (GROW)
Workshop I Report
October 3, 2000**

Introduction

In the Spring of 2000, the Urban Resource Partnership (URP)¹ launched the Open Accessible Space Information System (OASIS) Cooperative. The OASIS mission is to develop an accessible information system to “enhance the stewardship of open space so that these areas are linked, diverse and sustainable for the benefit of New York City.” Since the OASIS launch, software firms, NY State and City agencies, universities, and citywide non-profits organizations have joined with URP on a steering committee to implement the OASIS mission.

OASIS members have agreed that a fundamental barrier to better land management and stewardship in New York City is the lack of a reliable open space base map and database that can be linked with other related information. To address this need, in September 2000 the OASIS Cooperative selected the New York Public Interest Group’s (NYPIRG’s) Community Mapping Assistance Project (CMAP) to develop a pilot information system that utilizes the City’s new base map and ESRI’s GIS web engine to provide internet access on open space linked with land and resource data. The Steering Committee has asked CMAP to have the pilot web site ready for launch by December 1, 2000.

During the web site developer selection process in September, the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYCEJA) and Green Map System (Green Map) proposed a needs assessment process called GROW, or Grassroots Reassuring OASIS Works, to explore how to make OASIS accessible and useful to New Yorkers of all backgrounds, ages and means. In September, URP awarded NYCEJA and Green Map a grant to implement GROW activities, which consist of: 1) two workshops, 2) research activities by a diverse group of five community-based organizations, 3) a follow-up questionnaire, 4) and telephone evaluation conferences between September 2000 and February 2001. This report presents the outcome of the first GROW Workshop, which the GROW partners held at the Community Environmental Center in Long Island City, Queens on September 22, 2000 from 9:30 am to 2:00 pm. After briefly summarizing the specific GROW goals and objectives, the remainder of the report summarizes Workshop I results.

This report’s authors especially thank the staff of NYPIRG’s CMAP project for helping plan and implement the workshop, and the staff of the Community Environmental Center (CEC) in Long Island City for hosting and helping with the logistics for the event.

GROW

GROW’s goal is to give local groups a direct mechanism to help create OASIS by contributing information and ideas to the Steering Committee. Furthermore, GROW seeks to assist local groups and communities to identify and develop the resources,

¹ - The Urban Resources Partnership (URP) is a consortium of federal agencies funding environmental projects in underserved communities of New York City

information and technology they need to enhance urban life by turning open space to green space and brownfields to greenfields across New York City.

GROW has two key objectives:

- Create a grassroots approach to OASIS web site testing, development and use by working directly with community-based organizations to define local visions and needs for OASIS;
- Evaluate and report on GROW activities to the Steering Committee with recommendations for future action to ensure that OASIS resources are accessible and useful to the least served and connected in terms of information technology, open space and other resources.

GROW partners include NYPIRG's CMAP Project, Green Map and NYCEJA, as well as five grassroots organizations that NYCEJA and Green Map selected to participate as *Community Partners*. The Community Partners included three NYCEJA member organizations and two other groups:

- The Community Environmental Center in Long Island City, Queens
- Project Harmony in Harlem, Manhattan
- Nos Quedamos/We Stay in the Melrose section of the Bronx
- Red Hook GAGS (Groups Against Garbage Sites) in Brooklyn
- East New York Urban Youth Corps in Brooklyn.

Purpose and objectives of GROW workshop I: needs assessment and feasibility

The purpose of this first GROW Workshop was to begin assessing how OASIS might help local groups with land use planning, advocacy and stewardship by identifying what open space, urban forest or other relevant information people already have, how they use it, and where they get it -- as well as what information they would like to have and where they might access it. From there the workshop introduced the mapping and other concepts behind OASIS, what OASIS might look like and whether the GROW partners and other local groups with whom they work have – or would want to have – the capacity to use it. Finally, the GROW community partners began defining a basic research activity to investigate how OASIS resources might be used. (The preliminary agenda for the workshop and a participant list are attached as annexes to this report.)

Expectations and things to avoid about OASIS

To begin the workshop, the participants, which included staff members from the GROW partner organizations and other steering committee members, were asked to write down and post one expectation for OASIS, and “one thing they hoped to avoid.” This exercise was used to identify what people already knew or thought about OASIS, and to provide information to evaluate GROW and OASIS as future project activities are implemented.

The participants responses included the following:

Expectations for OASIS			
Educate people about geography	Develop a method of providing information for map database	Specific ideas	New info about my neighborhood
Community Engagement	Every community-based organization that needs information about open space in NYC can get it easily and use it effectively	Amazingly versatile tool that helps every community see itself in a healthier future, and know how to make it a reality	Should be an advocacy tool to change parking areas into green public spaces
The least connected can benefit from OASIS	User friendly	Provides basic info for start-up groups	Comprehensive set of links that serve as a gateway to the greening community
Information useful to small, grassroots organizations that may not have all the technical necessities	A system attractive to youth/young adults		
Things to avoid about OASIS			
Too technical to be of use	Vague ideas	Information that doesn't lead to any action	Techno-NONO's: Steep learning curve for new users
Info more useful to foes of open space than those who nurture the green apple	There is nothing to avoid	A resource that few people know about or can use	Assuming final product will be easily available to all who would benefit
Isolationism	Just useful for a small group of users	Not buying or preserving open space	Not being focused
Sluggish site with stagnant info, which is not regularly updated			

From these responses and the group discussion that followed as each person explained their expectation and "thing to avoid", several major themes emerged:

- OASIS should be simple and easy to use with the group agreeing that priority consideration should be given to working people on fixed incomes who have no household access to the internet at home and others who don't have to access to or cannot use a computer.

- The web site itself should not be sluggish and should be updated often
- OASIS should provide links to or networks of different greening and environmental groups to make research easier (e.g. who provides technical assistance on horticulture or forestry?)
- Local communities should be engaged in planning and implementing OASIS so that people will actually use it.
- Planning for open space needs should be linked to other planning processes because they are linked in the real world.
- Information can be added by local groups as well as technicians

Community Partner presentations

The workshop then proceeded to short presentations by the Community Partners summarizing their organization's mission and highlighting: 1) the types of open space (parks, gardens, vacant lots, sitting areas, recreation areas, etc.) and urban forest² that exist in their area, and; 2) the quality of that open space (e.g., green space, waterfront, hard surface, brownfields or abandoned lots) and tree canopy. Each group also presented their motivation for participating in GROW.

The Community Partners' presentations are summarized below:

We Stay/Nos Quedamos, Curtis Seyfried

- Residents of the Melrose section of the Bronx founded Nos Quedamos, which translates as "We Stay" in English, to fight the City's plans in 1983 to bulldoze and gentrify the neighborhood following the riots, fiscal crisis and blight of the sixties and seventies.
- Working with local residents and groups, Nos Quedamos fought to replace the City's plan with a community-based one to provide 63, three story townhouses for low and middle income housing and more open space than the City's original plans. Some existing community gardens will need to be relocated.
- Considerable vacant land in the area, as well as brownfields mainly from imploded buildings
- Nos Quedamos hopes to create a tree nursery to foster more local plantings and stewardship of trees
- Believes funding locally defined needs and programs should be a priority and hopes that GROW will help identify potential resources to expand Nos Quedamos' programming

Redhook GAGS (Groups Against Garbage Sites), Lou Some

- "Against" is key word in name. Working with the Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods (OWN), fought City Hall on creation of more garbage transfer stations in a neighborhood with many noxious facilities already -- as well as a beautiful view of the Manhattan skyline.
- GAGS now moving to proactive projects including: monitoring of transfer stations to insure compliance with operating requirements, study of asthma infection rates

² - "Urban Forest" is defined here as street trees in addition to individual, small stands in parks or other areas and rogue trees in the neighborhood.

- in neighborhood, recycling and waste prevention programs, and re-zoning effort to provide more mixed income housing
- 80% of local residents are low income living in public housing
 - GAGS wants to use OASIS to promote community-based planning to encourage light industry development rather than more noxious facilities in neighborhood
 - Open space includes two parks, many vacant lots used illegally (parking lots and “chop shops”), Red Hook recreation fields and at least two community gardens

Community Environmental Center, Lynn Grace

- CEC devoted to internal and external environmental quality and community sustainability. Among other duties, Lynn directs CEC’s youth development programs including an East River boat building program for kids and teens and summer youth employment programs focused on environmental ed.
- Trying to locate waterfront site in neighborhood to construct boat house for apprenticeship program
- Long Island City has two major parks (Queensbridge and Gantry), many abandoned brownfields and existing industrial facilities in neighborhood
- Hopes OASIS will help CEC to help local communities to research open space and land use issues including what is available, how to find out who owns it, how to find out the plans for different parcels of land before projects get started.

Project Harmony, Inc., Haja Worley

- Located on 122nd St off Frederick Douglas Blvd. In Harlem, Project Harmony is a small community group founded by block residents, Cindy Worley and Joseph Daniel Williams. Project Harmony maintains a community garden and their primary mission is to provide environmental education and consciousness raising for local youth and residents on environmental issues
- Project Harmony sponsors a range of events during the year including an inter-generational garden festival, autumn harvest events and summer youth programs.
- Establishing the garden has helped foster clean up efforts on the block and provided much needed green space for parents who want their kids playing nearby.
- Participating in GROW to help foster new urban environmental ethic in Harlem, where emphasis has been on commercial development without thinking about environmental quality and need for kids to live in green, healthy, sustainable communities.

East New York Urban Youth Corps, Renee Muir

- 14 year old organization devoted to youth development, affordable housing and creation of green, open space.
- Open space preservation and re-development became part of organizational mission over time because local youth lacked safe, healthy play space
- ENY Urban Youth Corps now operates, maintains and creates programs for 5 garden or small park sites in the area. Have carried out native planting research to attract birdlife and other fauna to neighborhood.
- Much of open space in area is hard top playgrounds without vegetation.

- Has 1 full-time horticulturalist on staff. Considerable community interest in open space stewardship but resources (information, technical assistance, training, etc.) lacking to strengthen efforts.
- By participating in GROW, hopes to make use of OASIS to make research on greening and environmental services available in NYC easier and faster. Also wants to explore how to network with other groups engaged in open space preservation and stewardship.

Information Needs and Technological Capacity

Fulfilling a facilitator's dream, as the presentations progressed, the Community Partners initiated the discussion that led to the next portion of the workshop: the definition of local information needs and technological capacities that OASIS and the Cooperative should address. Community Partners discussed both their own information needs and technological capacity as well as those of other partners and groups with whom they work.

In the course of the discussion, the Community Partners identified the following information needs:

- Street Trees
 - How to get them and how to care for them
 - Who provides technical assistance in NYC?
 - Where to get training for planting and care
 - The best place to put trees (e.g. why are they always dying in some places?)
- Vacant Lots
 - What are they zoned for and is that related to preserving open space?
 - What kind of zoning info is available?
- How do you get information about "mystery land", which are sites that local residents can information about.
- Hazards History: what has land been used for (cadastre), i.e., is it a brownfield?
- What open space is accessible?
- Where is the waterfront publicly accessible?
- Community parks and gardens
 - Features or facilities available in parks and other open spaces
 - Programs and activities
- Dilapidated or Abandoned Parks Facilities
- What groups or organizations are present in an area? What and when are activities conducted? (e.g, who might want to use a local park or garden or help start a program for kids or seniors?)
- A place to get or exchange information, i.e., an electronic bulletin board
- Loss or acquisition of green space and waterfront

How is the information catalogued
How far back, how far forward?

- Funding for Open Space acquisition available/potential funding pipelines
- Maps of brownfields and potential uses correlated with active hazardous uses
- Where can you access OASIS locally? (centers, NGO's, government)
- Historical information about advocacy efforts; who has worked on particular piece of land or noxious facility
- Who is in charge of land use planning?
Resource that links open space planning to other land use processes
Timing of Land Use Decisions/Jargon, policy and advocacy
- Where to get political boundary maps (BPs' Offices mentioned)
- Planned projects versus community visions

In the course of identifying their information needs, participants also raised the issue of technological capacity at the local level. Many in the group stressed the importance of thinking about how OASIS will address those groups – particularly low-income working people and single Moms – who do not have ready access to the internet and cannot get to the library when open (9 to 5). Will, for example, local residents be able to get maps locally from government, community-based organizations or another agency? Or, will a person be required to have access and the knowledge to use a computer?

The group then began to discuss how groups are already collecting open space information, which included youth surveys on trash, noise and high traffic areas, lead paint and polluted water. However, in the interests of time, the group moved to hold that discussion until after NYPIRG presented on OASIS and the use of mapping as a tool for research, planning and advocacy.

NYPIRG Presentation

Steve Romalewski and Christy Knight of NYPIRG's CMAP project then presented to the group about how mapping can be used to collect, analyze and present information about open space and other land use or demographic data. They began by presenting CMAP's mission, which is not advocacy but rather the provision of technical assistance to local groups on the use of maps for planning and advocacy. They went on to explain that the OASIS Steering Committee has charged CMAP with developing the proto-type web site and linked datasets. Their vision is to take different data layers "down" to the local scale, meaning it would show a geographic area small enough to be useful at the community level.

After showing examples of maps that CMAP helped local groups in New York City and Long Island to develop, the NYPIRG presenters used a CEC computer to show the group a variety of interactive web sites already up and running on the web, which will be

similar to some of the information and services OASIS will offer.

Identification of GROW research activities

In the final formal activity of the workshop, the Community Partners identified research activities to investigate how OASIS will actually work in terms of the participation of local groups. The facilitators explained that GROW and NYPIRG's creation of the pilot OASIS resources by December 1, 2000 are linked processes in which the results of GROW activities are used to guide NYPIRG's creation of the OASIS web site to ensure it builds on and meets grassroots' needs. Since OASIS will enhance existing open space information and create new maps and data, the Community Partners were asked to think about their research in a similar conceptual frame: 1) what are your existing needs and wants for research and information? 2) how can you gather and create new maps or information for planning and advocacy?

The Community Partners then brainstormed the following potential research ideas that they will carry out between now and the next GROW workshop in mid-November.

Name of Group	Research Topic	What map would be enhanced or created?
East NY Urban Youth Corps	Identifying nearby "active" open spaces, contacts and existing programs	Programmed and accessible green open space
	Housing and open space needs	Identify areas that lack open space or affordable housing
	Identifying local orgs and groups to help develop programs	Groups (churches, day care, etc.) and their use of programmed open spaces
Project Harmony	Info for community board about commercialization impacts on green space	Greening vision for CB IO "small area"
Community Environmental Center	Comprehensive land use survey	4 block area showing various land uses
Red Hook GAGS	Brownfields and vacant areas and existing noxious facilities	Map showing what is there
	Tree and asthma survey	Asthma clusters
Nos Quedamos	Reporting back: Is locally collected data usable?	To determine how local groups can contribute to OASIS

After much discussion among all GROW partners about these ideas, the group agreed to carry out a diverse set of research activities to examine different aspects of potential grassroots participation in the creation, use and update of OASIS, which are summarized below. All participants agreed on the need to keep the research activities simple and feasible enough to complete them by the mid November.

- The East NY Urban Youth Corps will design and carry out a survey of local groups to assess their information needs and technological capacities to

investigate whether OASIS resources are feasible and useable by smaller local organizations.

- As indicated above, Nos Quedamos has open space data that they will transmit to NYPIRG to see if it is useable.
- Redhook GAGS will speak with its membership to decide their research priority
- Project Harmony will continue with the plan to survey a small area to plot potential development and green space creation or preservation
- CEC will also continue with its plan to carry out a four block survey of all local land uses

The group then picked November 15, 2000 as the date for second GROW workshop at which NYPIRG will report on their progress and the Community Partners will report back on their research activities. The location of the workshop is to be determined. All OASIS members will be invited to attend the next workshop.

Hugh Hogan
New York City Environmental Justice Alliance

Wendy Brawer
Susanne Mueller
Green Map System

October 5, 2000

**GROW Workshop I:
Midnight at the Open Accessible Space Information System (OASIS)**

Date: September 22, 2000
Time: 9:30 to 1:30 pm
Location: Community Environmental Center, Long Island City, Queens
Subway and driving directions are attached.

Workshop Agenda

- 9:30 am Welcome and introductions
- 9:45 GROW overview and objectives
- 10:00 GROW Community Partner reports and discussion:
Assessing existing open space, urban forest and other needs
- 11:30 Break
- 11:40 Presentation: Mapping as means to collect, analyze and present
information for open space planning, advocacy and other needs
Steve Romalewski
Christy Knight
*New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG),
Community Mapping Assistance Project (CMAP)*
- 12:40 GROWing a research activity
- 1:30 Lunch and Close

Annex B: Participant List

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