

OER recently helped BK ROT expand its Brooklyn composting service onto a vacant City lot where they will make and distribute compost and topsoil, provide composting education, and create a community green space for Bushwick residents.

It took a year for BK ROT, an organization of many volunteers, a modest budget, and strong relationships to convert this neglected City property into productive space. This story also shows how OER works with community-based organizations to acquire City land and repurpose it to further an organization's mission.

In February, 2020 Ceci Pineda, BK ROT's Executive Director, met with OER Director Mark McIntyre and explained that BK ROT sought to increase their existing organic waste collection and compost manufacturing and expand into making topsoil. Moreover, Ceci had identified several adjacent vacant lots that BK ROT believed were City property where they could make topsoil.



One was an 1,816-square foot lot with brightly colored weeds which obscured large sinkholes down the center of the property. In the '70s, a three-story brick house had stood on the lot until it was set on fire, a resident explained. Later, the City foreclosed on the property and the burned-out building was demolished. The lot is managed by the New York Police Department and has been vacant and unused for more than 30 years.

OER contacted the NYPD and learned that the agency was willing to enter into a renewable short-term license with BK ROT. The NYPD agreed to offer the community-based organization a temporary license because it had no plans for the property and was looking for ways to support the Bushwick community.

Dan Gross, BK ROT's treasurer, then took charge of what became a nine-month effort to make the lot useful for compost and topsoil making. At first, Dan doubted that BK ROT was up to the task. Filling the sinkholes and stabilizing the lot might prove too costly or complicated, Dan feared.



This seemed likely after volunteers spent a day clearing weeds from the lot, which exposed gaping depressions down the lot's spine. Dan decided that BK ROT needed an opinion from a structural engineer about what would be needed to create a firm foundation across the space, but BK ROT lacked the funds to hire an engineer. Through the Pro Bono Program of the NYC Brownfield Partnership, a non-profit of brownfield industry professionals, GEI, a Boston-based engineering firm, agreed to send a structural engineer to examine the lot's subsurface at no cost to BK ROT.

After one hour, the engineer determined the site needed to be dug up, buried debris removed, fill brought in and the site leveled. After a bit of thought, Dan and Ceci determined that BK ROT could manage such a project

and turn the lot into an asset for BK ROT and the community. BK ROT would obtain a grant from the City Park Foundation's Green Fund to defray the cost of a contractor that would help remediate the site.

Volunteers returned to the site to clear remaining weeds, and BK ROT then rented a small excavator with a power hammer that Dan drove back and forth across the site driving its large spike into the earth to break up buried concrete slabs from the house's foundation. BK ROT's partner, the New York Restoration Project, generously donated operations staff and equipment to remove the lot's dilapidated fence and load shards of concrete into a container. Ultimately, over several long days, BK ROT staff and volunteers excavated and removed 60 cubic yards of concrete waste and other debris from the City property.



BK ROT then hired a contractor to complete the site's restoration. The contractor installed a new chain link fence and gate and poured cement over the lot's back half. BK ROT obtained clean soil from the City's Clean Soil stockpile and recycled concrete aggregate from the New York City Department of Transportation, both at no cost, to level the front half of the site. The property's expanded new gate allows BK ROT to receive truckloads of clean soil to mix with compost and make topsoil.

BK ROT plans to use the back half of the lot for compost operations. The feedstock will be principally coffee grounds from Bushwick coffee shops to minimize odors from composting on the lot, which is surrounded on two sides by homes. Compost will be sifted and cured and then mixed with clean soil to make topsoil. BK-ROT will also store part of their fleet of micro hauling electric bicycles on the back end of the lot to free up space at its partner garden, Know Waste Lands.

The front of the lot will serve a dual role as an area for compost education and a welcoming green space for the Bushwick community. In the fall of 2020, Ceci, Dan and Jessica Leyre Saab, a member of BK ROT's partner garden, Know Waste Lands, and the DECM block association, met with neighbors to inform them of their plans for the site and learn what uses the community wanted at the new lot. The following June, BK ROT and the Urban Design Forum's Forefront Fellows hosted a site design session with residents, BK ROT staff and board members to envision the lot's front half. The message from both sessions: seniors, youth and children should feel welcome at the new space.

In response, BK ROT plans to install an outdoor community kitchen powered by food waste, working with their neighbor integrate rainwater harvesting and collection, introduce native plants, create growing space for community members, and install tables and seating where residents can eat, enjoy the outdoors, play dominoes and pursue other activities that Bushwick residents enjoy.