

Community Reuse Organization of East Tennessee (CROET) – a brief history, part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on December 2, 2008)

Do you remember what it was like some 15 years ago here in Oak Ridge? The exact year would have been 1993...not so long ago, but I am convinced we all too often quickly forget exactly what things were like just a few years ago. Thus the need for historians to remind us!

I know you are accustomed to seeing *Historically Speaking* focus on the early history of Oak Ridge and occasionally I will bring in something that is current, but history making. This effort is intended to focus our attention on the evolution of an organization that has served a pivotal role in our recent past and may very well play a major role in our immediate and long-term future - the Community Reuse Organization of East Tennessee.

CROET is a recent but historic element of the Oak Ridge heritage and I believe we need to consider its brief but important history. A new concept called "re-industrialization" was born in the early 1990's and CROET was one result of that new focus. A second and lesser known element was Workforce Restructuring. I had a role in that element at Y-12. I well remember the day that I brought 35 people into my office one at a time and gave them layoff notices. Not fun! Downright depressing, actually! I was also on the team that wrote the Workforce Restructuring Plan for Y-12 and that created a special Apprentice Program that converted several machinists who would have otherwise been laid off to continue their careers as maintenance craftspeople.

Let me take you back to the early to mid 1990's by reminding you of a specific term in use then. You may well remember the term "**downsizing?**" What a hated term that was. In the five-year period from 1993 to 1998 some 5,000 people had just lost their jobs at Oak Ridge! It had actually begun earlier. With the end of the Cold War in 1989, the Y-12 Plant, as it was then named, was ordered to cease the manufacture of new nuclear weapons. The manufacture of "secondaries" (that part of the nuclear weapon that contains special nuclear materials) for all U. S. nuclear weapons had been Y-12's primary mission since before the Cold War began. In 1993, that production effort seemed to be over.

Of course, the Y-12 National Security Complex has a strong community presence today. It has a solid future based on being the Department of Energy National Nuclear Security Administration's Uranium Center of Excellence and the nation's warehouse for weapons grade enriched uranium. It is indeed a national resource and the primary location for all things to do with uranium. However, Oak Ridge was not always so sure that would be the case. Some will recall when there was a major effort to move Y-12's work to the western states.

The community even had to form a special organization to defend against that attack on our historic mission at Y-12. Remember the Citizens for National Security? Their primary mission was to preserve the historic mission of Y-12 into the future and they along with other support from elected officials and others succeeded in keeping Y-12 in Oak Ridge.

At the same time as this downsizing at federal facilities was being implemented, special legislation was passed which encouraged communities to apply for grants to establish a Community Reuse Organization for re-industrialization of shut-down federal facilities. The CRO mission was intended to determine and sponsor actions the community could take to offset the impact of job reductions because of downsizing of federal facilities. There it was, that hated term, "**downsizing!**"

To put this into proper perspective, there were 20,000 facilities throughout the country operated by a huge contractor work force, and many communities were transformed to support the herculean nuclear weapons production effort required to win the Cold War. President George H.W. Bush's announcement of the first unilateral nuclear weapons reduction agreement on September 27, 1991, signaled the end of the Cold War and dramatically reduced the need for further nuclear weapons production. This decision had tremendous implications for Oak Ridge and other nuclear weapons related communities across the nation.

Community Reuse Organization of East Tennessee (CROET) – a brief history, part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on December 2, 2008)

The following is quoted from DOE's Legacy Management web site: "...DOE is also helping affected communities by providing community transition grants. Through section 3161 of the Defense Authorization Act of 1993, DOE initiated a community transition program in 1993 to minimize the social and economic impacts of work force restructuring on communities surrounding DOE facilities. The program encouraged affected communities to chart their own economic development future through the creation of Community Reuse Organizations (CROs). A CRO is an organization recognized by DOE that can receive grants for programs that alleviate the impacts of work force restructuring at DOE facilities."

The web site continues, "Since the program's inception, 15 communities have established CROs and Congress has authorized \$284 million in funding for community transition activities. With these funds, the CROs collectively created a total of 42,750 jobs in their communities at a cost of \$6,040 per job." A main emphasis for Oak Ridge in 1993 was the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant site. The K-25 building had been shut down since 1964. The remainder of the gaseous diffusion buildings shut down in 1985. The name of the site had been changed to East Tennessee Technology Park.

DOE Oak Ridge Operations had a major problem, but also saw a huge opportunity. All those uranium contaminated buildings at K-25 and all those large buildings that just might make effective locations for private industry, provided they could be decontaminated. What a mixed bag. What in the world to do?

Well, some individuals did not waste time. Early leaders were Jim Hall, DOE ORO Manager at the time of the inception of the idea and the person who could well be called, "the architect of reindustrialization," Robert Brown, Deputy Manager, who has been a long-standing leader of the reindustrialization effort at ETP - the former K-25 site, and Larry Clark, Assistant Manager for Nuclear Fuel Supply with responsibility for reindustrialization, took full advantage of the opportunity presented to Oak Ridge by the above mentioned Defense Authorization Act initiatives. These gentlemen have worked literally for years to bring about the successes CROET can cite today and can also look forward to in the future. They are to be commended as visionary leaders for Oak Ridge's future.

Next we will look in detail at the formative efforts to create the CROET, the East Tennessee Economic Council's early involvement and some of the early results obtained. We will also examine some of the initial difficulties encountered.

In an April 22, 2004 guest column in The Oak Ridger, Lawrence Young, President and Chief Operating Officer of CROET ended by saying, "...I am only one among many who stand ready to help Oak Ridge embrace the future. I encourage everyone who has an interest in our changing Oak Ridge to be willing to come to the table and to find those areas where we can work together for the benefit of the entire community."

This comment reflects CROET's efforts to take the legacy of World War II, the Cold War and our nation's nuclear weapons complex in Oak Ridge and transform that legacy into facilities and land suitable for the next generation's use, while preserving the history of the heroic efforts that took place there. Our unique history and a dynamic future can go hand in hand and can complement each other.

Community Reuse Organization of East Tennessee (CROET) – a brief history, part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on December 2, 2008)



An aerial photo of the East Tennessee Technology Park's Heritage Center where CROET has focused efforts to attract new industry to Oak Ridge