



Brownfields: Recycling Our Cities

All communities have properties that are abandoned, under-used or have fallen into conditions of blight. When considering Brownfields, too often only industrial “war zones” or inner city neighborhoods in big cities of The Rust Belt come to mind. Brownfields are everywhere, in both urban and rural areas. They come in all sizes. A Brownfield property can be the old former lumberyard; an abandoned gas station; the corner feed mill abandoned in the 1950s or the vacant City lot where the old factory burned down when “Dad was a kid.”

Brownfields Defined

“With certain legal exclusions and additions, the term ‘brownfield site’ means real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant.” - Public Law 107-118 (H.R. 2869) - “Small Business Liability Relief and Brownfields Revitalization Act”. January 11, 2002.

Many properties suffer from the perception of environmental problems. Most have excellent business locations, existing infrastructure, and access to transportation. Due to fear of the unknown, buyers, lenders, and developers pass over these properties for less “risky” property transactions. Merely the fear of environmental contamination and regulatory intervention has been enough to hinder or stop redevelopment of these once vital community areas.

Removing The Fear

Communities and American business are resourceful and capable. When they know the boundaries of a problem, they deal with it. They find solutions with the resources available. It takes information to identify Brownfields properties in a community. It takes information to determine if possible Brownfields properties really do have environmental concerns or to demonstrate problems are merely a perception. Once the environmental issues are identified and measured, communities can begin to deal with any real problems. Assessment Grants from the EPA provide the means by which a community can identify and measure their Brownfields. Problem solving by the community can then begin.

Public Perception And EPA Brownfields Initiative

In recent years, there has been a common joke – “We’re the Government, and we’re here to help you.” In their duty to protect public health and the environment, EPA was often in the public eye only for enforcement actions against business and industry. The polluter still pays. Where public health or the environment stands threatened, the agency will enforce. However, since 1995 EPA’s Brownfields Economic Redevelopment Initiative has proven the “government” really is here to help communities and business. This is demonstrated by EPA grants helping sort the numerous Brownfields properties from those very few that require regulatory intervention. These grants help communities make environmental restoration a manageable part of local redevelopment, separate and complimentary to EPA’s enforcement mission.

