

QUICKNOTES

This PAS QuickNotes was prepared by Erin Musiol, AICP, Senior Program Development and Research Associate at the American Planning Association with assistance from Kate O'Hara, Brownfields Program Manager at the Land of Sky Regional Council.

BROWNFIELD REDEVELOPMENT

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency defines a brownfield as “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.” Brownfields can range in size from a single lot to a multiacre site and are found in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Examples include defunct manufacturing plants and textile mills, auto salvage yards, and abandoned dry cleaners and gas stations.

IMPACTS OF BROWNFIELDS

Brownfields can impact a community's quality of life in various ways. They can reduce the tax base and lower neighboring property values. They diminish the aesthetics of a community, discouraging investment and promoting blight, vandalism, and crime. Contaminated sites can also threaten public health and the environment through polluted soil and impacts to water quality.

Additionally, real or perceived contamination deters developers who may otherwise be willing to put the sites back into use. Instead they develop greenfields, undeveloped areas including farmland, forests, and open spaces. These sites lack infrastructure and multimodal transportation options, increasing costs to the consumer and local governments in the form of increased vehicle-miles traveled (VMT) and infrastructure costs.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO BROWNFIELDS REDEVELOPMENT

Redeveloping brownfield sites can be challenging. The sites are subject to various federal, state, local, and tribal laws and institutional restrictions that can complicate the development process and increase the time and expenses needed to complete the project. These laws and restrictions can vary greatly from place to place. Additionally, because all brownfield sites are different, a detailed site assessment is required to determine the true scope of a project. Although public funding may be available for cleanup, regulatory program guidelines can be confusing and add time to the redevelopment process.

Often, the biggest challenge to brownfield redevelopment is overcoming misconceptions. Fear of costs, complications, delay, or liability associated with pollution can invoke fear in residents, discourage private-sector investors from buying the sites, block local governments from project involvement, and raise concerns among lenders and financiers.

OPPORTUNITIES AND BENEFITS OF BROWNFIELD REDEVELOPMENT

Instead of being viewed solely as liabilities, brownfields should be thought of as opportunities for revitalization and transformation. Brownfields have locational advantages, as they are typically found near city centers and well-established transportation corridors. They often have infrastructure in place enabling them to take advantage of demand for new housing and employment opportunities.

Additionally, cleaning and reusing brownfield sites provides many environmental, economic, and community benefits. Environmental benefits include reducing threats to public health by cleaning up contaminated groundwater or illegal dumping. By providing an alternative to greenfield development, brownfields contribute to air quality improvements from reduction in VMT and protection of valuable open space through the curbing of sprawl.

Economic benefits include an increased tax base and reduced infrastructure and service provision costs for local governments. Additionally, residents benefit from new job opportunities, increased property values, and improved investment in the community.



The city of Conover, North Carolina, utilized a variety of state and federal funding sources to convert a closed furniture manufacturing plant into Conover Station, which houses the city library, Manufacturing Solutions Center, and a multimodal transportation center. (Image credit: Gary Herman)



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Community benefits include eliminating eyesores, reducing blight and threats to public safety, and improving community morale. Also, because brownfields are often disproportionately located in poor, predominantly minority communities, redevelopment addresses social justice issues by bringing hope, investment, and vitality to these communities.

BROWNFIELD REDEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The most effective way to clear up misconceptions and help developers, local officials, and residents overcome the barriers and understand the benefits of brownfield redevelopment is to help them gain a better understanding of the redevelopment process. This includes an understanding of pertinent laws and regulations, available funding mechanisms, and where to go for technical assistance.

Although there are many factors that influence the redevelopment process of a site, a basic community redevelopment process can be summarized in six steps:

- Use a collaborative planning process to **develop a community vision** for how to clean and redevelop the brownfield sites in your community.
- Gather as much information as you can about vacant properties to **identify potential brownfield sites** before conducting a detailed investigation. This information can help developers prioritize and match their goals to available redevelopment opportunities and make it easier and quicker to identify potential liabilities and assets of a given site.
- After a site is identified for redevelopment, an environmental site assessment must be conducted to **assess the level of contamination** at the site.
- If the site is contaminated, then a reuse assessment should be performed to **determine reuse options** for the site before investing in site cleanup.
- Analyze the legal liability, available financing, and compatibility with the end use of the property to **evaluate cleanup options** for the site.
- **Implement a redevelopment plan** that identifies the best reuse and cleanup option given the information identified in the preceding steps.

FUNDING RESOURCES

Federal funding, research, training, and technical assistance for the assessment and cleanup of brownfields are available to local governments through the Small Business Liability Relief and Brownfields Revitalization Act (the "Brownfields Law"). This law, an amendment of the 1980 Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA), or Superfund, also offers certain relief for small businesses from liability under CERCLA.

In addition to the funds available through the Brownfields Law, there are a number of other public and private funding mechanisms available. Local governments should look for ways to partner with federal and state agencies to leverage available funding. Common sources of funding include revolving funds, trust funds, tax increment financing, tax incentives, and public grant programs.

CONCLUSION

Brownfield redevelopment helps our communities grow smarter by addressing the environmental, economic, and community impacts that can result from vacant, contaminated sites. Although there are both perceived and real challenges to redevelopment, the benefits—to local governments, residents, and developers—can often outweigh those challenges. Gaining a greater knowledge and understanding of the redevelopment process, applicable laws and regulations, and available funding mechanisms and technical assistance can help a community revitalize and transform valuable real estate that would otherwise remain abandoned.

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