



Environmental Viewpoint

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EPA's Brownfields Program Increases Opportunities for Construction Projects Nationwide

Part of the Going Green Series...

Saving the Environment and Promoting Construction Along the Way

Ever increasing awareness of environmental issues has fueled efforts to preserve and protect the environment. From mandatory recycling programs and reusable shopping bags to hybrid cars, sensitivity to the environment has become the norm. Often, new environmentally-conscious rules and regulations, such as anti-idling laws, clean diesel initiatives and equipment retro-fit requirements, require those in the construction industry to adapt to new methods of construction and incur additional costs to comply with "green" building requirements. For some, altering well established construction practices in the name of the environment may be more a burden than a boon. Increased social concern with the state of the environment, however, may be creating certain benefits for the construction industry as a whole. This is evident from the progress that has been made in restoring and redeveloping "brownfields" sites across the country – including right here in New England.

Brownfields: Sources of Future Redevelopment

The term "brownfields" refers to properties which, due to the presence of hazardous substances or other contaminants, remain undeveloped and unused. Brownfields are those run-down properties that have remained unchanged for years: properties that have not seen progress or development due to soil, groundwater, and actual building material contamination, which is expensive to remediate and may create a cost prohibitive situation for properties. Not only are brownfields potentially harmful both to the environment and to human health, they can be eyesores and reduce the value of surrounding properties. Further, they are often fiscally delinquent properties – not contributing to the tax roles of their respective communities.

In 1994, the Environmental Protection Agency ("EPA") established a "Brownfields Program" to enable local governments and communities to clean up contami-

nated sites for redevelopment. In 2002, the federal Small Business Relief and Brownfields Revitalization Act became law and authorized the EPA to grant up to \$250 million in funding per year for cleanup of brownfields nationwide. In addition, the law expanded the previous definition of brownfields to apply to sites used for the manufacture and distribution of illegal drugs as well as "mine-scarred" lands and properties contaminated by petroleum.

Under the current Brownfields Program, the EPA awards funding in the form of grants from select pools of applicants to be used in the remediation and restoration of brownfields. In addition to facilitating the remediation of contaminated sites, EPA Brownfields Program funding helps communities assess the nature and extent of contamination at a given site. Certain grants may also be used for job training purposes.

Not only has the Brownfields Program been successful in decreasing the number of brownfields across the

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 country, it has stimulated redevelopment of previously unuseable sites. Once abandoned industrial sites are now becoming residential and commercial centers. As of early 2008, the EPA's Brownfields Program has led to over \$10 billion in cleanup and redevelopment funding nationwide. In addition, the Program has resulted in nearly 50,000 jobs in cleanup, construction and redevelopment. It is apparent that not only has the EPA's efforts to promote brownfields cleanup converted hundreds of previously unused lots into valuable properties, it has created new construction projects and jobs in the construction industry.

New England has also benefited from the EPA's Brownfields Program. The EPA reports that since 1994, it has provided nearly \$170 million in grants to New England cities and towns. Almost \$60 million in brownfields grants have been awarded in Massachusetts alone.

2008 and Beyond: Cleaning the Environment and Stimulating Construction

2008 should see continued progress and redevelopment of brownfields sites. The EPA estimates there are ap-

proximately 450,000 brownfields located in all corners of the country, ready for cleanup and redevelopment. As a result, the EPA announced in April of this year that nearly \$10 million in brownfields grants have been awarded throughout New England. In Massachusetts, the EPA has awarded 14 grants totaling \$2.2 million to eleven communities and agencies to assess and cleanup brownfields. These grants are part of almost \$75 million

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These funds are expected to provide benefits to the construction industry by facilitating new opportunities for development and construction. For example, the EPA reports that the Town of North Brookfield, Massachusetts received a \$200,000 brownfields grant to clean up contaminated property located in the center of the town. According to the EPA, the town expects to redevelop the once
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contaminated property for both retail and commercial uses.

Similarly, the City of North Adams also received a Brownfields grant for 2008, which is anticipated to lead to the construction of residential housing at a previously contaminated brownfields site. The EPA has also awarded funds to the Planning Office for Urban Affairs, Inc. to remediate a property in Haverhill, Massachusetts, which is expected to be the future location of 57 mixed income housing units and commercial space. Similar projects are forecasted for Roxbury and Revere. A Brownfields grant to the Urban Edge Housing Corporation is expected to stimulate the development of affordable housing, retail and office space in Roxbury. In Revere, a 2008 grant of \$200,000 is expected to generate public investment in a "transit-oriented" development project in the Wonderland-Revere Beach area.

These examples illustrate the effects of the EPA's Brownfields Program on the construction industry. Not only has the program facilitated cleanup of once abandoned and contaminated sites, it has stimulated redevelopment of property that had previously gone unused. These efforts have led, and will continue to lead to new projects for the construction industry, ranging from residential housing, to industrial and commercial redevelopment.

Conclusion

The EPA estimates that there are over 450,000 brownfields across the country, ripe for redevelopment. This year, nearly 100 applicants from New England applied for Brownfields grants and of these applicants, eleven were awarded grants in Massachusetts. The EPA's Brownfields Program has expanded greatly since its inception in 1995. When it first started, the EPA awarded funds on a much smaller basis for two-year "pilot" projects throughout the country.

Now, the EPA is empowered to award grants on a much larger scale, affecting communities across the United States. This year, the EPA awarded

\$74 million in grants in 43 states. In the coming years, this number may well continue to rise. To a construction industry that has seen new jobs and over \$10 billion invested in the redevelopment of properties, the expansion and successes of the Brownfields Program is certainly a welcome benefit of construction progress coupled with "going green". With continued federal funding for environmental cleanup of brownfields, hundreds of thousands of previously unusable sites may become ripe for redevelopment. Of all

the byproducts and benefits of recent efforts to save the environment and "go green", increased construction activity may be an understated one.

Information about the Brownfields Program may be found at the EPA's website: <http://www.epa.gov/brownfields/index.html>. ■

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