

Brownfields: Recycling our Community

Mt. Vernon, Illinois | Brownfields Assessment Project

EPA Cooperative Agreement # BF-00E06031 | Fact Sheet #1



All communities have properties that are abandoned, underused, or have fallen into conditions of blight. When considering Brownfields, too often only industrial “war zones” or inner-city neighborhoods come to mind. Brownfields are everywhere. They come in all sizes. Brownfield properties can be former gas stations or convenient marts, the old lumberyard, or the vacant city lot where waste is buried. 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, these 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.

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

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 Brownfield properties in a community. It takes information to determine if possible Brownfield properties really do have environmental concerns or to demonstrate problems are merely a perception. Once the environmental issue is identified and measured, communities can begin to rectify any real problems. Grants from the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) provide the means to a community to assess and measure Brownfields. Once the assessment has been completed, the community can move forward with solving the issues, if any, associated with the property in question.

Public Perception and EPA Brownfields Initiative

With the responsibility to protect public health and the environment, EPA has often been seen in the public eye only for enforcement actions against business and industry. Where public health or the environment stands threatened, the agency will enforce. EPA’s Brownfields Economic Redevelopment Program is here to assist communities and businesses. This is demonstrated by EPA grants that provide the needed resources to sort through the numerous Brownfields properties from those few properties that require regulatory intervention. These grants help communities make environmental restoration a manageable part of local redevelopment.



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Phase I Environmental Site Assessment

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What makes a property a “Brownfields site?” Historical information tells us every property with commercial history doesn’t require environmental cleanup. It’s impractical to go to every **potential** Brownfield and collect samples for identification of chemicals present at the site. Even if money were no object, you still couldn’t test for everything, everywhere on every property. So where does a community begin?

Brownfields Assessment

The Phase I Environmental Site Assessment (ESA) is a preliminary look at a potential Brownfield property. It’s a limited evaluation involving records research and an on-site visual reconnaissance. Phase I ESAs **do not** include sampling or laboratory testing. Phase I ESAs identify whether a recognized environmental condition¹ exists. If a recognized environmental condition is identified, it doesn’t typically indicate whether contamination exists or that cleanup is required. The Phase I ESA report doesn’t require regulatory or other action except in special circumstances of imminent threat to public health. Conducting Phase I ESAs for a Brownfields Assessment project provides essential information to do the following.

- Provide liability protection to owners
- Help decide where actual testing should occur when necessary

Brownfields Liability

The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act and amendments (CERCLA/ Superfund) deem the responsibility of correcting past environmental problems may fall to a current owner or new buyer. The 2002 Small Business Liability Relief and Brownfields Revitalization Act (the Act) provided liability protection to landowners who completed “all appropriate inquiries” prior to purchasing property. This Act is EPA’s recognition that undiscovered conditions can remain hidden until after the land transaction is complete. These inquiries are governed by ASTM (formerly American Society for Testing and Materials) E 1527 which defines standard practices for conducting “all appropriate inquiries”.

ASTM E1527 STANDARD PRACTICE: PHASE I ENVIRONMENTAL SITE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

“the purpose of this practice ... is to define good commercial and customary practice in the United States of America for conducting an environmental site assessment of a parcel of commercial real estate with respect to the range of contaminants within the scope of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA) and petroleum products. as such, this practice is intended to permit a user to satisfy one of the requirements to qualify for the innocent landowner defense.”

¹ Recognized Environmental Conditions are defined by ASTM E 1527 as “the presence or likely presence of any hazardous substances or petroleum products on a property under conditions that indicate an existing release, a past release, or a material threat of release of any hazardous substances or petroleum products into structures on the property or into the ground, groundwater, or surface water of the property.”



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Mt. Vernon's Brownfields Project

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Does Mt. Vernon have brownfields? Mt. Vernon, like most communities, has properties that are abandoned, under-used or blighted. These properties, or Brownfields, are common to all communities, both in rural and urban areas. They can be the former lumberyard, the corner feed mill abandoned in the 1950s, or the vacant City lot where the old factory burned down when "Dad was a kid."

EPA's Brownfields Assessment

EPA's Brownfields Economic Redevelopment Program was created to assist communities and businesses. This is demonstrated by EPA grants that provide the needed resources to sort through the numerous Brownfield properties from those few properties that require regulatory intervention. These grants help communities' brownfields a manageable part of local redevelopment.

The City of Mt. Vernon has received an EPA Brownfields Assessment grant to conduct Phase I Environmental Site Assessments (ESAs) and Phase II ESAs. These assessments are conducted free of charge for qualifying properties in Mt. Vernon.

How Do I Know If My Property (Or a Property I am Interested in Buying) is a Brownfield?

In simple terms, a property is considered a brownfield if contamination – or the possibility of contamination – is interfering with its reuse. These properties could be anything from a former row front store with suspected asbestos, to a former manufacturing facility, to the vacant lot in the middle of downtown. The grant awarded to the City is specifically for sites that have a significant portion of their contamination associated with petroleum products.

The City's grant application to the EPA discussed several brownfield sites/areas that the City would like to assess.

- **South 10th Street Corridor** - This corridor is the primary entrance to the City from the south and gives visitors a negative perception of the community. There are dozens of abandoned businesses and warehouses, vacant commercial sites, former gas stations, and vacant lots of concern in the target area alone.
- **Park Plaza Shopping Center** - Once at the center of the former Car Shop complex, this railroad-servicing facility-turned-shopping-plaza is now abandoned and completely dilapidated. The last tenant of Park Plaza relocated in 2022 due to the deteriorating condition of the building.



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Getting the Public Involved

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It Can't be Done Without YOU

Community opinion and involvement is vital to the success of Brownfields restoration. The EPA Brownfields Project must reach members of the community.

When Brownfields studies identify environmental issues, the solution is always a balance between cost and community benefit. The type of environmental restoration affects the type and amount of cleanup needed, if any. For example, properties restored to business use often require less cleanup than for private home construction. You can help determine the needs of your community as part of these decisions.



In seeking environmental solutions, the project incorporates your ideas in seeking the proper balance between protecting human health and the environment and an overall redevelopment strategy to create jobs, generate tax revenues, and attract new residents and businesses.

How YOU Can Help

The community asks that you get involved. Be a part of balanced solutions by your written or e-mail comments, attending public meetings, or participating in a Brownfields Public Field Day. These activities will assist you to understand the process and help shape the progress of our community's redevelopment efforts.

How YOU Can Get Involved

The EPA requires cities receiving Brownfields grant money to involve members of the community. This occurs by providing opportunities for citizens to educate themselves on Brownfields redevelopment and participate in their community effort. The following opportunities may be available to help engage our citizens in this community effort.

- Public Meetings
- Printed Fact Sheets
- Newspaper Public Notices
- City/Project Website
- City Contact Persons
- Project Public Field Day
- Project Information Exhibits

If you have other ideas about how we can increase community involvement, please let us know!

**Remember: Be a part of our community
Brownfield solutions!**



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Information for Future Citizens

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Families grow, and as they do, they often need more space. Our cities grow in the same way. As more people move into a community, new homes, schools, businesses, and roads are needed to support that growth. For more than 200 years, we have been able to go to the edge of the community and build new buildings for homes and businesses. This continuous growing out away from the center of a community is called “urban sprawl”.

Our planet is very large, but we must think about the future. If we continued to build cities outward, we would eventually use up all the green spaces. Cities would some day grow together, become one big city. Our natural resources would not provide places for animals and plants to live or parks for humans to play.



Some places where our parents and grandparents lived and worked growing up have been abandoned. Many factories and places that used to provide jobs to families are gone or are empty. Some of those places have been polluted or just thought to be polluted. No one wants to build anything new there. These places are called “brownfields.”

The name does not come from their color. Brownfields are property that is the opposite of the green fields and forestlands we have been building on at the edge of our cities. Brownfield properties are usually located near rivers, highways, railroads or people. All these things are necessary for a successful business.



We recycle many things such as plastic, paper, glass, metals, cars, and even computers. Communities and private businesses are now working together to recycle Brownfields. Together with the community, these Brownfield properties are being reused to provide new businesses, jobs, and homes like they did for our grandparents.

The people of the community, including children, must be involved to make the best re-use of Brownfields. **Help recycle Brownfield properties in your community!**



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