

Building Visions of Almost Heaven: An Innovative Program Helps Redevelop Brownfield Sites in West Virginia

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FOCUS WV Brownfields Program

In 2008, the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation funded the Northern West Virginia (WV) Brownfields Assistance Center (i.e., the Center) to create a mini-grant program that encourages brownfield redevelopment in West Virginia. The Center's Foundation for Overcoming Challenges and Utilizing Strengths (FOCUS) WV Brownfields program enables communities to cultivate and implement a redevelopment vision for brownfield properties of strategic community interest. This article describes the FOCUS WV Brownfields program and provides examples of three projects that demonstrate creative and collaborative means toward brownfield redevelopment in West Virginia.

In January 2009, the Center awarded grants and assistance to 15 communities throughout northern West Virginia that identified underutilized sites with prime locations and development potential. These projects were selected to receive \$5,000 for Stage I: Site Analysis and Revitalization Planning. In August 2009, five of the original projects were selected to receive \$12,000 for Stage II: Site Design and Marketing Implementation to increase the site's competitiveness through the implementation of the revitalization plan developed in the first stage. Based on its success in 2009, the program has been reinstated and expanded statewide for 2010.

The FOCUS grant program serves to help communities cultivate and implement a redevelopment vision for brownfield properties of strategic community interest. In Stage I, each community generates a con-

ceptual design for redevelopment, as well as a community outreach plan to solicit input from affected stakeholders. These outreach plans include, for example, a public presentation of the award, as well as an incorporation of stakeholders in the visioning process.

Communities are also offered an economic tool developed by SRA International for the Center to assist in decision making related to redevelopment projects. The Land Use Decision Enhancer Tool serves to inform community strategies for site cleanup and reuse based upon site attributes and market conditions. The cities discussed in two of the case studies in this article (i.e., Weirton and Reedsville) are using this tool. By collecting the inputs necessary to run the tool, these communities have collected much of the data necessary to market their properties. Beyond data collection, the outputs from the tool are informing their redevelopment plans.

This article offers examples of three projects and their accomplishments in this first stage of the grant. The projects depict unique brownfield partnerships that enhance the communities' capacity to engage in community redevelopment through education and entrepreneurship, a key objective of the FOCUS WV Brownfields program.

Case Study 1: Former City Garage, Shinnston, West Virginia

The former Shinnston City Garage is strategically situated in the heart of Shinnston between renovated city basketball courts, new public restrooms, the Little League field, and old city basketball courts. Although actual soil and water contamination is unknown, past use of the property as a municipal garage included vehicle and equipment maintenance, as well as storage of controlled substances such as used oil, herbicides, and pesticides. These potential environmental issues hinder the city's redevelopment of the site. Through the

FOCUS WV Brownfields program, the City of Shinnston seeks to ensure the safe reuse of the site as a park for city residents with recreational and green spaces.

Through the FOCUS program, the city is working with the WV Department of Environmental Protection on environmental sampling of the site to collect information to inform their redevelopment plan. To solicit input for development from key stakeholders, the city crafted community outreach around the local schoolchildren, the future users of the facilities.

The community visioning process with student-aged children was unique to the typical city official's tasks: "I love working on this project . . . beats sewer projects and water complaints any day," claimed a grant contact from the city. To solicit input, the city created maps of the area with an empty space for children to draw or write their vision of the site. Over a period of several days, the city took the maps into classrooms of kindergarten through fifth-grade students to collect their visions for the project. The Center connected the city with West Virginia University's Community Design Team, who provided technical assistance to compile the students' renderings into a unified vision and site plan.

By empowering local schoolchildren in the visioning process, the city created a park plan with community investment. Benefits of the process, however, stretch beyond the scope of the FOCUS grant objectives. The student visioning sessions produced such an upwelling of park development ideas from key stakeholders (i.e., student-aged children), the city envisions using the information in future decisions about city park development.

Case Study 2: Weirton Rail Yard, Weirton, West Virginia

The Weirton Rail Yard project encompasses 72 acres of level land with 22 rail-

road tracks adjacent to state and federal highways and the Ohio River in Weirton. Since 1909, the rail-yard site has served as an industrial steel transfer point until the property was slated for divestment in 2007. This site has documented aboveground petroleum tank and hazardous waste issues related to the rail yard that hinder the site's further development. A modern intermodal freight terminal is envisioned that could move goods from the Ohio River via rail or truck, thereby reducing stress on land transportation systems.

The Brooke-Hancock Regional Planning and Development Council (i.e., the Council) has led a regional approach in the rail yard's redevelopment. With former steel properties totaling 1,700 acres in the region, the rail yard is part of a larger revitalization effort. The Council has received \$600,000 in assessment grants from the United States (US) Environmental Protection Agency since 2003, which enabled the Council and its 20-member task force to inventory and prioritize 31 sites and conduct Phase I and II site assessments. The Council continues to look for solutions to the redevelopment challenges posed by the rail yard. Through the FOCUS WV Brownfields program, the Council seeks to analyze the site and create a financial revitalization plan for the underutilized rail yard.

The Council's FOCUS project has leveraged other technical and financial resources, creatively included stakeholder groups, and connected with other community initiatives. The city planners, for example, have identified the rail yard as a targeted redevelopment area. To incorporate stakeholder perspectives, the Council leveraged other funding opportunities. With help from the Center, the Council received a grant from the WV Development Office to employ key stakeholders in interactive visioning workshops. During these workshops, a facilitator guides participants to draw their vision of their community's potential. After attendees describe their drawings, the facilitator helps integrate multiple ideas for an attending artist to render a graphic depicting their common vision. A vision in graphic form, rather than potentially contentious words, is attracting diverse stakeholders to the project, including the WV Port Authority, the WV Depart-

ment of Transportation, and the US Army Corps of Engineers. The Council continues to leverage additional technical and financial resources through the substantial resources of various project stakeholders.

Case Study 3: Former J&B Filling Station, Reedsville, West Virginia

The former J&B Filling Station is a vacant gasoline station at the intersection of state routes and a county road in the center of Reedsville. An abandoned unmonitored underground gasoline storage tank is located on site, and a nearby dilapidated structure is an eyesore on the corner of one of the most traveled intersections in the county. Based on the community and site connections to the adjacent Deckers Creek watershed, the nonprofit organization Friends of Deckers Creek applied to the FOCUS WV Brownfields program. Through the program, Friends of Deckers Creek seeks to develop and enhance a vision for redevelopment of a highly visible area in the city of Reedsville.

Friends of Deckers Creek facilitated meetings and fostered partnerships with Reedsville's town council, the private landowner, and community members to develop a revitalization vision. A series of meetings, which included an invited representative from the state Division of Highways, assessed the site and its history and worked to create a vision beyond the targeted site for a revitalized intersection. One meeting challenged attending community members to draw their various visualizations of what the intersection could be. A local landscape architect with the organization Friends of Deckers Creek compiled the community's drawings and descriptions, old photographs, and the common mission for the intersection to create a rendering of a shared vision for the intersection. Alongside visioning efforts, the Center worked with Friends of Deckers and the landowner to identify assistance from the WV Department of Environmental Protection to facilitate tank removal on the property.

The facilitated meetings helped create a cohesive community group aware of their community's assets. The process has led to the formation of a community vision for the revitalization well beyond the initial

scope of the FOCUS site to the rest of the adjacent intersection.

Background of Brownfield Centers in West Virginia

In 2005, the WV state legislature recognized the lost economic and social value in abandoned contaminated lands or *brownfields*. To support community efforts to revitalize the state's brownfields, the legislature created two Brownfields Assistance Centers (i.e., the Northern and Southern) to collaborate with communities and the state Department of Environmental Protection. The Center assists communities in identifying technical assistance from the WV Department of Environmental Protection, which provides brownfield assistance through its Division of Land Restoration. "These communities are helping us to achieve our agency's mission. Through remediation and redevelopment of the state's brownfield sites, these efforts can provide much needed suitable land for development and increase conservation of open spaces and greenfields," said Ken Ellison, director of the WV Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Land Restoration.

The WV Brownfields Assistance Centers empower communities to plan and implement brownfield redevelopment projects throughout the state. The Centers provide education, outreach, and assistance to communities. The Centers help groups solicit grants and low-interest loans for site assessments, cleanups, and environmental job training, and support community planning efforts. The Northern WV Brownfields Assistance Center is located at the WV Water Research Institute at the West Virginia University National Research Center for Coal and Energy; the WV Brownfields Assistance Center at Marshall University is located in the Center for Environmental, Geotechnical and Applied Sciences. For more information, visit <http://www.wvbrownfields.org>.

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