

Steubenville Herald-Star and Weirton Daily Times

Brownfield work reinvents region's future

August 29, 2010 - By JOHN BROWN, BHJ executive director

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(Editor's note: This is the second in a two-part series prepared in part by the Herald-Star staff in cooperation with the Brooke-Hancock-Jefferson Metropolitan Planning Commission and the Jefferson County Regional Planning Commission. The series aims to illustrate how community leaders and private industry are creating regional job opportunities through the discovery of mothballed commercial and industrial properties.)

Environmental clean-up and the creation of jobs are not contradictions. For the Brooke-Hancock-Jefferson Region they are inevitably linked. You can make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. The premise is simple. Key project stoppers for the redevelopment of mothballed commercial-industrial sites, frequently called "brownfields," are cost and risks. Reduce these unknowns and investors will follow.

Through the financial assistance of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the dramatically improved methods of evaluating environmental risk, this is exactly what has happened in comparable communities, including Pittsburgh. Regionally, BHJ and the Jefferson County Regional Planning Commission hope to transplant these successes to a similar end.

Surprises are sometimes encountered, such as previously unknown underground storage tanks or buried drums. When unexpected circumstances arise, the cost for clean-up increases, and as a result, the cleanup work may be delayed or stopped entirely. To avoid unexpected contamination and increased costs, many investors insist that a site be thoroughly investigated prior to commencing remedial cleanup activities.

In 2009, buoyed by a \$1 million U.S. EPA grant, the Jefferson County Regional Planning Commission initiated a brownfield assessment campaign for Jefferson County. With the cooperation of property owners, the regional planning commission has prioritized seven hazardous waste sites and five petroleum sites.

Rich Fender, regional planning commission planner and brownfield coordinator, states, "Brownfield assessments represent great potential for economic development. The

banking community requires any property transfer to include a brownfield assessment. The JCRP assessment program picks up this cost. To the property owner, the JCRP program can minimally provide a \$3,000 saving and over a \$20,000 savings for larger sites."

Through similar federal EPA support and a 20-member task force, BHJ has maintained a property assessment campaign in Brooke and Hancock counties. Since 2003, through its assessment program, the BHJ Task Force has saved property owners more than \$100,000 in development cost.

John Brown, BHJ executive director, states, "Brownfield assessments support job creation. They overcome a development hurdle; however, they are one in a line of necessary steps to promote, target, negotiate and attract a company. We're constantly in touch with our local economic development agencies. While we're a partner in job development, we're not the first contact for new jobs. Brownfield assessments further create a product called developable land with certainty and low risk."

To many states like West Virginia, brownfield programs are in their infant state. With limited brownfield experience, local insurance liability companies and bankers may be pushed beyond their comfort level. Local brownfield programs need to communicate and illustrate how standard operating procedures can change for the benefit of all parties. In many cases, the success of a local brownfield assessment stands on the shoulders of private property owners. These owners need to understand their participation advantages. With the availability of other funds like federally sponsored clean-up dollars and a more informed profit knowledge through environmental assessments, private property owners have increasingly stepped up to the plate.

The next Jefferson County Regional Planning Commission public meeting to consider brownfield sites will be at 2 p.m. Wednesday on the second floor of The Towers building, 500 Market St. in Steubenville. The next BHJ public meeting to consider sites will be held Sept. 14 at noon on the second floor of the Weirton State Office Building. The meetings are open to the public. Those attending may introduce potential brownfield sites.

For information, contact the Jefferson County Regional Planning Commission office at (740) 283-8568 or the BHJ office at (304) 797-9666.

(Brown holds a doctorate in public policy making from the University of Pittsburgh. He became executive director of the BHJ in August 1998.)

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The Brooke-Hancock Brownfield Task Force, a 20-member advisory group for brownfield assessment, has saved local property owners over \$100,000 in assessment costs. From left to right, hidden/ Mark Zatezalo (Weirton Redevelopment Authority), Jim Mosby (West Virginia Development Office), Pat Kirby (Northern West Virginia Brownfield Assistance Center) and Don Donell (Starvaggi Industries). Photo courtesy of the Brooke-Hancock-Jefferson Metropolitan Planning Commission.