

Brownfields in the Green Mountain State

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“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet.

Looking across the Black River at the refurbished building that used to house the former Fellows Gear Shaper factory, the last adjective to pop into my mind was “brown” or “field.” After accompanying Governor Shumlin to Springfield this past September on a glorious autumn day, it was a pleasure to see this revitalized downtown building. Once completed, the beautifully restored 19th century factory building will hold medical offices, restaurants, shops and more. Along with Governor Shumlin, I was there with Agency of Natural Resources Secretary Deb Markowitz and Agency of Commerce and Community Development Secretary Lawrence Miller to celebrate the award of several U.S. Environmental Protection Agency grants to help Vermont communities clean up similar sites across the state.

These sites are referred to as “brownfields,” a name that does them an injustice. Whoever coined this term missed the opportunity to recognize that redeveloped properties in downtowns are an excellent way to be “green” and to make some “green” in the process.

Names aside, as beautiful as Vermont is, it may be surprising to learn that our state is also home to many properties contaminated as a result of historical uses. Brownfields can be difficult to redevelop, since the perceived risk of being held responsible for possible environmental contamination may discourage investment in their revitalization. Instead these properties and buildings deteriorate, becoming unsightly liabilities for the communities where they are located.

For the developers of these sites, brownfields can generate a fair amount of green. While it may take a bit longer to work through the required steps to ensure that public health and environmental risks are managed, sites with low or moderate levels of contamination can turn a tidy profit once redeveloped. Even some sites with more significant contamination can become profitable given the level of available federal, state, regional and local support.

For communities, finding ways to encourage development in their downtowns provides many benefits. Removing the barriers to redevelopment of brownfields returns properties to the tax rolls, improves adjacent property values and reduces the risk of suburban sprawl. Often, redeveloping existing structures preserves historic and architecturally significant buildings that have influenced the development pattern of an area. Redeveloped brownfields almost always create jobs, first during the construction phase and then again as businesses, restaurants, health services and housing take the place of once abandoned and blighted space in the heart of the community.

On the other end of the spectrum, reusing existing space and structures preserves open space and working landscapes. Redeveloping in central locations reduces emissions of greenhouse gases by

limiting the miles that people need to travel to work, shop or recreate. These projects are win-win for the residents; a liability is transformed to create a more livable, more sustainable community.

It was with this in mind that Governor Shumlin announced a joint effort of the Agency of Commerce and Community Development and the Agency of Natural Resources to encourage redevelopment of brownfield sites in our communities that day in Springfield. This new effort will increase coordination between state and federal agencies, regional development corporations, planning commissions, municipal representatives and private sector developers. This team approach will simplify and fast-track brownfield revitalization projects that participate in the program and ensure that issues are identified and resolved without undue delay.

With better communication between federal, state, regional and local officials, there will be less cost to the project developer and less time spent waiting for the necessary approvals. Selected sites will receive priority funding from the state and coordinated and timely permitting. The overarching goal of this initiative is to get redevelopment projects completed – faster, cheaper and easier – so that communities that host these properties can take advantage of all of the benefits of a revitalized downtown center.

To be successful, this effort will require collaboration among developers, lenders, insurers, and federal, state and community leaders. Multiple professions will need to be engaged including planners, scientists, engineers and attorneys. In addition, this effort will require participation from regional planning commissions and regional development corporations. Ultimately, the success of brownfield redevelopment will depend on how well all of these players work together.

Vermont can be a model for this kind of cooperation given our deep and commonly held understanding of the close relationship between our economic vitality and our environmental health. The redevelopment of brownfields, poorly named though they may be, represent an exciting opportunity to improve the lives of Vermont residents and the resilience and livability of our communities in this Green Mountain state.