

News

Brownfields Forever

Bridgeport has loads of contaminated industrial sites that defy development, but city officials are diligently chipping away at the challenge of making them useful again

By Daniel D'Ambrosio

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On a recent muggy summer afternoon, I took a tour of Bridgeport brownfields with Ed Lavernoich, the city's deputy director of planning and economic development. Before we left, we pored over a city map, plotting the former industrial sites that make up the city's brownfields as Lavernoich grew more and more animated about the challenge of dealing with the contamination left behind.

"You can tell I'm amped up — let's go!" he said, striding out of the meeting room.

Brownfields are the sites of industrial businesses, ranging from munitions factories to metal scrap yards, which have gone kaput, leaving behind a smorgasbord of chemicals and other contaminants that make the property unusable until somebody cleans it up.

"Nobody has more far-reaching or greater magnitude of problems with brownfields than Bridgeport," says Lavernoich. "It's kind of amazing how much the problem of urban brownfields impacts so many aspects of American life, everything from poverty and public health to the destruction of natural habitat because people wanted to avoid these problems in the inner city."

Graham Stevens, brownfields coordinator for the state Department of Environmental Protection, says Bridgeport is one of the most active communities in the state when it comes to dealing with brownfields.

"Bridgeport has a long history with brownfield redevelopment that goes back to when the term 'brownfield' was coined in the early 1990s by the Environmental Protection Agency," Stevens says.

Stevens points out the term does not apply solely to Connecticut's urban centers.

"I think people need to think of the corner gas station idle for years as a brownfield," says Stevens. "They need to think of the mill up on the river. Just about every village in Connecticut had some sort of industrial past. Mills were built around water, and around the mills housing was developed."

Lavernoich has compiled a list 45 known or suspected brownfields in Bridgeport as of June 2009, along with a summary of their present condition and funding needs. The list is far from comprehensive, and on more than half of the properties funding requirements are listed as "Unknown, not fully disclosed."

"We have a list that's a work in progress comprised of properties we're dealing with directly that are city-owned, or that we have some knowledge of that are privately-owned," says Lavernoich. "It's not meant to be an all-encompassing list. There are probably several hundred properties in town that exceed state standards for contamination for certain types of contaminants."

Lavernoich is well aware people don't like it when city government starts putting together lists of properties.

"We didn't put anybody on that list unless we had information in our possession and verifiable sources there are conditions on the property that potentially make it a brownfield," he says. "Some owners are working with us actively. We would like that to increase."

To that end, the city is convening a brownfields summit next month they hope will bring together property owners, regulators and interested citizens.

"We hope property owners will say, 'The city has experience with this, they have identified resources on the technical services side and funding side that will help me; I'm not going to ignore this problem, I'm going to try to find a way to move my property forward,'" said Lavernoich.

The first stop on our tour was Went Field near the train tracks in the city's West End, where Elaine Ficarra, the city's communications director who was also along for the ride, recalled how decades earlier it could be dangerous to slide into base on the softball field. You never knew what might be lurking just below the surface of the dirt.

Long before it was a neighborhood ballpark, Went Field was a winter home for P.T. Barnum's circus. After Barnum was through with it, it



Daniel D'Ambrosio photo

The biggest building on the American Fabric brownfield site comes down, a move some saw as a mistake

became the site of a printing and engraving plant and a plating facility. When those businesses went under, they left behind a variety of contaminants and a collection of "gross, disgusting old factory buildings," says Ficarra.

Today, Went Field holds a manicured ball field, bathroom facilities, basketball courts, a lined running track, a soccer field and a collection of pavilions for picnics. The city still has to monitor contaminated groundwater deep underground at the site, but the water is not thought to be a threat to Long Island Sound or any other waterways.

It took \$4 million to clean up and contain the contamination, tear down the old factory buildings and build the new park — money that Lavernoich had to piece together from eight different sources, including state, federal and private funders. Everyone from the Environmental Protection Agency to J.P. Morgan Chase was involved.

"Having eight different funding sources, as far as I can tell, was unparalleled," says Lavernoich. "I've been to local conferences and conferences in Washington, D.C., and no one else can point to a project, or knows of another brownfield project, that attracted eight sources of funding."

But it's not the funding scheme that really matters at Went Field. It's the effect the resulting work has had on the neighborhood. Kids were filtering into the park and onto the basketball courts from every direction while we were there.

"People take far greater pride in the ball field now that there aren't abandoned factory buildings next door," says Lavernoich. "That's a point that applies to the whole town when you get rid of blighted influences. Certain properties take entire neighborhoods down."

On the way to our next stop we passed by Bridgeport's new train and bus terminals, built two years ago. Lavernoich says it's essential for a city to invest in infrastructure to send the right signal to developers.

"You have to make strategic public investments in order for private investments to follow," he says. "If you're not making public investments, everybody thinks you're letting the infrastructure go to pot."

Yonkers-based developer Jason Friedland was willing to invest \$3 million in a large brownfield on Connecticut Avenue that had been the American Fabric complex since the turn of the century. The city foreclosed on the property when the original owner failed to pay taxes for 10 years, and Friedland's Westrock Development, LLC ended up with the winning bid in a request for proposals.

He immediately faced two major problems with the property. First, the entire complex was heated by an ancient, patched-up boiler.

"It's the most inefficient way to heat a property you can imagine," said Friedland. "The rent roll was around \$500,000 and the heating bill was around \$500,000."

Second, the spaces in the half-dozen buildings making up the complex were not rentable as configured — they were too big — and there was a lack of loading docks and loading doors. Friedland has broken one 40,000-square-foot building into five separate spaces ranging from 4,500 to 12,000 square feet. He has added loading docks and doors. And he is tearing down a 60,000-square-foot, four-story building to provide access to two other single-story buildings and improve traffic flow on the lot.

"The hardest part about bringing down this building was the peer pressure of everyone calling me an idiot," said Friedland. "It's 60,000 square feet, but there's just zero market for multi-story industrial space."

Another four-story building at the front of the property was spared, however, when a community of artists already renting space there was able to convince Friedland they could fill the building with more artists.

It looks like it's going to work. There are about two dozen artists occupying the third, fourth, and part of the second floors, ranging from quilt makers to painters to photographers. There are only about half a dozen spaces left on the second floor. Friedland has other plans for the first floor — perhaps a distributor or some other wholesale business.

"We're putting in new lighting everywhere. People love the lighting," says Friedland. "Their toilets wouldn't flush. We put in new toilets."

Brechin Morgan is a painter on the fourth floor who was among the first to rent space in the building that once housed the executive offices of American Fabric. He says Friedland's willingness to give the artist's community a shot was a relief to everyone involved.

"These guys saved our ass, O.K.?" says Morgan.

The 16-foot ceilings and 10-foot windows that allow light to flood into his studio make the space an artist's dream. Morgan has added a loft where he has an office and library. On the main level, dozens of Morgan's paintings, many with a nautical theme, reach high up the towering walls. Outside his window, giant excavators continue to gnaw away at the doomed 60,000-square-foot building.

Lavernoich says Westrock has successfully mitigated brownfields on many projects in the tri-state region — he checked with the regulatory agencies involved. That's why the city was willing to place \$1 million of the \$3 million purchase price in escrow to help pay for the work to deal with the contamination.

"People may question some of the strategy but keeping (the property) in one capable person's hands is a big deal, and we knew they had a track

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record," says Lavernoich. "There are a lot of brownfields in this town, and long after I'm gone people will be dealing with these issues. It's a war with individual battles. Let's face it — individual properties can take down entire neighborhoods. We're always looking for strategic properties to see if we can turn them around."

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