

Ann Arbor News “Your World” column submission for 10-17-05:

Brownfields Redevelopment in Washtenaw

Washtenaw County’s population is projected to reach over 410,000 residents by 2020, an increase of twenty-seven percent from 2000. Development to accommodate this rapid increase can result in loss of the valuable agricultural lands, open spaces, and natural features that make Washtenaw County a desirable place to live.

A “Catch-22” situation exists: there are underutilized sites within our urban areas that could be redeveloped, yet they remain vacant due to suspected contamination. Although their clean-up would revitalize the community and attract new investment, developers avoid them for fear of incurring liability for contamination found at the site.

These sites are called “brownfields” (as opposed to “greenfields,” which are areas not previously developed). There are 24 confirmed contaminated sites in Washtenaw County, and others are suspected but not confirmed. They include abandoned gas stations, dry cleaners, and a former landfill.

It is estimated that there are more than 600,000 brownfields in the U.S. Cleaning up these sites makes urban areas healthier and more attractive. And redeveloping sites where streets and utilities already exist is more efficient—it helps to ease the pressure to develop greenfields in outlying areas, thus slowing the rate of urban sprawl. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that for every acre of brownfields that is redeveloped, 4.5 acres of undeveloped open space are saved.

Cleaning up brownfields increases local tax bases and facilitates job growth. EPA numbers show that redeveloping brownfields has created 25,000 new jobs nationally, and has spurred additional private investment—for every dollar spent, an additional \$2.48 has been invested.

The federal government has provided a major boost to Washtenaw County’s brownfield redevelopment efforts through a \$1.2 million EPA Revolving Loan Fund. The money is available to lend at low interest rates to landowners (as long as they are not the party responsible for the contamination) to clean up contaminated properties. The fund is self-sustaining—it “revolves” by using loan repayments to provide new loans.

As part of this program, \$150,000 is available for grants that do not need to be repaid. Sites eligible for grants must be owned by non-profit or public entities, their use being for the “greater good of the community.”

Examples of clean-up measures which may be paid for with these loans or grants:

- Installation of fences, warning signs, drainage controls, berms, dikes or impoundments.
- Drainage or closing of lagoons.
- Excavation/removal or capping of contaminated soils.
- Use of chemicals to retard the spread of the contamination.
- Removal of containers that may contain hazardous substances.
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The EPA has also given Washtenaw County a \$200,000 grant specifically to identify and assess properties which are contaminated with petroleum or petroleum products. For information on how to nominate a property for a petroleum contamination assessment, or to apply for a Revolving Loan or Grant, visit www.brownfields.ewashtenaw.org, or call 734.222.3834.

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