

Why is Wood-Land-Lakes Interested in Converting Brownfields?

by Mike Yoder, Wood-Land-Lakes Land Trust Chairman

One of the keys to protecting and preserving our community's most valuable asset, farmland, is to create and maintain livable urban areas. Cities, towns, residential areas, business zones, and industrial zones need to be well-planned in order to utilize the land as efficiently as possible. However, because America is a vast land, we have never faced the same land availability constraints that many other countries in the world face. It has always been cheaper and easier to move into a greenfield area to build new, rather than deconstruct, clean up, or redesign an old, outdated, or polluted site. We have always had plenty of land and the market economics of limited planning and zoning ordinances make greenfield development much more attractive for business investors.

This concept of plenty has resulted not only in urban residential sprawl but also industrial and manufacturing sprawl, leaving in its wake abandoned downtown business districts and industrial areas. Many times these industrial sites have existing ground or ground water pollution problems because the businesses operated prior to environmental regulatory operating rules.

It is challenging for many communities to adopt strict planning rules; thereby, forcing brownfield or abandoned properties to be redeveloped before new greenfield areas are approved for any type of expansion. These communities find themselves at an economic disadvantage because the brownfield areas are too expensive to redevelop by private businesses. Private industry always has a choice of where to locate or where to expand - that choice is many times driven by the basic cost of land and construction. Unless a brownfield area can be made to be as cost efficient to locate to as a greenfield area, companies will choose communities with greenfield areas ready for development and avoid the brownfield areas.

In recent years, the value of farmland has increased because many communities now desire to maintain open space to preserve or create a more livable community. Also affecting farmland value may simply be the pure economic driver of a hungry world and the need to double food production in the next 40 years - with the current amount of farmland available. Additionally, the concept of making our cities more livable and a growing understanding that we need to create more sustainable living patterns, communities are now focusing more resources on brownfield redevelopment activities. Federal and local resources are being committed to these efforts.

The result is old abandoned manufacturing sites are experiencing a rebirth, old residential neighborhoods are being renovated, and communities are once again learning the value of a vibrant downtown district. The most critical and important result is valuable farmland is no longer being turned into manufacturing or residential areas, just because it was the easier and less expensive land to convert.♦

Brownfields Grant Awarded

Wood-Land-Lakes RC&D was one of several partners working with **Region III-A Development & Regional Planning Commission** to secure an EPA brownfields assessment grant. The nearly \$1 million grant will be administered through the **Northeast Indiana Economic Development District**.

The local **Brownfields Assessment Coalition** will be concentrating on hazardous substance assessments, petroleum assessment, and will also assist with the remediation and redevelopment planning of brownfields in northeast Indiana. "We don't anticipate a release of funds from EPA until after October and then we will identify and prioritize the assessments," said **Kristine Christlieb**, Community Development Planner with Region IIIA. "After the sites are determined and given permission by property owners to proceed with the assessments, we will work with them to administer the grants as needed," Christlieb added.

"This is an excellent example of how greater partnerships and collaboration can and will benefit the regional economy and quality of life in northeast Indiana," said **David Koenig**, Executive Director for Region III-A.♦