

## More Than Brownfield Redevelopment, It's Community Building!

Each year, nationwide, hundreds of communities apply and compete for U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) grants to assess, cleanup and redevelop Brownfield sites. Out of this year's pool of applicants, 172 communities were selected across the country to receive 279 grants, and only 5 were chosen from Michigan; Envirologic authored the St. Clair County Brownfield Coalition's successful submittal. EPA's grant awards support both urban and rural communities in their efforts to address their brownfields concerns. Michigan's total award (\$2.4 million) was the highest total dollars awarded in Region 5. Michigan continues to fare well in this program, which reflects the robust legislation and unique tools that are available to support brownfield redevelopment. Unfortunately, the federal resources dedicated to redevelopment continue to decline.

The application process for the EPA Brownfield Assessment, Cleanup and Revolving Loan Fund Grants has become extremely competitive. During a recent "debrief" on an unsuccessful application, the EPA representative indicated that he had no major comments and the application scored extremely high to the point of being ½ a point or one point below the award threshold score. The EPA representative did not have any suggestions for improving the application for future application rounds other than make sure you review the new guidelines and definitely resubmit. In many cases, it does take several application rounds to be successful.

With all of this "positive news," should your community still consider applying for EPA Brownfield Grant Funds? Absolutely! However, you need to ***Plan! Collaborate! and Leverage!*** From our years of experience, we have a few suggestions to improve your chances for a successful application:

- If you have received Brownfield grants in the past, consider an alternative organization within your community to serve as the lead applicant so that the EPA will recognize the "new" contender.
- Consider developing coalitions with other organizations, as it demonstrates the collaborative nature of the community and broadens the benefit that would be received if awarded.
- Begin planning, organizing and educating your various community stakeholders including the business members, i.e., banks, attorneys, developers, etc.
- Seek other funding and/or support to begin the process of identifying existing and potential brownfield sites in your community.

- Develop and implement a plan to address existing and potential brownfield sites. Utilize and leverage in-kind resources and expertise, i.e. planning departments, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), health department, County Land Bank Authority, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), to better plan, understand, educate and lead meetings related to known or perceived sites in your community.
- Consider utilizing the free resources offered by the Technical Assistance to Brownfield Communities (TAB) to conduct meetings and design charrettes focused on problematic sites and corridors in your community.
- If you have known contamination issues such as regional groundwater or lead contamination in a community that may represent a health risk for area residents, consider contacting the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). They have free resources to conduct health assessments in your communities.
- Take advantage of the Michigan Association of Counties (MAC) Grant Services expertise and support.
- Reach out to the MDEQ for funding considerations on sites that are a threat to your community. The MDEQ does have funding available to address certain sites with petroleum contamination, as well as other contamination that may be affecting groundwater and surface water in your community. The MDEQ also has limited grant and loan funds that can be used to redevelop sites of contamination, especially if there is a proposed development for the site.
- The Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) has programs to assist with the redevelopment of blighted, historic or functionally obsolete structures in addition to other tools.

How will doing the above activities help with the success of your EPA Brownfield Grant application? First, you energize the community to address brownfields in your area. Applications that demonstrate your community has a plan in motion, with some successes, are well received. If you can show that your community has dedicated funding and/or in-kind resources to work on your plan for redevelopment, this too makes for a stronger application. The EPA wants to know that you (and they) will be successful in working with the grant funds. They want you to be focused on a program that is not totally reliant on a developer walking through the door. They want to see partnerships that demonstrate a united front, jointly committed to tackling a public challenge.

Additionally, if you are not awarded grant funds this round, you now have a plan in motion propelling your redevelopment goals for the community. Many communities become discouraged when grant funding is not received. However, communities are pleasantly surprised when the planning and rallying efforts are rewarded with private investment and interest. Grant funds can be a tremendous kick-start to programs, especially in communities



that are struggling financially. Nonetheless, grant funds are becoming scarcer and cannot always be relied on for support. Community engagement remains an integral component of the brownfield redevelopment process. Brownfield Redevelopment can be considered community building, which requires an abundance of strategies, patience and perseverance to build coalitions, educate, and grow awareness in the communities.

For most communities, brownfield redevelopment entails more than just the remediation of a blighted or contaminated plot of land. It is important that partners recognize the enduring impact brownfield projects have on neighborhoods, communities, and entire regions. The impact is more than cosmetic, as projects have an impact on health and safety, the local economy and the environment. In fact, many of these outcomes take place:

- Increased positive perception and community pride
- Removal of blighted curbside eyesores
- Public health and safety
- Improved property values and tax base
- Improved odds of attracting or retaining talent
- Job creation
- Enhanced investment by the private sector
- Attracting local, home-grown entrepreneurs and investors

Put your plan in motion and seek any incremental success, even if they are small ones. Michigan has one of the best and most successful brownfield programs in the country. The tools and resources that are available continue to be improved upon and allow significant flexibility to a redevelopment project. The EPA has recognized this strength over the years, and Michigan has been rewarded accordingly. However, the funding pot continues to shrink and is being spread more equitably around the country. To be successful with a grant award, your community must actively implement a plan. A call to action will be rewarded with a positive reaction.....just be patient and persistent.

If you have questions, please contact our Envirologic Brownfield Team led by Jeff Hawkins. He can be reached by phone at 800.272.7802 or by email at [jhawkins@envirologic.com](mailto:jhawkins@envirologic.com).

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