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Brownfields sites helping developers transform land

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As the Phoenix metropolitan area continues its rapid expansion, land close to the urban center is becoming an even more precious commodity.

Yet if you drive through the area, you'll see plenty of properties that look abandoned or underused. Many of those are brownfields, unused or underused properties where expansion or redevelopment is complicated by real or perceived environmental contamination.

Redevelopment of those brownfields sites can be an expensive undertaking.

Because of potential environmental contamination at brownfields sites, such properties must be assessed and — if necessary — cleaned up before redevelopment can begin. That added about \$30 million to the cost of Tempe Marketplace, but developers saw the potential.

Sometimes, however, assessment and cleanup expenses exceed the value of the land.

That's often what causes land owners to abandon the sites. It also can be hard to convince prospective buyers to purchase property they may have to clean up.

That combination leaves many polluted or potentially polluted sites unused, underused, or abandoned.

But successful brownfields redevelopment projects demonstrate that, with a little help, developers are willing to invest in turning brownfields sites into attractive, productive developments.

"Brownfields redevelopment is a win-win for any community with property that has productive commercial value but is contaminated," said Arizona Department of Environmental Quality Director Steve Owens. "It helps the community by getting rid of the contamination and by putting the property back into productive use," he said.

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That was the case for Trend Homes. The residential developer was hesitant to risk buying a brownfield property that involved substantial cleanup cost. So the Phoenix Brownfields Land Recycling Program agreed to assume remediation costs over a negotiated amount.

The 24th Street and Southern Avenue site, now is home to the Copper Leaf residential subdivision, a 750-home, mixed-income community.

The Phoenix Brownfields Land Recycling Program has assisted 19 private sector projects and 19 public redevelopment projects since its inception, said Phoenix Brownfields Project Manager Rosanne Sanchez.

The bond-funded program's current project — Riverview Business Park — involves redevelopment of a former landfill at 13th Street and Riverview Drive within the Rio Salado Beyond the Banks area.

Riverview Business Park LLC, which is developing the property into 60 office/warehouse condominium units, received a \$73,000 grant to help with cleanup, Sanchez said.

Riverview Business Park Development Manager Jim Vance said that once he had completed a soil assessment, the decision to develop the property was an easy one.

"The location is exceptional, with industrial zoning, easy freeway access, and proximity to Phoenix's Sky Harbor airport," Vance said. He expects construction to begin within the next few months.

The Phoenix Brownfields Land Recycling Program also assists other city departments with public brownfields redevelopment.

One example is a proposed neighborhood park at 32nd Avenue and McDowell Road, the former site of a trucking operation and compressed gas manufacturing facility. The Phoenix Brownfields Program provided more than \$1 million in bond funds from the 2000 Phoenix Citizens Bond Program to purchase the site and to conduct environmental investigations.

Phoenix is not the only city pursuing brownfields redevelopment.

The city of Glendale recently launched a public outreach campaign to assess the need for brownfields redevelopment assistance.

According to Kathy Chaberski at Glendale's Environmental Resources department, the city is using its \$200,000 EPA assessment grant as a measuring tool to see if there is a need for brownfields redevelopment assistance within the city.

The state also is involved in brownfields redevelopment. In addition to administering a \$1 million revolving loan fund for brownfields redevelopment projects in Tucson and Phoenix, the ADEQ conducts brownfields assessments using EPA grant funds.

Owens said that this fiscal year, the agency has \$250,000 to identify potential environmental contamination and possibly conduct small cleanup operations at brownfields sites.

Since the inception of ADEQ's brownfields program, the department has facilitated redevelopment at two sites, one in Winslow and the other in Yuma County.

Opportunities for brownfields redevelopment are on the rise, said Vance. "Without a doubt, as Phoenix continues to grow, more and more opportunities for brownfield redevelopment will surface," he said.

Get connected

Phoenix Brownfields Land Recycling Program: phoenix.gov/BROWNFLD/brownfld.html.

Glendale Brownfields Assessment Program:
www.ci.glendale.az.us/environmentalresources/brownfields.cfm.

Arizona Department of Environmental Quality:
www.azdeq.gov/environ/waste/cleanup/brownfields.html#ref.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: www.epa.gov/region9/waste/brown/index.html.