

growth & development

By Eva Moore

Brownfields Grants Nurture Economic Development

EPA Funds Clear Way for Property Re-Use

The EPA is really loving Columbia right now," Fred Delk, executive director of the Columbia Development Corporation, recently told City Council.

The reason the Environmental Protection Agency is so happy, Delk says, is that Columbia's brownfields initiatives are doing exactly what they're supposed to.

A brownfield site is property that might be contaminated by chemicals or other hazards. According to Delk, brownfields aren't always necessarily polluted, but because of their history or associations, people assume they are. They are "areas with the perception of environmental hazards," he says. And that perception can hurt economic investment and redevelopment.

That's where the EPA comes in. The federal agency provides grants for governments to assess brownfields sites. Since 1998, a few years after the EPA program began, the City of Columbia has received four such grants. The most recent chunk of funding came under the Recovery Act: a \$1 million EPA grant for continued brownfields work, this time in partnership with West Columbia.

The list of brownfields projects in Columbia over the last several years is an honor roll of successful developments downtown and in the Vista: 701 Whaley, EdVenture, CanalSide, the South Carolina Research Authority.

The Vista's industrial past means much of the land there is potentially contaminated.

"Most of the properties in the Vista are brownfields properties, just because of the rail," says Brian Kvam, project manager at CTC Brownfields, a nonprofit hired by the city to manage the brownfields grants.

Downtown Columbia sites often have a long, complicated history, Kvam says. The city is dotted with underground storage tanks that once held heating oil or gasoline. Industries opened and closed, leaving behind various environmental contaminants. Dry cleaners used to dump their cleaning chemicals "literally out the back door," he says.

"What the developers want to know is what's there," Kvam says.

Most recently, EPA grants have funded assessments of the Mast General site on Main Street and a proposed downtown parking garage site at Sumter and Taylor Streets.

On the new Mast General project, Kvam says his firm got involved early on — before it even knew what company was interested in the old Lourie's building at 1601 Main St.

In the case of the Lourie's site, the news was good: All that Mast General will have to do on the site is some asbestos remediation. The EPA funding doesn't cover cleanup; it's just for assessments and, if needed, a cleanup plan.

A more complicated project was the Columbia Supply Company site in the Vista, a former manufactured gas plant. Using \$100,000 in EPA funds, CTC Brownfields performed a major site assessment in 2005 to determine the extent of the contamination. Since then, the developer, Gervais and Lincoln LLC, has spent \$1 million so far cleaning the site in preparation for a new restaurant and office space, with future plans for a \$35 million hotel and more office and retail space.

Why, one might ask, is the federal government funding these assessments when environmental regulations and good legal practice would require developers to do so anyway?

It's all part of attracting businesses, Kvam says.

"With lending as tight as it is ... things are so razor thin right now," he says. "Five, ten thousand really makes a deal go forward."

Under the first three grants, the city spent \$600,000 in EPA grant funds.

According to a recent report prepared by CTC Brownfields, \$325,000 of that EPA funding was spent on six properties in the city, which collectively have already brought in \$63.7 million in capital reinvestment.

That reinvestment resulted in \$12.5 million more in taxable property being added to the city tax rolls. And it adds up to a projected 350 to 400 new jobs by the end of 2011.


For the new \$1 million Recovery Act grant, Columbia's development corporations have teamed up with West Columbia to form



the Congaree Coalition, which will fund brownfields assessments in both cities.

On Columbia's side of the river, the city is now turning its attention to funding more projects in North Columbia, guided by the city's master plan for the area.

"Projects are a little slower to come along up there," Kvam admits.

Brownfields assessments are only a small part of what's needed to spur economic development. But if they can help North Columbia and Main Street the way they have the Vista, then the EPA will have still more reasons to love Columbia — and Columbia will have plenty of reasons to love the EPA. 

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L-R: Brian Kvam, a geologist with Concurrent Technologies Corporation, and Columbia Development Corporation executive director Fred Delk Columbia are shown here at a property adjacent to Columbia Supply Company in the Vista on Tuesday, April 20. The property is the former site of a coal gasification plant that was abated with EPA brownfield funding. Concurrent Technologies is the EPA brownfield consultant to the city's development corporation. *Photo by Jonathan Sharpe*