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Resurrecting an Icon

Vermont finds a way to clean up a really bad brownfields site.

By Joelle S. Greenland, AICP

Since 1994, when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency started its National Brownfields Program, Vermont has received over \$27 million in EPA brownfields funding, with more than half going to its 11 regional planning commissions. By leveraging brownfields funding and collaborating in private-public partnerships, RPCs are making invaluable contributions to redeveloping Vermont's 94 *known* brownfields sites and protecting its future generations.

Redeveloping a brownfields site is no easy task, as anyone who ever has done it can attest. But with the right team of people, anything is possible. This was the case in Springfield, Vermont, where a few years ago I was part of a "dream team" that came together both to redevelop a brownfields site and to revitalize a town whose prosperous industrial past had seemingly tainted its future.

In December 2012, I returned to see the site and was compelled to tell this story, if only to give hope to others and offer a few lessons that could provide the impetus for redeveloping brownfields that seem to be lost causes.



The backstory

I am passionate about brownfields. I want to breathe life back into environmentally impaired properties that were once productive and vibrant — providing a kind of CPR, if you will. Most likely, I was predisposed to the work since my father, a chemist with a specialty in toxic chemicals, worked for the U.S. EPA for over 35 years.

In 2008, I worked as a planner for the Southern Windsor County Regional Planning Commission in southeastern Vermont, an hour north of the Massachusetts border. Unlike most states, Vermont has no county governments. Its RPCs provide technical assistance on planning and development activities to local municipalities. RPCs are vital to protecting the landscapes of Vermont as well as ensuring a high quality of life for residents. RPC planners wear many hats, and one of mine was serving as the brownfields coordinator for our region.

In 1999, with funding from the EPA, the SWCRPC established the Brownfields Reuse Project. When I joined the commission it had a number of active EPA brownfields assessment grants and was the only RPC with a \$1 million brownfields revolving loan fund for cleanup activities. Having both funds, it was in a unique position to redevelop brownfields sites.

In a state with vast rural areas and renowned scenic landscapes, why did southern Windsor County have this much brownfields funding? Among the 10 towns the SWCRPC serves, Windsor (pop. 3,553) and Springfield (pop. 9,373) were once home to a thriving machine tool manufacturing industry established in the late 19th century: it was known as Precision Valley.

Springfield alone had three major machine tool plants — Jones & Lamson Machine Company, Bryant Chucking Grinder Company, and Fellows Gear Shaper — that put the town on the world's industrial map. These are also some of the largest brownfields sites in the state, with more than 200,000 square feet each, and ranging from six to 35 acres.

The site

In 1896, Edwin Fellows founded Fellows Gear Shaper on over six acres of land along the banks of the Black River in downtown Springfield. He had invented a new type of gear shaper that eradicated many production errors.

As the demand for machine tools increased, more employment opportunities and prosperity came to Precision Valley. In the early 1940s, Springfield was the largest employment center in Vermont, with more than two-fifths of its population working at Fellows.

By the late 1960s, however, with a shift away from manufacturing and to cheaper industrial imports, the machine tool industry started to decline. By the 1980s, many towns were devastated by the depletion of their employment base. Precision Valley was left with over one million square feet of abandoned historic industrial buildings whose environmental hazards posed significant risks to nearby rivers and whose blight was a constant reminder of its past.

For two decades, the nonprofit Precision Valley Development Corporation used the Fellows building as a quasi-industrial incubator. In 2005, as maintenance costs escalated and the building fell into disrepair, the town asked the Springfield Regional Development Corporation to help oversee and coordinate the building's operation and management, as it was already doing with some of Springfield's other former machine tool plants.

Chartered in 1761, Springfield came into the spotlight when it won The Simpsons Movie premiere location contest in 2007. At almost 50 square miles, the town has a lot going for it: direct access to Interstate 91, small town charm, historic architecture, and a picturesque river running through its center.

Its heart is its people. Springfield's residents have immense pride in their town and wanted to save its iconic Fellows building, whose rusting footbridge not only connected them physically, but also emotionally.



The team

The resurrection of the blighted Fellows building was an unprecedented brownfields undertaking in Vermont. With 210,000 square feet of contaminated space, the building was fraught with environmental problems: asbestos, lead, USTs, PCBs, and soil and groundwater contamination. Its greatest challenge, though, also led to its sweetest victory: obtaining the first PCB Risk-Based Cleanup and Disposal Approval in Vermont from the EPA's Region 1 Toxic Substances Control Act Enforcement Program.

Taking on all of these challenges was a team that included determined developers and local, state, and federal agencies. The team worked to maximize resources and leverage all available public and private funding. Its success was largely due to having key people in the right place at the right time.

The team was formed in 2006, when Washington, D.C.-based developers Rick Genderson and John Meekin, saw and fell in love with Fellows, despite all its flaws. "The building is so unique with good bones," says Meekin. "It's the type of facility that just isn't made anymore in this type of setting."

To them, the brownfields aspect was ancillary. "We fell in love with Springfield, and understood the history and recent rough times," says Genderson. "This was a chance to make an impact as well as restore a remarkable building and bring it back to life."

With a mixed use development in mind, the developers began meeting with Bob Flint, a native of Springfield and the executive director of SRDC. Flint loves Springfield and its machine tool buildings as if they were his adopted children. In April 2007, the developers signed a letter of intent to purchase Fellows, and Flint became its much-needed champion.

Flint then reached out to Tom Kennedy, AICP, executive director of SWCRPC, for brownfields redevelopment assistance. As the agency's brownfields coordinator, I was enlisted to lead the project through our brownfields program. Kennedy and I knew we had an incredible opportunity to make a huge difference in Springfield.

As we began identifying and reaching out to people who would be valuable partners, Flint would often say, "This is Vermont; people know people." Indeed we did. Enter our partners from the EPA and the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, Alan Peterson and Trish Coppelino.

Peterson helped to navigate the many "dos and don'ts" of EPA brownfields grants. I immersed myself in grant management as well as writing and securing additional brownfields grants. It was quite challenging — work plans, quarterly reports, budgets, matching requirements, compliance issues, procurement procedures, ACRES reporting — but as a planner with a science background, I found it incredibly rewarding to witness tangible results, not just plan for future ones.

Coppelino was the "remediation gatekeeper" and a huge resource in deciphering remediation alternatives. Before implementing any cleanup, a state-approved Corrective Action Plan had to be in

place, and with Coppolino's assistance, we obtained it in October 2009. The ANR also had brownfields funds that were used to leverage further remediation funding.

Rounding out the dream team was Kiersten Bourgeois, the director of economic development at the state's Agency of Commerce and Community Development. She was instrumental in pursuing additional funding via a CDBG, state historic tax credits, and the ACCD's Brownfields Initiative.

The return

When visiting last December I could hardly wait to see the transformation as the Fellows site was by then 90 percent remediated and the original building reduced by 50,000 square feet. As Flint and I approached, my jaw dropped. Smiling, Flint said, "Wait till you see the Great Hall."

Entering the Great Hall, I am in awe of its expansive space (7,000 square feet) and its sheer beauty. Rays of sunshine flood the long 44-foot-wide atrium. Large pieces of colorful art hang on crisp white walls. The once dingy, contaminated area is now a public art space showcasing works from local and regional artists.

In a corner near the main entrance is a "mini museum" displaying Fellows memorabilia. At the opposite end is a pharmacy and large sliding glass doors leading to the newly built, 31,000-square-foot Springfield Health Center. The center and walk-in clinic occupy three floors of riverfront office space, with the latter providing immediate care service and helping to reduce the number of emergency room visits at the nearby Springfield Hospital.

Climbing up the original wood center stairwell — now beautifully restored — we come to the area intended for a restaurant. It is an impressive and inviting space, with enormous restored windows providing panoramic views of the river and waterfall. I take the opportunity to peer out and watch visitors walk across the new 142-foot-long footbridge, an exact replica of the original historic iron one.

As we continue our tour, the building buzzes with activity. Green technologies such as passive solar and geothermal energy are used throughout the building, and there are plans to restore the original on-site hydroelectric plant.

Ending the tour, I am amazed at how the old structures, once plagued by PCBs and required to remain, have been adapted into a clay studio, equipment space, and magnificent two-story garage. As I take in everything, I ask Flint what kept him going. "This," he said. "We had to save it, there was no other choice. It's an icon of this community."

Lessons

Reconnecting with some of the dream team members, I ask them what they learned. "It was our dress rehearsal," Flint says. "I would take the same basic approach with the next one." He notes that it was critical having a team that rallied around a common vision and willingness to find solutions — and included the right developers. "They were so patient and committed to the project; they took a leap of faith."

For the developers, remediation presented a huge learning curve. "We didn't count on the brownfields piece being as complicated as it turned out to be," says Genderson, "but we are thankful that, at every turn, we had people that found a way to solve the various problems and delays."

PCB remediation was one of those problems, as Coppolino acknowledges. "Falling into a regulatory program [TSCA] that we weren't sure we were going to be able to get out of was one of the biggest hurdles," she says. But she also believes communication was essential to the project's success: "The team was very good at keeping dialogue open and including all stakeholders in decision-making discussions."

At the state level, Bourgeois stresses the strength that came from partnerships, access to funding, and having a common vision. "State, regional, and local involvement, coupled with a strong private sector developer, made this a recipe for success," she says. "We also had the benefit of involving economic development from the very start. In the end, this project is about jobs and returning a historic building to a productive use."



As a planner, Kennedy says the project also had the merit of resurrecting a community. "We had the opportunity to bring back dignity to the town, not what it was, but something new," he says, adding, "we had strong partnerships and environmental consultants that thought outside the box to come up with cost-effective remediation strategies."

For me, the key points were keeping end uses in mind and working together to find viable solutions. Reaching out to colleagues across the country provided the necessary breakthrough needed to formulate a cost-effective, and ultimately successful, PCB remediation scenario. One tool was applying different paint colors to show the boundary between engineering controls and tainted material.

There were moments when we all could have used a "Bang Head Here" sign. Things often took a lot of time and were done on an ad hoc basis, which could be incredibly frustrating and daunting. Weathering these storms not only strengthened relationships, but also provided the necessary strength to cross the finish line. That finish line currently provides 80 jobs (200 to 250 at full build-out), and a physical testament to the power of partnerships.

The goodbye

People often say that professionals should avoid an emotional connection to something that may not work out. In this case, we all had an initial emotional connection to the spirit of Fellows. It was our glue and a primal source of energy that kept us working together to move the project forward.

So it was no surprise that when I turned to leave, I started to feel that old tug of affection. With a wide grin on my face, I silently saluted Fellows and wished it good luck in its new life. This project had validated my beliefs that there are no lost causes, and that planners can make huge contributions to the brownfields world.

Saying goodbye was not easy for me. But as I got into my car and took one last look, I'm pretty sure that if buildings could talk, this one would say, "Thank you." n

Joelle Greenland is an environmental planner and an expert in brownfields redevelopment, grant management, and writing who has authored and secured over \$1.2 million in brownfields grants. Contact her at brownfieldsforthefuture@gmail.com.

Funding Fellows

The \$13 million Fellows building remediation project tapped into many resources and used a key financing mechanism.

During predevelopment work, a lease to purchase contract (combining a lease contract with an option to purchase contract) was executed between Precision Valley Development Corporation and the developers. This allowed PVDC, as a nonprofit and property owner, to access various federally and state-funded brownfields grants, thus keeping the project moving forward and the developers engaged.

Pursuant to EPA rules, individuals and profit-making firms are ineligible for EPA brownfields funding. In addition, grant recipients must be owners of the property and are ineligible if they are considered potentially responsible parties for any contamination.

The breakdown:

- SWCRPC's Brownfields Reuse Project provided over \$1 million through EPA-funded grants, loans, and federal ARRA funds through its Brownfields Revolving Loan Fund (the original loan, executed in 2009, was the first in Vermont and the highest made by an RPC in EPA's Region 1).
- ANR's Brownfields Reuse Initiative and ACCD's Brownfields Revitalization Fund contributed over \$350,000 towards remediation activities.
- Developers received a \$750,000 CDBG Slums and Blight grant and \$461,000 in historic state tax credits after purchasing the property in December 2010.
- Springfield Medical Care Systems, as a Federally Qualified Health Center, received \$2 million in HUD funding to help build the new health center and clinic, the anchor tenant for the project.
- Private funding accounted for about two-thirds of the project's costs.

Future financing of brownfields sites

While all of Vermont's RPCs have received some type of EPA brownfields funding since 1994, access to cleanup activity funds has recently increased dramatically with two more RPCs (Wyndham Regional Commission and Northwest Regional Planning Commission) each receiving \$1 million EPA Brownfields RLFs. Further, in September 2012, SWCRPC and SRDC received EPA grants totaling \$600,000 for further remediation activities at Jones & Lamson, the next machine tool plant to be tackled (estimated cleanup costs are \$2 to 2.5 million).

For the SWCRPC, "Our brownfields program is evolving and becoming more sophisticated and learning from our experiences," says Kennedy. "It looks forward to creating solutions for its present sites as well as future projects which are in its region as well as outside."

Resources

Images: Top — Before and After: The Fellows Gear Shaper Factory and its iconic iron bridge (top), and a replica bridge that was recently installed connects the community to its new resource. Photos Springfield Redevelopment Company and Jennifer Hauck, *Valley News*. Middle — Demolition day and beginning of new Great Hall and entrance to Springfield Health Center. Photo Bob Flint. courtesy Springfield Redevelopment Company. Bottom — The Great Hall houses an art exhibition space. Artists install their work before the grand opening. Photo Lynn Barrett.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Brownfields Program: <http://epa.gov/brownfields>

The Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development's Brownfields Initiative: http://accd.vermont.gov/business/relocate_expand/capital/brownfields

The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources' Brownfields Reuse Initiative: www.anr.state.vt.us/dec/wastediv/sms/brownfields-home.htm

Other team members: Supporting the team were many other partners whose contributions were invaluable to the project's success: Kim Tisa, EPA's Region 1 PCB Coordinator; SWCRPC's Board of Commissioners and Brownfields Steering Committee; SRDC's Board of Directors; several environmental consultants, most notably Dan Voisin of Stone Environmental; the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation; EPA's Region 6 TSCA Office; the New Orleans Regional Planning Commission; and the residents and officials of Springfield.