

Know Your Brownfield Inventory Cold

by Marc Florian

Presumably, one of your jobs in some way involves the marketing and sales of brownfield sites in your community. It just might not be in your job description. And for anyone experienced in the marketing and sales process, whether it's brownfield sites or widgets, you know that sales is a "top of mind" awareness issue.

Inventories and Databases

Some of you may be the recipients of an EPA Site Assessment grant, in which case you know that, often, the first two tasks undertaken as part of an assessment grant include creation of an inventory of brownfield sites, and development of a brownfield database. Both these activities are grant-fundable if you include them in your work plans. However, even if you aren't an EPA grant recipient, this information can be critically important to you as well.

The purpose of these activities is to motivate you to look at the "universe" of brown sites in your community; assimilate everything you know about those sites, and then; prioritize them in terms of which are the "linchpins" or priority sites on which you would like to spend your assessment grant dollars.

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Now, you wouldn't think that the EPA would need to encourage communities to look at their universe of sites, but I can tell you from experience that most communities don't fully appreciate the number of brownfield sites that actually exist in their jurisdictional boundaries. We know about the corner gas station, or the old factory at the edge of town, but what about the body shop down the street, or the hair salon, or the dry cleaners? Sometimes it's also a case of not wanting to know, or a simple fear of the unknown.

That said, all too many times, we've seen communities create wonderful inventories, comprising volumes of information, only to place them on a shelf—never to be seen again—almost as though the activity was simply a prerequisite task to be checked off the list, prior to moving on to bigger and better things.

Remember, for our purposes as economic development/community development

officials, the goal of brownfield redevelopment is to facilitate taxable investment, job creation, infrastructure re-utilization, and cleanup. However, in order to achieve these goals, you have to be able to market and sell these sites. Your job as an economic development, community development, and brownfield redevelopment professional is to sell these sites: Get them back into circulation and elevate them to their highest and best use.

Accordingly, why "short-sell" yourself by not establishing a comprehensive inventory and database of brownfield sites in your community? More importantly, if you've already created your inventory, why handcuff yourself by not taking full advantage of the investment you have already made in this valuable tool?

Sustainability

One of the themes in brownfield redevelopment today is sustainability—getting



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hook in the marketing and sales of brown-field sites? Simple: Financial benefits. It's gotten to the point in one community where they are considering a billboard advertising campaign along the interstate highway near the state border announcing the availability of brown sites, and the willingness of the state and community to offer the associated financial incentives.

This example might seem a little extravagant, but keep in mind the savvy developers out there already know about these incentives. They already know—but, they don't want to have to drive the train in your community. They don't want to have to educate you, and they certainly don't want to have to educate your commissioners or your council members. They want to know that you know what you have to sell that's brown and how to apply these incentives.

You need to figure out ways to tell them, and figure out ways to show them. Accordingly, when you think about it in this context, the notion of billboard advertising doesn't seem that far-fetched after all.

In another community, they have taken efforts to expand and populate their brown-field database with all types of information typically sought by developers and site selectors. In other words, it's not just a database of "brown" information, but it includes accessibility information related to transportation, workforce, utilities, acreage, taxes, and so on.

The objective here is to think creatively and look for ways to maximize the utility of your inventory and database. Think like a developer/site selector. Determine what information would be important to you, and put it in your database. And once you've done that, get prospects to see your database by linking it to the county economic/community development website, state economic development corporation or brownfield program website, and even the state brownfield association website, to name a few.

At this point, you might be asking yourself if developers are really looking for these types of sites or not. Is it all really worth it? The fact is, today you need only look in the

everyone to think "long-term." Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet when it comes to the marketing and sales of brownfield sites. "Brownfield" is just a name. But, is it really? Many times, people will jump up at this point and express concern and hesitation about marketing the "brown" nature of these sites—referring to a perceived "stigma" or negative connotation—fearing that developers/investors will shy away from these types of properties and hence, shy away from their communities.

Maybe a decade ago this were true, but it just isn't the case today. Many of the states in which I practice, the brown sites are the preferred sites. That's because in nearly all states, the term brownfields is now associated with a host of financial incentives, incentives that are not otherwise available at a "green" site. Accordingly, it's not surprising that over the course of the past 10 years we have seen a shift away from green sites and toward brown sites, simply because of the added benefits and incentives available to the developer of a brown site.

Setting the Hook

In marketing and sales you'll hear people talk about having to have a hook—something about the product or service that captures the buyer's attention. So what's the



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back of most real estate trade journals and you’ll see advertisements from developers/investors looking for brownfield sites. Bottom line: there are a lot of developers out there who understand and appreciate the financial benefits typically associated with brownfields redevelopment, and they aren’t afraid to spend their money. But, they need to know what you’ve got to sell. You need to know what you’ve got to sell. If you don’t tell them, who will? Don’t leave your inventory and database on the shelf, but put them to work for you.

A Recent Example

In southwest Michigan, a consortium of public and private interests lead by Whirlpool Corp. has acquired more than 500 acres of old industrial wasteland, dilapidated buildings, and dumps and is converting it into a \$500 million residential/ commercial development built around a Jack Nicholas Signature Golf Course.

Could Whirlpool have made that investment elsewhere and avoided the stigma? Certainly, and if the city in which this site is located had not already inventoried much of the information about the 400-plus property parcels comprising this site—effectively pre-qualifying them for brownfield incentives available from the EPA and state of Michigan—the project might have gone elsewhere.

If the \$500 million didn’t already get

your attention, last July Whirlpool announced its commitment to invest an additional \$85 million in the expansion of its corporate campus onto one of the parcels comprising this brownfield site: An announcement that was predicated on the company’s ability to obtain brownfield benefits.

How are you going to market your brownfield sites? Ask yourself: How do you market your green sites? When you think about it, brown sites are nothing more than green sites with benefits!

When you’re creating your inventory of brown sites and formatting your database, think long-term. Think like a developer/site selector. How can you maximize the utility of that database in the marketing process and not leave that valuable tool on the shelf.

When you think “brown,” consider how “what you know” about brownfields can be used to help you incite developer interest and close the deal. Think about the hook, and what’s really important to the prospect. **REN**

Marc Florian serves as Principal in charge of Site Restoration activities for Environmental Consulting & Technology, Inc., and has authored numerous articles on the subject of risk management in the real estate arena. For the past 25 years, he has been routinely involved with municipalities and local units of government (LUGs) in the conceptualization and communication of risk management strategies pertaining to Brownfield Redevelopment Initiatives.

Capitalizing on the Upcoming EPA Conference

At the upcoming Brownfield conference, which will be held this coming April in Philadelphia, there will be a developer “Transactions Forum.” It’s a day and place within the conference dedicated to matching these developer interests with individual communities. It’s an opportunity for communities like you to showcase your community and your inventory of brownfield sites to an audience comprised of developers/investors looking to buy these types of properties.

In the past, I’ve seen communities develop posters, handouts and fliers. However, I’ve also seen others take it to the next level by creating 50-75 page “coffee-table” booklets spotlighting the history, demographics and development opportunities existing within their communities. Basically, these booklets serve as a hard-copy summary of their brownfield inventory and database, which the developer can take and review—just like a shopping catalog. In some instances, the booklets are accompanied by a diskette or invitation to visit the community’s website and database.

And, speaking of “stigmas,” do you think that the communities participating in the Transactions Forum are concerned about the stigma of promoting their brownfield sites? Obviously not; but they sure hope that you are concerned about yours. The longer you are, the less competition they’re going to have! **REN**