

Brownfields summit is upbeat on city development prospects

A bright, brown future?

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James P. McCoy/Buffalo News

Against a projection of downtown, brownfields expert John DeVillars tells a Buffalo Niagara Partnership audience that "there are wonderful opportunities for brownfield development here."

Buffalo's industrial history, including steel plants and refineries, has left numerous brownfield sites that could be economically feasible to develop under new state laws.

That was the message John DeVillars, founder and managing partner of BlueWave Strategies and former executive vice president of Brownfields Recovery Corp., conveyed Wednesday at the Buffalo Niagara Partnership's "Seeing Green" brownfields summit.

"There are wonderful opportunities for brownfield development here," said John DeVillars, who underlined the importance of the program for urban development.

He said that in Buffalo, it would be hard to do development "without brownfield developing."

The Brownfield Cleanup Program that Gov. George E. Pataki signed into law in October 2003 has the potential to spur the redevelopment of former polluted industrial sites, speakers said.

The law provides tax credits to individuals, environmental groups or corporations who remediate and redevelop brownfield sites in the state. A brownfield is defined as any real property where redevelopment or reuse may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous waste, petroleum, pollutant, or contaminant. Tax credits will kick in beginning in 2005, and many believe that the region stands to benefit.

Depending on site conditions, the type of developer, the level to which the site will be remediated, and the surrounding community, state tax credits can range anywhere from 10 percent to 22 percent of the costs of investigation, remediation and redevelopment of the brownfield. If the brownfield is located in an area that has a poverty rate of at least 20 percent and an unemployment rate of at least 1 1/4 times the state average, the tax credit increases by 8 percentage points.

Sandra Nasca, Buffalo's environmental coordinator in the office of strategic planning, feels that the tax incentives will be beneficial for the city. Nasca also mentioned that the city will be seeking grants that apply to municipalities.

State law also provides for reimbursement to municipalities of 90 percent for investigation and site assessment of brownfields.

There are other benefits to developing brownfield sites, such as maintaining green space that would have been used for development, said Amy Fisk, an environmental planner for Niagara County Economic Development.

"It can be cheaper to develop a brownfield site than a greenfield site because often the brownfield site already has the infrastructure," she said.

While the state does not have the funding to directly clean up all of the sites, its most recent legislation shows that it is "biased towards remedial action," according to Martin Doster, regional representative of the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

"The tools are now in place," he said. "(Grant) money will be going fast now."