



April 2010 | BUSINESS, ENVIRONMENT

Article

Washington County gets federal grants to identify contaminated sites

by Craig Idlebrook

The Washington County Council of Governments recently won two grants totaling \$400,000 from the United States Environmental Protection Agency to identify brownfield sites in the county for cleanup. The council is beginning to sift through potential sites for testing, favoring land that has the most potential for redevelopment.

Brownfields are sites with soil that has been contaminated from past use. In the Downeast region, brownfields often are associated with sites that housed seafood processing factories and old garages, says Jeremy Gabrielson, senior planner for the Washington County Council of Governments (WCCOG). Often, these sites are located in prime downtown locations and slow downtown redevelopment.

"It could be an old cannery that used lead soldering for the sardine cans...or a significant amount of asbestos in an old building," Gabrielson says. "You're going to find these sites anywhere throughout the country."

Betsy Fitzgerald, Machias town planner, believes she may have found the first site that will be approved for assessment under the grant.

"We're the poster child," Fitzgerald joked.

Colonial Street in downtown Machias has been going through a revival in recent years, with a natural food store anchoring a small plaza of businesses. But the revival doesn't reach to an important historical attraction on Colonial Street: the Burnham Tavern, where residents met in June 1775 to defy a British captain, which led to the first naval battle of the Revolutionary War, according to the Machias Historical Society Web site.

Between the shops and the historic site is a large vacant building that housed a Laundromat as recently as 2006. The building is boarded up with several faded for-sale signs hanging on the windows. There are still rolling bins for laundry inside, along with exposed insulation. Such facilities, which frequently included drycleaning operations, are often suspected of being

contaminated with the chemical polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCB.

[Editorial note: the suspect contaminant is perchloroethylene (PCE); PCBs are often contained in oils found in transformers or other electrical equipment, among other sources.]

Fitzgerald says that the owner of the building is enthusiastic about having the property tested. Often, it's impossible to sell a property without information about potential contaminants. Fitzgerald hopes that Machias could buy the building and knock it down to allow better tourist access to the tavern site. Whatever happens, the test will make the unknown known, she said.

"This is word of mouth. If nothing else...it removes the doubt," she said.

Larger sites and/or sites with contamination that pose immediate health risks often qualify for cleanup through the federal government or through the state EPA. Many brownfield sites in Maine have smaller amounts of contaminants and qualify for smaller grants.

In a recent Maine Association of Planners newsletter, Nick Hodgkins, brownfield coordinator for the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, said Maine municipalities and non-profits received \$6.5 million in grants and loans for cleanup funding in 2009. Hodgkins said that figure meant Maine received more per capita than any other state. Along with the WCCOG grants, the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Pleasant Point received \$200,000 and the Greater Portland Council of Governments received \$400,000 in assessment grants.

Last year was a banner year for brownfield grants, said Joe Ferrari, brownfield project officer for the regional branch of the EPA. The Obama administration released an unusually large amount of grant funding as part of the stimulus package.

Once a site is identified, a landowner can enter into a voluntary cleanup agreement with the state, where the two parties agree on the steps the landowner will take to clean up the contamination in exchange for a release of liability for problems that may arise with the site. Landowners may apply for EPA grants to defray the costs of cleanup, but these grants are competitive. Ferrari estimates that between one-third and one-half of applications for these funds are awarded grants.

The Washington council pursued the EPA assessment grants after being approached about the idea by Rip Patten with Credere Associates, the Portland based environmental consulting firm behind the award-winning cleanup of the Eastern Fine Paper mill in Brewer.

"They thought that Washington County was eligible, ripe and had a good shot at it," WCCOG executive director Judy East said.

After winning the grant and going through a formal bidding process, however, the council hired another environmental firm, GEI Consultants in Falmouth. GEI project manager Todd Coffin says brownfield assessment can be the first step toward returning downtown properties to good economic use.

"That's really the heart and the soul of the project, bringing these properties back to life," Coffin

said.

Cherryfield recently benefitted from stimulus brownfield money, according to Dick Fickett, a selectman there. With money from the EPA, the state cleaned up two sites in its commercial district, including an old garage. The state trucked away contaminated dirt and replaced it with clean gravel. The cleanup helped raise the value of land around it and now a restaurant and a grocery store flourish nearby the two sites, he said. He's trying to contact another Cherryfield landowner to convince him to participate in the WCCOG program.

"If I were an owner, I would certainly want it assessed," he said.