Brownfields
Success Story

Taking Back Downtown One Brownfield at a Time
Great Falls, Montana

"The grandest sight I ever beheld." That's how American explorer Meriwether Lewis described the Great Falls of the Missouri River during his and William Clark's landmark expedition across the uncharted West in 1805. More than two centuries later, the Great Falls Montana Development Authority (GFDA) is doing its best to keep downtown Great Falls looking grand as ever by encouraging cleanup and redevelopment of brownfield properties.

Great Falls is located on the high plains along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front Range at the confluence of the Missouri and Sun Rivers, which provided hydroelectric power for a thriving industrial economy throughout the 1800s and early 1900s. Lillian Sunwall, a project manager and business strategist with GFDA, describes the city's downtown as a "diverse and exciting place" in the mid-1900s. But, as the chug of industrial progress sputtered in the later part of the century, the city's population growth slowed and many of the historic buildings were left underutilized or abandoned.

"One of the big projects our organization is doing is to revitalize Great Falls by encouraging investment downtown," Sunwall says. "We have concentrated our efforts on several brownfield projects, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's [EPA] Targeted Brownfield Assessment and Revolving Loan Fund grants have been critical to attracting investment."

The Projects

The first site to be redeveloped under this program was a former transmission shop and gas station at Central Avenue and 9th Street, one of the busiest intersections in town. Two entrepreneurs were awarded a $250,000 loan in 2010 to clean up the site, which had a petroleum plume under it. Post-cleanup, the owners opened what has become a thriving drive-through coffee shop.

Casey Doran and Brandon Jurasek built a coffee shop and small park on the site of an abandoned auto transmission center.

Photo credit: Amber Fern Photography

EPA Grant Recipient:
Great Falls Montana Development Authority

Grant Types:
EPA Targeted Brownfield Assessment and Revolving Loan Fund

Former Uses:
Gas station, livery stables, bank

Current Uses:
Coffee shop, hotel/pub, nonprofit offices

Easter Seals-Goodwill renovated an old bank building to serve as its regional headquarters.

EPA
United States Environmental Protection Agency

Developers preserved the building's historic brick façade when renovating the Arvon Block, now home to an Irish pub.

Photo credit: Amber Fern Photography

> **"People are walking around these areas now. These projects are turning vacant eyesores into thriving places where people want to be. It's changed the feel of the downtown."**
>
> *Lillian Sunwall, Project Manager & Business Strategist, Great Falls Montana Development Authority*

"They let us use them as guinea pigs," Sunwall says, referring to a creative financing agreement GFDA brokered for the grantees with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality's Montana Petroleum Tank Release Compensation Board to facilitate the cleanup. Now other grantees are using the same model.

Another site is the Arvon Block on 1st Avenue, South, one of the oldest buildings in Great Falls. "Everyone said it wasn't worth saving," she says, "but the structure was intact." Built in the late 1800s, the building was one of the earliest livery stables in the region. "We have some photos from the historical society that were taken when this was one of the only buildings in town," she adds. "There was still animal feed in the building when the cleanup began!"

Developers received a $128,000 low-interest loan to clean up hazardous materials at the site, including lead paint and asbestos. The Arvon Block building now houses an Irish pub and restaurant, and a small hotel is on the way. In addition to retaining the building's historic character, the developers plan to earn certification under the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) program.

At a third location, Easter Seals-Goodwill applied a $350,000 grant in 2012 to clean up hazardous materials in a former bank building that is home to the organization's five-state regional headquarters and several programs for people with developmental disabilities. "They turned it into a beautiful facility," Sunwall says, "a real awesome addition to downtown. It also keeps good jobs in information technology, human resources, marketing and program management here in Great Falls."

The Great Falls Community Food Bank, at 1620 12th Avenue, North, was awarded a $38,312 grant to clean up asbestos and other hazardous substances as part of a $500,000 renovation.

The Challenges

Misconceptions about brownfields were among the biggest obstacles, according to Ted Lanzano, with EPA Region 8. "The attitude was: if it's contaminated, I don't want to deal with it," he says.

Sunwall agrees. "When we first received the grant, no one had a clue what brownfields were or their potential for redevelopment," she says. "Educating the public and companies on how to deal with the pollution was a biggie, as was letting them know about the grants and resources available."

Collaboration with a variety of partners was critical to make things happen. For example, GFDA partnered with the city of Great Falls to integrate brownfield redevelopment into the city's downtown master plan. Other partners included the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, EPA Region 8, nonprofit organizations and the private sector.

One of the most interesting aspects of the redevelopment effort underway is the variety of ways projects are being financed. "We aren't pigeonholing ourselves into just using brownfields funding," Sunwall says. "We are leveraging other financing as well." For example, because it retained much of the original façade and woodwork, the Arvon Block redevelopment qualified for tax abatement as well as tax credits related to historic preservation.

The Benefits

Together, these projects are returning life to downtown Great Falls. Cleaning up one property leads to ripple effects on others. Benefits include fewer abandoned storefronts and more foot traffic. The Arvon Block used to be a place you wouldn't go near at night. Now it's a place to grab a burger and a pint.

Once Easter Seals-Goodwill cleaned up the old bank building, it too changed the atmosphere in the area. Its employees are eating lunch downtown and frequenting local businesses. "It's spurred a local brewery to open nearby," Sunwall says. "Employers are looking at downtown as a more viable place to do business."

She contends that revitalizing the downtown can help retain existing companies and jobs too. "We have a large investment firm here, one that has lovely office buildings in Seattle and elsewhere. Yet they've kept their headquarters in Great Falls. They are a huge employer here."

Lessons Learned

Although it took almost 4 years to get the first brownfield project financed, GFDA officials were undaunted. "Redevelopments are pretty quick," Sunwall says, "but the lead-up takes longer. Keep communication lines open with major partners. Let them know what you're doing early on so they are familiar with the project and willing to help find solutions. Think outside the box and don't give up."

One of the keys to GFDA's success is knowing when and whom to ask for help. "You don't have to be an expert in cleanup and redevelopment," she says. "Leverage all the expertise you can. We have a pool of local environmental professionals who oversee the cleanup work, and we depend on our local historian to look into the old buildings and advise us on ways to preserve the town's history."

The media too can be a great resource. "I'm constantly asking media outlets to do stories on our projects," she says. "Invite them to open houses. Let people know what you're doing. Put information on your website, Facebook and Twitter."

The bottom line is that redevelopment downtown is possible. "New construction may be easier, but reuse of old buildings preserves that gorgeous character, that piece of history that you just hate to see go away," she adds. "To me, that's exciting."

The remodeled Great Falls Community Food Bank features supermarket-style shelving to make it easier for patrons to select foods.

For more information:
Visit the EPA Brownfields website at www.epa.gov/brownfields or contact Ted Lanzano at (303) 312-6596 or Lanzano.Ted@epa.gov.

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