

# Brownfields Success Story



## The Ripple Effects of Brownfield Redevelopment *Wilson, North Carolina*

In the 1920s, the city of Wilson, North Carolina, was home to the world's largest bright leaf tobacco market. Located along highway 301 in the eastern part of the state, the city was also home to diverse industries and a vibrant economy. As the tobacco economy and other industries declined, the city's economy struggled, with many businesses closing and properties turning into vacant brownfields. Over the past decade, however, the city and its partners have received EPA assessment grants and loan funding and pursued state, local and private resources to support brownfield cleanup and redevelopment. Today, the local economy is flourishing once again, with each new project fostering fresh interest in brownfield redevelopment in the community.

### The Revolving Loan Fund Program and Assessment Grants

In 2013, the city of Wilson partnered with the neighboring city of Greenville to establish the Eastern North Carolina Brownfields Coalition (ENCBC) Revolving Loan Fund Program. The goal was to provide low-interest loans and grants to eligible entities to finance environmental cleanups. Since EPA first granted \$1 million to the ENCBC, the program has steadily expanded over time; it now includes 10 counties in the area. The resources help make redevelopment projects possible, encouraging developers and other stakeholders to take on revitalization efforts. The city received a \$200,000 EPA grant for Community Wide Petroleum Assessment in 2010 and another \$200,000 EPA grant for Community Wide Hazardous Materials Assessment in 2012. Since receiving the initial grants, the city has continued to apply for and receive supplemental funding.

In 2010, these efforts started to bear fruit, with the announcement of the Whirligig Park project. Commercial and residential redevelopment projects followed. Today, these projects have resulted in significant and sustained investment in the city's downtown district.



Over the span of a decade, investment in downtown Wilson grew from about **\$1.8 million** a year to more than **\$61 million** anticipated over the next two years.

### Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park

Vollis Simpson, a farm machinery repairman, made giant kinetic sculptures at his family farm just outside Wilson. His sculptures, also known as whirligigs, had long attracted visitors. In 2010, a public-private partnership among the city of Wilson, the North Carolina Arts Council and Wilson Downtown Properties sought to move the sculptures to Wilson's downtown district and open a new public park. Leveraging \$1.3 million in grant funding from federal, state, local and private sources, Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park opened to the public in November 2017.



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### By the numbers:

- More than 100,000 visitors annually.
- A total of 100 days of events at the park in 2019, including farmers markets, concerts and wedding receptions.
- About 40,000 visitors attend the annual Whirligig Festival, held in November each year.
- The Hi-Dollar tobacco warehouse nearby was redeveloped as part of the \$14 million Whirligig Station project. The development includes 96 apartments, a restaurant and a museum/gift shop.



### Assessment Grants: Western Auto/Nash Street (2013) and Wilson Furniture Lofts (2014)

Two residential redevelopment projects in downtown Wilson received \$25,000 in EPA funding for phase one environmental site assessments for initial investigations. "It was tough. No one had developed residential uses downtown in 75 to 100 years," recalled Holton Wilkerson, a managing partner at CommunitySmith, the developer that led the projects. "Getting banks to sign on was challenging because there was nothing else like it." After the assessments found no further cleanup was required at the sites, both redevelopment projects moved forward. They achieved 100% occupancy within several months of their completion, providing 13 apartments, including two live/work units, at Western Auto/Nash Street, and five loft apartments, including two live/work units, at Wilson Furniture Lofts.



### For More Information:

EPA Brownfields Program  
Website

[www.epa.gov/brownfields](http://www.epa.gov/brownfields)

EPA Region 4 Brownfields  
(404) 562-8729

## Historic Hotel Revival: Cherry Hotel (ongoing)

An \$18 million redevelopment project is set to transform the historic Cherry Hotel into a major visitor destination and conference center. The project received \$85,000 in EPA assessment grants for initial investigations and a revolving loan fund of over \$650,000 for asbestos, mold and lead abatement. Local government leadership positioned the property for redevelopment, and Cherry Hotel LLC responded to the city's request for proposals in 2016. Spurred by EPA grants, the revolving loan fund and state historic preservation tax credits, current development plans call for 101 guest rooms, conference/meeting rooms and a two-story ballroom in the heart of downtown. The facility will create an estimated 25 to 30 jobs. Anthony Albanese, a managing partner with Cherry Hotel LLC, described his experience working with the grant and loan funding programs. "You have an opportunity through EPA and the funding available through these grants to take these buildings and give them a new life," he reflected. "It's a way to preserve and take care of historic buildings to benefit the community."



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City of Wilson, NC.

## Leveraging Resources

Each brownfield redevelopment project in Wilson has helped propel the next project forward, a ripple effect that continues to this day. "Brownfield grants have had a major influence on us trying to redevelop properties," noted Michelle Brown, the city's senior planning and brownfield program manager. "When we get assessment money, we have a lot of parties fighting for the funding now." The city has gone through the funding so quickly that it has applied for supplemental funding and additional assessment resources. Even when no funding is available, city staff have found that developers and other parties are now more eager to take on brownfield redevelopment. "We have all these success stories that have brought a lot of comfort to smaller developers," added Michelle Brown.

The city is also strengthening brownfield funding resources with local economic development incentives, historic preservation tax credits and opportunity zones. In addition, the city has maintained its leadership role in redevelopment efforts, acquiring several vacant downtown lots, conducting environmental assessments and cleanups to support their future use, and putting them back on the market. In addition to supporting downtown projects, the city is also targeting brownfield redevelopment along the Highway 301 Corridor.

Today, the city of Wilson, North Carolina, is a leading national example of the benefits of brownfield redevelopment. About a decade ago, before the city received EPA grant resources and revolving loan and assessment funds, downtown Wilson experienced about \$1.8 million of investment a year. In contrast, over the next two years alone, the city anticipates more than \$61 million in public and private investment. Looking back and looking forward, Rodger Lentz, the city's chief planning and development officer, encourages other cities to look into support from EPA's Brownfields Program. "If a city is considering brownfield redevelopment, they should attend a regional or national EPA brownfields conference – that is where I learned about the revolving loan funds," he said. "EPA staff have been so helpful."