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Brownfields jeopardizing economy and environment

Did you know that Alberta's environmental stewardship is being jeopardized by an increasing number of contaminated brownfield sites?

Brownfields are derelict properties where past actions have resulted in actual or perceived contamination that is preventing redevelopment. While abandoned gas stations are common, other examples include automotive repair shops and dry cleaners. Almost every small community across Alberta has at least one significant brownfield site and they are also very common in our larger urban areas.

As the owners of these properties often choose to pay their property taxes as a cheaper alternative to addressing their

responsibility to remediate the site, these properties sit as an eyesore and often a safety hazard and have limited, if any, use in their communities. In other cases, the property owner may be willing to remediate the property but is hesitant to do so without an effective certification process through the provincial government.

The end result is hundreds of properties across the province that detract from investment, blight our landscapes, and are barriers to economic and social development in their communities. Given that Alberta's Land Use Framework calls for more efficient use of land, it is very timely that responsible action is taken to ensure these properties are remediated.



Photo: Brownfields are eyesores that occupy valuable real estate in Alberta, such as this former gas station, which remains an empty lot in Vegreville, AB.

Success in other Provinces

Nova Scotia

Nova Scotia's Contaminated Sites Regulations and Ministerial Protocols were released in July of this year and are being recognized across the country for their clarity and simplicity.

The Canadian Urban Institute nominated these regulations for a "Brownie Award" given their ability to provide confirmation of remediation and to provide liability closure.

Nova Scotia's website, novascotia.ca/nse/contaminatedsites provides very helpful information and guidance to municipalities, land owners and developers.

British Columbia

B.C. has a mechanism similar to remediation certificates, called certificates of compliance, which apply liability closure to entire sites. The province has issued over 1,300 certificates since 1997.

In 2003, the Environment Management Act was tightened to make the requirements for the certificate more stringent and lessen the chance of the remediation being found to be insufficient at a future date.

The ministry has had feedback from developers that the certificates provide the assurance they need to move ahead with projects and have been crucial to securing project funding from lending institutions.

This newsletter is compliments of the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association



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continued

In 2010, AUMA called for the development of a provincial brownfield redevelopment strategy. In response, the province struck a Brownfield Redevelopment Working Group comprised of representatives of municipalities, the fuel sector, the building industry and the provincial government and asked them to develop recommendations for addressing brownfield sites.

After a year of diligent collaboration, the working group tabled a report in April 2012 to the responsible Ministers of Environment and Sustainable Resource Development and Municipal Affairs containing practical recommendations to resolve the challenge of these contaminated sites. Despite AUMA's year and a half of follow-up and discussion with these ministries, it is disappointing that the province has not taken any action to respond to these recommendations. In the meantime, other provinces

(see below and sidebar on page one) are leading the way in responsible environmental stewardship while Alberta lags behind.

The working group advised the province that the most important action is to provide an inspection and certification process that assures property owners that they have fully discharged their responsibility to remediate the site to acceptable standards. By addressing this liability issue, current and future property owners have the required assurances to move ahead and invest in redevelopment.

Members of the working group are eager to assist the province in working through the details of how their recommendations could be implemented. We look forward to leadership from the province so municipalities, industry and the province can work together to move these important actions forward.

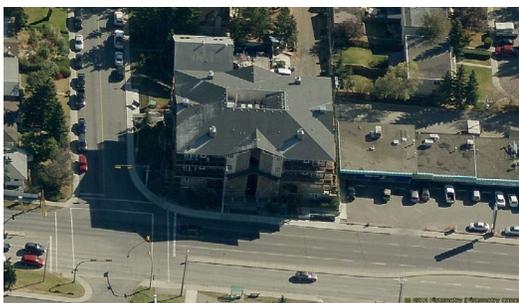


Photo: 14th Street, Calgary (above, 2007 and below, 2013). When conditions are right for remediation, brownfield redevelopment can be a catalyst for community revitalization through residential and commercial investment.

Summary of Recommendations for Redevelopment of Brownfields

- Provide liability closure to enable redevelopment through improving the remediation certificate program and creating a no further action required certificate
- Provide financial tools (grants, community revitalization levy and tax deferrals) to enable redevelopment
- Clarify risk management plan process (which would enable sites that have continuing contamination challenges to be managed in an environmentally safe manner)
- Require publicly accessible registration of brownfield sites
- Establish a provincial brownfield coordinator office to build capacity for redevelopment within provincial and municipal governments and the development sector
- Develop and implement a province wide education program

Tank Site Remediation Program sets foundation for future action

Since 2000 the Government of Alberta's Tank Site Remediation program has provided just over 91 million dollars to municipalities and owners of small gas stations to clean up contamination from underground petroleum tanks. There has been a total of 1150 sites in the program. Of those, 786 sites have been remediated as of June 30, 2013, while the remaining sites have ongoing contamination issues.

While the program provided an excellent first step in address the issue, funding has run out and hundreds of sites still require remediation. Still other sites which have been remediated thanks to the program remain vacant due to ongoing liability concerns which could be addressed through implementing the working group's recommended changes to the remediation certificate program.

For more information about AUMA, please visit www.auma.ca or call 780-433-4431.



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