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Smart growth needs cleanup funds

By Kristina Egan and David Begelfer | May 1, 2005

WE ALL know that providing housing and good jobs are the most pressing concerns facing the Commonwealth today. Unfortunately, cities and towns across the state are about to lose their ability to transform thousands of vacant, underused lots into homes, shops, and offices. One of the few proven economic development and smart growth tools is about to die on the vine unless the Legislature acts.

In 1998, to encourage the redevelopment of vacant and contaminated land known as brownfields, the Massachusetts Legislature made a one-time allocation of \$30 million to create the Brownfields Redevelopment Fund. It provided funding for the assessment and clean-up of sites that would otherwise be environmental, health, and public safety hazards. Thanks to this funding, these redeveloped sites have brought new economic life into blighted areas and provided hope to once fractured communities.

Since the Brownfields Redevelopment Fund was established, Mass Development has awarded funding to assess or clean up 317 contaminated sites in 92 communities. More than 4,000 units of housing, much of it affordable, are being created. Projects aided by the fund have financed retail, commercial, and office space -- creating jobs and tax revenue. The fund has also helped to create mixed use developments and manufacturing facilities, transforming polluted property into clean community centers and schools. Boston Mayor Thomas Menino recently stated that in Boston alone, the Brownfields Fund has helped to revitalize 20 abandoned properties.

Although the numbers are compelling, the projects tell the real story.

In Dorchester, five acres of former industrial land are now home to a new building hosting a state-of-the-art graphic design and printing company. The company, Spire, created more than 135 jobs in Dorchester at all skill levels, while generating \$110,000 in property taxes.

In Lawrence, a badly deteriorating block was revitalized and is now the home of a playground, renovated affordable housing, and a vibrant community association.

In Williamstown, an abandoned historic mill was transformed into 90 homes and new commercial space. The development will create up to 150 construction jobs and promises an annual \$250,000 in real estate taxes.

These are not isolated examples. By any measure, the program has been a success, turning around neighborhoods while fulfilling the need for housing, environmental cleanup, tax revenues, and job creation. In addition, the fund's projects fit virtually all of the requirements of smart growth, an area in which the Legislature took the lead last session and a top priority for the Romney administration. The sites that benefit from the fund are often near downtowns or public transportation and provide developers with competitive opportunities to build in existing neighborhoods where critical infrastructure is already in place.

Tragically, all of this progress will stop when the Legislature's initial \$30 million allocation to the Brownfields Redevelopment Fund runs out this summer. Developers are eyeing dozens of opportunities for new reuse opportunities that might be lost if the Brownfields Fund is allowed to

wither away. Casualties would include projects now in the pipeline at Mass Development. It would also include parcels like a lot in Plymouth that has been abandoned for 12 years and won't be cleaned up without this critical funding, or a former auto body shop in Dorchester scheduled to be converted into a community youth center.

State leaders from both parties claim to be on a mission to create jobs in Massachusetts. Brownfields reclamation has proven itself in that area, creating thousands of jobs while transforming wastelands into clean, safe community assets. Furthermore, with an estimated \$42 in investment generated for every state dollar spent on a brownfields project, it's a financially sound economic development strategy.

The fate of this successful smart growth program is now in the hands of our state's leaders. Legislation filed by Senator Mark Montigny of New Bedford and Representative Jeffrey Sanchez of Boston will recapitalize the Brownfields Redevelopment Fund with \$30 million for continued site assessment, cleanup, and redevelopment. At the same time, the bill would make the Brownfields Tax Credit, a complementary redevelopment tool due to expire in 2005, permanent and more usable.

A host of problems -- pollution, blight, sprawl, joblessness, and the desperate need for housing -- are finding at least a partial answer in one program. That is an investment worth continuing.

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