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Help Is Available to Redevelop Polluted Industrial Sites

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With its continual need for flat land, West Virginia would do well to put its manufacturing expertise to work making good land out of bad.

Story by Pam Kasey

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MORGANTOWN -- With its continual need for flat land, West Virginia would do well to put its manufacturing expertise to work making good land out of bad.

With those words, West Virginia Secretary of Commerce Kelley Goes opened the 2009 West Virginia Brownfields Conference, "Re-Energizing Communities," Sept. 1 at the Waterfront Place Hotel in Morgantown.

"Maybe your angle is toxic waste," Goes said, surveying an audience of 180 from across the state who had gathered to learn about redeveloping contaminated industrial sites.

Or maybe, she said, it's water quality or esthetics or community development.

"But I look out here and all I see are economic developers," she said. "No matter what angle you come at it from ... it's money and benefit and improvement for the state of West Virginia and the citizens of West Virginia."

A brownfield is any property that has development potential but is sitting vacant because there it may be contaminated, according to George Carico, program director for the Southern West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Center at Marshall University.

Because of its history in heavy industry, West Virginia has brownfields sites that Goes numbered in the hundreds: former metals and glass factories, abandoned chemical plants and mine-scarred lands as well as more common sites such as vacant service stations and dry cleaners.

By putting in the effort to redevelop brownfields, communities can create jobs, increase the tax base, reduce safety concerns and beautify their neighborhoods, Carico said.

They also can preserve greenfields -- lands that have never been developed -- and prevent sprawl.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency provides grants on a competitive basis for brownfields site assessment and clean-up and, with the help of the northern and southern West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Centers, West Virginia communities have received more than \$5 million for those purposes since 2005.

Although grants cannot be used simply to clean up eyesores, Carico said, they may be used for a wide variety of redevelopment purposes ranging from industrial and commercial to housing and recreation.

An additional funding opportunity, the FOCUS WV Brownfields Mini-Grant Program, was the subject of a surprise lunchtime announcement.

In Jan. 2009, the Northern West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Center's Foundation for Overcoming Challenges and Utilizing Strengths (FOCUS) awarded grants of \$5,000 to fifteen projects in northern counties to create redevelopment visions for underutilized sites with good development potential.

Follow-up grants of \$12,000 were announced at the conference for five of those projects: Brooke-Hancock Regional Planning and Development Council for the Weirton Rail Yard; Friends of the Cheat for the Cheat River coal prep plant in Preston County; Friends of Deckers Creek for the abandoned J&B filling station in Reedsville; Marion Regional Development Corp. for the Owens-Illinois glass factory in Fairmont; and the Rowlesburg Revitalization Committee for the old Rowlesburg School.

The grants will help implement each group's plans to revitalize brownfields in their communities, according to Mary Hunt-Lieving, senior program officer for the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation.

Conference sessions shared redevelopment case studies, detailed funding opportunities available for brownfields site assessment and clean-up, assisted with grant-writing and offered expert critique of project ideas.

Goes underscored her support for the work to clean up and redevelop brownfields and said she hoped to receive e-mails after the conference asking for specific assistance from the Department of Commerce.

The 2009 West Virginia Brownfields Conference was sponsored by Triad Engineering Inc., Jackson Kelly PLLC, Thrasher Engineering and H.C. Nutting Co.

Conference materials and other resources may be found on the Web site of the West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Centers at www.wvbrownfields.com.

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