Michigan Brownfield Redevelopment: A Shifting focus from Environmental Contamination to Economic Development

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The Creation of Brownfields

A Brownfield site as defined by the EPA “means real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant”. Below is how the combination of environmental contamination and redevelopment needs have combined in Michigan to create Brownfields.

Environmental contamination:

- Michigan peaks in manufacturing employment in 1967 with 1,044,800 employed.
- The Resource Conservation and Recovery Act is passed in 1976 which took a cradle to grave approach to handling our country's municipal and industrial waste.
- The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (also known as the Superfund Act) was passed in 1980 to address sites that posed immediate threat to public and environmental health.

Abandonment of sites: (See Figure 1 for a case study of Detroit.)

- The move of manufacturing from center city to suburbs in the 1960’s.
- The shift of manufacturing from the Frost belt (Midwest and Northeast) to the Sun Belt (South and Southeast) in the 1970’s.
- Manufacturing begins to move overseas in the 1980’s and continues to in the 1990’s.

Michigan’s approach to Brownfields

Michigan’s approach to cleaning up Brownfields has been to use public funds to attract private investment.

What does this mean in practice? It means that areas with active land markets where private investment is already being attracted are also areas most capable of addressing both the redevelopment and environmental contamination concerns presented by Brownfields.

This marks a shift in focus from primarily addressing the issue of environmental contamination posed by Brownfields to the issue of redevelopment.

A great example of this is Michigan’s Act 381 which allows Brownfield Redevelopment Authorities to use school and local tax increment financing to fund demolition, lead and asbestos abatement, infrastructure improvements, and site preparation activities.

Although the recycling of previously used urban land is favorable to continual sprawl at the edge of cities, this focus on redevelopment shifts Michigan’s effort away from addressing the problem of historic environmental contamination. As table 1 shows, the cities that benefit the most from this shift in focus are not our industrial cores. Figure 2 also shows this shift of focus from the industrial core to new geographical centers of development.

Conclusions

The dual nature of a Brownfield as both a site with actual or potential environmental contamination as well as a site needing redevelopment creates an inherent divergence of interests. While neither goal is outside of the scope of effective environmental policy, one half of the definition addresses land preservation and recycling while the other half address cleaning up past contamination.

Based on my findings I would suggest Michigan realize its Brownfield legislation has become a tool for redevelopment and either strengthen the environmental contamination requirements for site approval or separate the issue of environmental site remediation from redevelopment and create a program that focuses more directly on cleaning up our old industrial cores.

References