



## *Brownfields Redevelopment and Greenfields Protection: Building Bridges for Sustainable Development in the Great Lakes Region*

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In releasing its *Sustainable America* report in March 1996, the President's Council on Sustainable Development offered a series of operating principles to guide efforts toward a sustainable future. One such principle states that "environmental progress will depend on individual, institutional and corporate responsibility, commitment and stewardship." The President's Council also highlighted the need for government/private sector/citizen group partnerships. Further, it placed a special focus on "sustainable communities" and the role of brownfields redevelopment and greenfields preservation in achieving sustainability.

In 1998 the Great Lakes Commission embarked on a collaborative effort called *Bridges* that responded to the President's Council principles by building bridges among Great Lakes states, provinces and localities, and among the public, private and not-for-profit sectors for the purpose of brownfields redevelopment and greenfields protection within the Great Lakes region. The National Wildlife Federation-Great Lakes Natural Resource Center and the Council of Great Lakes Industries were the Commission's partners in the project, while funding was provided by the C.S. Mott Foundation.

The *Great Lakes Commission Strategic Plan*, as part of its sustainable develop-

ment goals, calls for promoting responsible land use through brownfields redevelopment and greenfields preservation. Brownfields are urban areas where environmental contamination presents a barrier to redevelopment, whereas greenfields are agricultural and open space lands on the urban fringe at risk of development.

### ***Brownfields, greenfields linked***

Results from the *Bridges* project were recently published by the Great Lakes Commission in a report titled *Linking Brownfields Redevelopment and Greenfields Protection for Sustainable Development*. Available in print and online, the report outlines a series of strategic actions to promote and link brownfields redevelopment and greenfields protection. Each strategic action is accompanied by a rationale and, where appropriate, examples of similar policies or programs already in place in the Great Lakes region. Some strategic actions are specific to brownfields redevelopment, some are for greenfields protection, while others are intended to link both types of efforts. Those actions are listed on the inside pages of this summary.

Great Lakes public, private and non-profit leaders are urged to carefully consider each of the strategic actions and implement those that will reverse damaging land-use trends and enhance existing efforts to promote sustainability in their

areas. The Great Lakes Commission will assist Great Lakes jurisdictions and relevant private and non-profit interests in advancing these strategic actions as part of its ongoing commitment to sustainable land use in the Great Lakes region.

### ***A low-density trend***

Linking brownfields redevelopment and greenfields protection requires addressing a variety of land-use issues affecting the region. A section of the full report on development and farmland conversion in the Great Lakes region highlights the continued trend toward low-density development, along with population shifts in selected Great Lakes metropolitan areas, and sheds light on their combined impact on farmland in the region.

In the Great Lakes region, metropolitan areas have generally been gaining population while nearly half of medium and large cities have been losing population. The rate of development continues to far outpace population increases and much of this occurs at the expense of farmland and open space.

In Great Lakes states between 1982 and 1997, the amount of developed, non-federal land increased by 27 percent and more than 11 million acres of farmland was converted to other uses -- an area greater than lakes Erie and Ontario combined.

# Strategic Actions

## For Brownfields Redevelopment and Greenfields Protection



*The following strategic actions are presented for consideration by public, private and non-profit leaders throughout the Great Lakes region. They are not listed in order of priority, nor will they all be appropriate or necessary in all cases; depending on local circumstances, certain actions may be more timely or appropriate than others. However, they provide an excellent starting point for the review and development of policies, workplans and priorities in the interest of promoting more efficient and sustainable use of our precious land resources.*

### A. Brownfields and Greenfields Linkages

#### State/Provincial Actions

1. Establish a special commission or task force to evaluate real estate tax policies as they pertain to greenfields protection and brownfields redevelopment/urban revitalization. Such an effort should include an assessment of the potential for:

- a) a greenfields conversion tax;
- b) a real estate transfer tax;
- c) split taxation system whereby land (not buildings) is taxed in certain areas; and
- d) regional tax sharing.

2. Enact statewide legislation authorizing the establishment of the mandatory type Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) programs within one or more counties or multiple municipalities (i.e., townships, towns, villages or cities). The legislation would encourage multiple jurisdictions or a single county to work together to establish TDR programs, including determination of appropriate sending and receiving areas. Sending districts are priority areas for protection while receiving districts are priority areas for growth and development.

3. Adopt state/provincial planning goals that promote urban revitalization, greenfields protection, and transit and/or pedestrian oriented development patterns that enhance neighborhoods, reduce public infrastructure and service costs, and discourage sprawl. In support of such planning goals, states and provinces should also:

- a) Review and where necessary, modify state policies and programs to ensure their consistency in support of state planning goals and/or brownfields redevelopment/urban revitalization and greenfields protection;
- b) Adopt policies that direct public investments (where state/provincial money is involved) for roads, sewers, water lines, schools and other growth-related projects into already developed areas and avoid greenfields; and
- c) Establish concurrency policies that require public facilities (i.e., sewer/water, schools, roads) to be in place (or consistent with a capital improvements program) before new development can proceed.

4. Require coordination among state agencies for state-funded projects that will directly result in changes in land use and establish a process for multiagency evaluation of such projects that: a) ensures that such projects support the state planning goals and/or the mutual goals of greenfields protection and brownfields redevelopment/urban

revitalization and b) requires the consideration of alternatives where the project is inconsistent with local land-use plans.

5. Encourage the development of local comprehensive plans and provide funding to support their development. Such funding should be contingent on plans that reflect state/provincial planning goals or that include designated areas for growth and also for protection; promote urban revitalization, greenfields protection and transit and/or pedestrian-oriented development patterns that enhance neighborhoods and reduce public infrastructure and service costs and discourage sprawl; and are prepared through local interjurisdictional agreements or in cooperation with other municipalities.

6. Require that zoning ordinances be consistent with comprehensive plans.

7. Tie state funding for brownfields cleanup and redevelopment to land-use planning by encouraging consistency with up-to-date comprehensive plans as a condition for brownfields funding, particularly in metropolitan and other urbanized areas.

8. Establish a statewide study effort to focus on the issue of interjurisdictional or regional metropolitan governance as it relates to controlling sprawl-related local government costs.

#### Local Actions

9. Communities of all sizes should consider adoption of urban growth boundaries and greenbelts as growth management tools.

10. Encourage the use of settlement monies that accrue from litigation regarding environmental cleanup or open space creation/protection for brownfields redevelopment/urban revitalization and/or greenfields protection.

11. Reduce unimproved, secondary road mileage in urban fringe counties through the sale/donation or vacation/abandonment of selected rights-of-way to adjacent farm operators, trail organizations and land trusts.

12. Conduct greenfields impact assessments and levy associated impact fees for the usual infrastructure and public service costs as well as for ecological damages. Consideration should be given to incorporating such fees into the permitting process and devising fees that also account for a portion of long-term infrastructure

maintenance and public service costs. Also, local governments should adopt impact coordination rules whereby each community must consider the impact of planning/zoning and development decisions on neighboring communities/jurisdictions.

13. As part of comprehensive plans or as an independent effort, jurisdictions in urban fringe areas should:

- a) Inventory wildlife habitat acreage and characterize its capacity to support viable plant and animal populations;
- b) Inventory cultural and historic resources for tracts of undeveloped land and develop mitigation/protection measures in advance of development proposals.

### Private Actions

14. Implement business location decisionmaking policies that are sensitive to the issues of greenfields protection and brownfields redevelopment.

## B. Greenfields Protection

### State/Provincial Actions

15. Establish a comprehensive statewide farmland protection program that includes funding for farmland preservation, tax relief for farmers, disincentives for farmland speculation/conversion, and a public education campaign about the attributes and benefits of farmland. Use/value assessment with a meaningful recapture (penalty); tax credits for farms in counties that have adopted a farmland preservation plan; voluntary agricultural district programs; and state funding to support local purchase of development rights programs are specific policies that should be considered.

16. Adopt a policy of farmland/greenfields mitigation that requires the state to purchase (or pay the costs of purchasing) the development rights on other farmland/greenfields, specifically those designated for protection, where state-funded projects will directly result in farmland or greenfields.

### State/Provincial, Local and Private Actions

17. Make risk of conversion or development a priority eligibility criteria for state, local and non-governmental open space land and easement acquisition programs and strategically fund land and easement acquisition to create buffers/greenbelts around medium-sized cities and metropolitan areas.

### State/Provincial and Local Actions

18. Establish a tax increment financing (TIF) program for greenfields that earmarks the TIF revenue for greenfields protection, and infrastructure and public service maintenance in the same jurisdiction

19. Promote large lot size zoning in transitional areas as a buffer for farmland.

20. Promote city farmers' markets and linkages to urban fringe farmsteads with both organic/regular production practices.

## C. Brownfields/Urban Revitalization

### Federal, State/Provincial and Local Actions

21. Establish new initiatives for designating local historic districts and expand the federal historic preservation income tax credit to include a wide range of residential and commercial structures.

22. Modify brownfield grant and loan programs to allow non-governmental organizations like community groups and business associations to be eligible to apply for these funding assistance tools.

23. Great Lakes states and provinces should adopt public participation policies within existing brownfields cleanup and redevelopment programs that provide meaningful opportunities for neighborhood involvement throughout the cleanup and redevelopment process, and support the use of neighborhood-based land-use plans.

### State/Provincial Actions

24. Enact legislation to reform condemnation and demolition procedures and combat fraud/negligence when owners avoid responsibility for abandoned buildings. Innovative funding, along with more personnel and equipment for abandoned building demolition, are needed to cope with a serious situation.

25. Provide incentives for brownfields cleanup to residential or unrestricted use levels with special emphasis on mixed use and affordable housing projects.

### State/Provincial and Local Actions

26. The leading state/provincial agency, in cooperation with local government and community groups, should organize informational and capacity-building educational workshops periodically in targeted metropolitan areas with an emphasis on economically challenged urban neighborhoods. Neighborhood residents, representatives of local and state brownfields programs, financial institutions, and private developers should be encouraged to participate in and even help organize these workshops to share information and experiences related to brownfields redevelopment.

27. In cooperation with relevant state agencies, local governments should produce and disseminate a community development guidebook to serve as a resource for community members interested in pursuing a brownfields redevelopment project.

### Local Actions

28. Through the use of fee incentives and permit expediting, promote small-scale infill development in urban areas.

29. Adopt local zoning ordinances and building codes that are flexible, and design standards that promote mixed uses to facilitate rehabilitation and redevelopment of older buildings and neighborhoods.

### Local and Private Actions

30. Encourage design competitions for redevelopment of central city and first-ring suburban commercial nodes where higher density and mixed-use zoning are combined with traffic calming initiatives.

### Private Actions

31. Private sector employers and financial institutions should review policies and programs and, where appropriate, modify them to encourage investments such as infill development, transit-oriented and pedestrian-friendly development, and location-efficient mortgages that will contribute to neighborhood revitalization or enhancement.

32. Create a private-sector financing pool to attract bank and corporate capital, as well as leverage government funds for the purpose of restoring brownfields.

The data analyzed for the report confirm that, despite a relatively stable population around the Great Lakes, people and the development supporting them continue to spread out. On the land, this is manifested in sprawling development in the form of strip malls, subdivisions built on former farmland and open space and new, wide roads connecting them.

### **Current policies**

The report also addresses state and provincial brownfields and greenfields policies in the Great Lakes region. A section on barriers to brownfields redevelopment examines policies designed to overcome those barriers, including liability reforms, cleanup standards and financial assistance. Community involvement in brownfields decision-making is addressed in its own section, which features the results of two local workshops.

Another section on greenfields describes the state of agricultural lands in the Great Lakes region and factors affecting farmland loss. It highlights more than a dozen policies and practices used by the states and provinces to protect agricultural land, ranging from tax incentives for farmland to conservation easements

An analysis of both brownfields and greenfields policies is reflected in a special section that examines selected weaknesses in exist-

tainment of brownfields contamination, land-use planning, smart growth, and the transfer of development rights to guide development and preserve agricultural lands and other green space.

Four case studies from around the Great Lakes region – on finding room for large development projects, on how counties around Chicago are addressing growth pressures, on efforts to advance planning and smart growth in Great Lakes states, and on the Ohio Conservation and Revitalization Fund – further illustrate key issues, challenges and opportunities in linking brownfields redevelopment and greenfields protection.

### **The next steps**

The report is an important first step in providing a regionwide approach to linking brownfields redevelopment and greenfields protection policies and tools so that they reinforce and complement one another. Though numerous tools exist to promote brownfields redevelopment and greenfields protection, the implementation of such tools has been uneven in the Great Lakes region.

Where the tools have been used, they have been applied by separate interests with different and sometimes competing priorities. For the most part, the focus has been on either brownfields cleanup and redevelopment, or protection of open space and agricultural lands, but not both. *Linking Brownfields Redevelopment and Greenfields Protection* recognizes that we can no longer afford to pursue a fragmented approach and sets forth an agenda for addressing these two issues in a complementary way.

By highlighting successes as well as weaknesses, the report promotes the transfer of successful policies and programs to other jurisdictions for regionwide application and serves as a guide for policy reform and/or development. If adopted and implemented by public, private and non-profit sectors, the strategic actions presented in this report will do more than simply redevelop brownfields sites or protect farms from development. They will promote more efficient use of the land and, in doing so, can revitalize urban areas, create viable communities where people live and work, and preserve the unique quality of rural areas and open spaces.



*New home construction and other development consumes large areas of farmland, woods, open fields and other greenfields. The challenge is to come up with efficient forms of development that help preserve greenfields. GLC file photos.*



*Decaying industrial building in downtown Detroit, Mich., where numerous brownfield sites await redevelopment. Photo credit: Victoria Pebbles.*

ing state and provincial policies and suggests ways to improve them. Cutting-edge and sometimes controversial issues and policies are explored, such as cleanup versus con-

## **Report availability**

The full report is available online at [www.glc.org/bridges](http://www.glc.org/bridges). Print copies of the 80-page document, bound and collated, are available for \$15 from the Great Lakes Commission, 400 Fourth St., Argus II Building, Ann Arbor, MI 48103 or e-mail [glc@glc.org](mailto:glc@glc.org).



*Cover photo: Mackinac Bridge construction, Al Ballert*