

This land is your land ...

Brownfields are everywhere in and around Portland, prompting a concerted effort to explore options for this property that grows in value with the city's need for space

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They're everywhere, but often go unnoticed — the empty lots and vacant buildings that dot many of Portland's thoroughfares and neighborhoods. Overgrown with innumerable weeds or concealed by a layer of asphalt, they hardly catch the eye. But in a city that projects a population growth of 200,000 people over the next 20 years, the potential for development on brownfields will play a vital role in the future of neighborhoods around them. These vacant fields are commonplace occurrences on outer East Portland's landscape, and some area neighborhood associations hope property owners will sell to developers who will build businesses that benefit their communities rather than pave the way for more fast-food chains and convenience stores.

But there is more to these formerly developed brownfields, than their unknown future. Many are toxic or under suspicion of being toxic. In many cases, the existence of contamination is unknown because there is no requirement that property owners disclose environmental hazards on their property to the state. A vacant lot may have housed a gas station, dry cleaner or other operator of toxic chemicals in its earlier days, so before it can be developed, it has to be tested and made safe if necessary. In the meantime, historical pollutants can pose health risks to those close in proximity.

Earlier this year, the Department of Environmental Quality began work on an EPA-funded pilot project to identify and assess former dry cleaner lots in Portland and Tillamook, many of which are brownfields. Dry cleaners use the carcinogenic solvent tetrachloroethylene, more commonly known as PCE. While its use today is highly regulated and managed, in the past many dry cleaners dumped the used solvent out the door of their businesses, contaminating the property for years to come.

Project lead Sarah Miller scoured old phone books and directories to determine where the cleaners had been located and to see if any of the sites are in close proximity to schools, churches, residences or other buildings where vulnerable people might be spending a lot of time. Thus far, DEQ has discovered 40 historic dry cleaners near 82nd Avenue that were previously unknown. Some are brownfields, and some are businesses. A Mexican restaurant and a horse tack shop are on the short list of former dry cleaners that DEQ is examining for its pilot project.

Miller said that the most common effects felt from exposure include "headaches, dizziness and sleepiness." Long-term effects can be much more serious. According to the EPA, all routes of exposure to PCE can be carcinogenic, and in some cases lead to reproductive and central nervous system disorders.

There are currently more than 100 sites in Portland receiving EPA funds to help with the assessment and cleanup process. Often property owners will foot the bill. Some properties sit un-assessed while their owners wait for property values to go up. Many times contamination isn't discovered until a buyer comes along and investigates.

According to a report released by the City of Portland in 2012, there are approximately 910 acres of brownfield properties in Portland, and the development of those properties could result in 31,000 new jobs.

Metro, the area's regional government, has also formed a broad coalition of organizations, businesses and interested parties to address the future viability of these properties. The group, which started this year and meets quarterly, is looking at various options for developing the properties — where viable — including incentives for remediation to examining existing laws and perhaps future legislation to support future projects.

Groundwork Portland, an organization that works with community members in low-income neighborhoods to reclaim underutilized land for purposes that will benefit the community, has been focusing on the potential of some of these sites for gardens, parks and community centers. Earlier this month, nonprofits Groundwork and Know Your City hosted a bus tour of "The Dirty Side of Portland," in which both a vacant and a reclaimed site were visited. At right are several of the sites on the tour, which gives a snapshot of the amount of land currently in limbo over the cost and complications of contamination.



The dots on this map, prepared for Metro, represent a selection of known brownfields in the Portland metro area, identified by the Department of Environmental Quality. The shaded areas are populations with above-average levels of poverty. The map was prepared by Maul Foster Alongi and published in Dec 2012.

The Environmental Protection Agency classifies brownfields as properties where "the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant."



Legend

- Reported DEQ Sites

Metro Equity Analysis

- Light Gray: Above Average
- Dark Gray: Significantly Above Average

822 NE Emerson Street

This narrow plot, nestled snugly between two houses on Emerson Street, was riddled with concentrated lead from an affordable housing unit that burned down. This type of contamination is common on sites where old residences once stood. The land was placed in trust with Oregon Sustainable Agricultural Land Trust, and all the contaminated soil was moved to the back of the lot and fenced off. Groundwork has worked with community youth to renovate the space and turn it into a community garden and outdoor learning center.



85th Avenue & NE Siskiyou Street

This expansive property in Northeast Portland faces a residential neighborhood. It housed a landfill in the 1970s and was closed and capped in 1982. It later served as a driving range, but has sat vacant for decades. Neighbors worked with former Mayor Sam Adams to stop a Canadian firm that proposed a big-box shopping center from buying the land seven years ago because they feared a Walmart might move in. In 2009, the Oregonian reported that at one point, the property owner fell behind on regular methane tests required by state regulators, causing neighbors environmental concerns. DEQ tests show that methane continues to leak from the property.

3300 N Williams Street

This site housed Ellis Dry Cleaner from 1950 to 1986, and is now in the midst of the cleanup process. Soil tested by DEQ showed elevated levels of PCE, and air tests inside both a home and a retail space adjacent to the property also confirmed the presence of the carcinogen. According to DEQ's Brownfields Coordinator Rebecca Wells-Albers, her agency recently discovered that the owner of the cleaner regularly dumped PCE onto his property. Shown here are the extraction wells, pipes and the vacuum-like machine used to suck the harmful vapors out of the ground. The vapors are then pushed through carbon filters that are swapped out regularly. A solution was also injected into the ground to create a welcoming environment for microorganisms that eat away at the pollutant. Wells-Albers said the vacuum will run continuously for a total of three to four years, maybe even longer, before it has extracted all the harmful vapors.



PHOTOS BY EMILY GREEN

3330 SE Division

According to EPA spokesman Mike Slater, this former gas station and auto shop was assessed and cleaned up with EPA funding and other investments made by the redevelopment project. An apartment building with retail space below is currently mid construction on this desirable plot of land located amongst popular restaurants, shops and a slew of other new apartment buildings in inner Southeast Portland.

