

The Portland Observer

## Sustainability SPECIAL



# Toxic Sites Made Useful Again

## Community garden serves as example

BY JAKE THOMAS  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

On a warm morning on Emerson Street in northeast Portland, volunteers clad in Carharts and dirty jeans rake pitch black soil over a vacant lot.

It's been nearly 15 years of back-and-forth with the state and the county, testing soil, and recruiting

overgrown with weeds for about 50 years will flourish as a community garden.

This site is a brownfield, a property that people are reluctant to use because of either real or perceived contamination. And as more people flock to Oregon, the use of such properties will become increasingly important in creating sustainable and healthy communities.

Brownfields often sit idle for years, contributing to urban blight and presenting potential health hazards. North and northeast Portland has no shortage of these sites, and as the area sees new interest economic interest in it, many are being developed.

When TriMet began preparing for the installation of the MAX Yellow Line in the late 1990s, the mass transit agency initiated a brownfield inventory along North



PHOTO BY JAKE THOMAS/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER  
Teri Phillips sets aside her cane and picks up a rake to spread around soil at a lot on Northeast Emerson Street. This site used to be a brownfield, a polluted site, and will be opened up as a community garden later this month.

Interstate Avenue. With a grant from the EPA, it took an inventory of brownfield sites in the area. It identified two former gas stations that required little cleanup and now house office space as well as a health clinic run by Providence.

"There's got to be some sort of excitement and desire to be there," said David Bartz, an environmental

lawyer at Schwabe, Williamson, and Wyatt, who does work for developers working on brownfields.

He explained that if a property is in a good location with lots of economic activity there is a good chance that a developer will take a chance on a property.

Bartz said that gentrifying areas, like north and northeast Portland, often attract the interest key to getting brownfields developed. Areas like Burns or Mollala are harder to develop, he said.

However, there are barriers to transforming these properties from dangerous eyesores to places that will benefit people who live nearby.

One of the big stumbling blocks to developing these properties is the uncertainty that surrounds them. It's seldom clear how polluted the area is, how much it might cost to clean it up, expensive it might be to clear it up, and there's the possibility that new containments might be found later.

"The real challenge with brownfields is the mystery behind them," said Jenn Bildersee, acting coordinator of city's brownfield program. Portland is one of 40 communities in the U.S. to be awarded grants by the Environmental Protection Agency. The city was awarded about \$400,000 to help assess how toxic brownfields are.

Because Oregon has strict land use laws designed to prevent

sprawl and the state is seeing an influx of people, developing these sites will be important to accommodate newcomers.

There is no precise number of how many properties qualify as brownfields in the state, in part because there is no uniform definition of what constitutes such a property, according to Gil Wistar, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality's brownfields coordinator.

He said that pollutants on each site vary, but petroleum, PCBs, metals, and solvents are common pollutants, and these sites need a clean bill of health from DEQ before being developed.

Bartz said that in order to get a brownfield developed they have to be assured that they won't be slammed with more costs if more pollutants are later found or regulations change. DEQ offers technical assistance to developers and can offer some liability protection if more contaminants are found, which Bartz said is key.

But in addition to commercial developers, there are grassroots activists trying to turn polluted areas in community sites.

The lot on Emerson Street first caught the eye on Sybil Kelley, an instructor at Portland State and neighborhood activist, in 1995 when she lived nearby. A house had once been there in the 1950s, but now it was a mean-looking vacant lot, overgrown with unkempt foliage.

Kelley saw potential in the site and got the gears churning on turning the lot into something better.

She got the city to do an initial investigation of the site under its brownfields program, and in 1997 she tested the soil, which confirmed that it was contaminated with lead—a common problem with older residential properties.

Kelley later partnered with Groundwork, an organization that works on developing brownfields to get volunteers to help out.

The city donated soil to dilute the lead, which volunteers hauled from a truck in wheelbarrow and raked across the 3,125 foot square foot lot getting it ready for its presentation to the community later this month. Soon this poison place will be community garden.

"I've always saw brownfields as an opportunity, not a problem," said Kelley.

## Groundbreaking Celebration

A groundbreaking ceremony is planned Saturday, July 31 from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. for the Emerson Street Garden at 822 N.E. Emerson St. The event will include free entertainment, food and art activities for youth, teens and adults.

The community garden space was designed to engage local residents and the African American community, and to incorporate the history of the King Neighborhood into the site. The property was a former brownfield because of pollution, but has been cleaned up. Youth from King Elementary and the Blazers Boys and Girls Club helped in the process.

Do you have something to contribute to the garden? To help or RSVP, contact Cassie at 503-662-2590 or via email at [cassie@groundworkportland.org](mailto:cassie@groundworkportland.org).

volunteers, but later this month a the work of a dedicated few will pay off when a once toxic and neglected lot that has remained unused and

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TRIMET

**Project Name:** Portland-Milwaukie Light Rail Project East Segment RFP No. RH 110162JB

Willamette Community Connectors is a joint venture (Granite-Hamilton-RailWorks). We are an equal opportunity employer and request qualifications from all interested firms, including DMWESBs. We are seeking qualified DBE's interested in this project upon award. This is not a hard bid proposal. We are seeking firms who would be interested in working with us upon award. Please attend one of our upcoming events to learn more regarding scopes and have an opportunity to meet with our team.

**Please join us at one of our "Meet the Project Team" Events**

Friday, July 9<sup>th</sup>  
OAME - Amelia Conference Room  
4134 N. Vancouver Ave.  
Portland, OR 97217  
9:30 to 11:30 am

Thursday, July 15<sup>th</sup>  
WCC Office  
4105 SE International Way, Ste 503  
Milwaukie, OR 97222  
3:00 to 5:30 pm

Suzanne Donaldson, DBE Consultant  
360-280-2321  
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