

Tulsa sees potential in cleaning up brownfields

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The brownfield site on N. Lansing in Tulsa. (Photo by Rip Stell)

TULSA – While many high-profile properties have been cleaned and transformed into productive sites through the state's brownfields program, there likely is still much work to be done, a state environmental official said. And at least one Oklahoma city is looking to capitalize on the program.

"There is a large number of sites left, if you include all the buildings that have asbestos and lead paint," said Rita R. Kottke, remediation programs manager for the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality.

When the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency started encouraging states to create brownfield programs in the mid-1990s, the Office of Management and Budget estimated that there were 450,000 brownfields nationwide, she said.

"This number represented known, defunct industrial sites," Kottke said. "That was prior to indoor asbestos and petroleum (former gas stations) being added as brownfield contaminants."

Currently, nationwide there are millions of brownfields that need to be cleaned up, she said.

Just a few of the success stories in Oklahoma City include Bricktown, Skirvin Hilton Hotel, Dell call center and the Devon headquarters, Kottke said.

"There have been so many," she said.

Bricktown, for example, was underused for decades before Oklahoma City decided to redevelop it, Kottke said.

"It was a lengthy process since there were so many small sites that were consolidated into the application," she said. "Oklahoma City Urban Renewal broke the area into large parcels for the cleanups."

The investigation and cleanup took about seven years.

The Skirvin Hilton Hotel, closed in 1988, deteriorated for 16 years prior to Oklahoma City finding the capital and private partners to abate asbestos and ensure that the redevelopment moved forward, Kottke said.

In 2005, the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality loaned the city the funding to abate the asbestos.

"Once the building was clean, the developer moved forward on the revitalization of the historic hotel," Kottke said.

The Skirvin Hilton reopened to huge fanfare in 2007.

The site of the Devon tower had underground storage tanks and contamination associated with petroleum, Kottke said.

Development dreams

Tulsa, meanwhile, is working to use the brownfields program as an economic development tool, said Clay Bird, Tulsa economic development director.

"We almost never had a program; it was more reactionary in that we'd respond when people called to ask about what we had to offer," Bird said. "Now, what we are doing is focusing on using it (brownfields program) as an economic development strategy to come up with a playbook. It is still evolving."

The program could stimulate economic growth and development by acting as a method for tax-exempt financing and a way to attract grant dollars, Bird said.

Although Tulsa is revitalizing its brownfields program, there have been several successful property renovations, Kottke said. They include the BOK Center, the Mayo Hotel and the Brady Village downtown.

Two industrial areas cleaned up were the Brainerd Chemical Co. and Flint Industries sites, she said.

The term brownfields can be used to describe any property where there is a perception that contamination is present and the perception discourages developers or buyers from considering the property – due both to the cost of cleanup and the liability, Kottke said.

The contamination could be hazardous substances or petroleum from former commercial or industrial uses, but also includes asbestos, lead paint or other contaminants from older technologies such as mercury thermostats or polychlorinated biphenyls in fluorescent light fixtures.

"These issues tend to be in older buildings," Kottke said.

Bird said there could be 200 sites surrounding downtown Tulsa that are eligible to be renovated under the brownfields program. An area bounded by Peoria Avenue on the east, Cincinnati Avenue on the west, Interstate 244 on the south and 36th Street North contains at least 100 potential sites. Another 100 potential sites are west and east of downtown, Bird said.

One area attracting attention from Tulsa city officials is the Evans-Fintube site northeast of downtown, he said.

"That is one of the sites we have identified through the planning process," Bird said. "To attract a developer for that, we really need a clean site but there are costs associated with getting it cleared. And those costs are up there."

Tulsa is still seeking the dollars to accomplish that project.

Overall, Bird would like to collect up to \$1 million for the brownfields program.

"We do not have that and, at this point, nothing close to it," Bird said.

Statewide, DEQ does not have an inventory of all the brownfield sites, Kottke said.

"Our state program allows owners to self-identify their property as a brownfield as the brownfields program is a voluntary cleanup program, not an enforcement program," she said.

With all of the buildings that might have asbestos, hazardous substances or petroleum contamination, the number of brownfield sites statewide could easily be in the tens of thousands, Kottke said.

Sites are selected for cleanup for several reasons, she said.

"Often, the location is desirable, so those sites are cleaned up and reused first, like the Brainerd Chemical plant in Tulsa or the Native American cultural center in Oklahoma City," Kottke said. "Sometimes it is because a city identifies an area for revitalization, so it works to get property cleaned up and reused, like Bricktown or the BOK Center."

Sites are picked for their historical and cultural significance and community requests for the

property to be revitalized, like the Skirvin Hilton and the Mayo Hotel, Kottke said.

"Sometimes owners or new owners wish to clean up their own property, so they can reuse it or sell it, like Flint Industries or the Devon tower," she said.

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