

Brownfield'sites sit in costly limbo

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On an island where the Mill River flows through New Haven sits English Station, a defunct electric power plant once teeming with contaminants.

The 9-acre plant embodies every municipality's struggle with sites known as brownfields, abandoned plots where commercial and industrial businesses once operated, mostly at a time when environmental laws were less stringent.

Throughout New Haven County, urban and suburban areas alike are grappling with the costly process of reclaiming these eyesores, cleaning up the environmental and health hazards lurking there and finding new uses for the parcels.

English Station is one of 27 brownfields on a list that cities and towns in Greater New Haven identified to the Connecticut Brownfields Redevelopment Authority as priority sites for reuse. Many are situated near major routes, highways and existing commercial hubs. Some are more isolated.

"It's really a positive to be on the list because it attracts developers," said Cynthia Petruzzello, vice president and redevelopment project manager for CBRA.

To see if you live near a brownfield site, go to www.newhavenregister.com

and view a Google map of the 27 locations.

English Station was once owned by United Illuminating Co. and burned coal and oil from the 1880s until it was decommissioned in 1992. In 2000, UI paid Killingworth-based Quinipiac Energy \$4.25 million to take the plant off its hands.

Quinipiac Energy set up a \$1.9 million fund for remediation but that money has been spent.

The current owner, Evergreen Power, last summer was in talks to sell the

plant to First National Development of Bridgeport.

At the time, developer Garfield Spencer said his vision for the property was a mixed-use development with 200 rental units, boat slips and street-level retail space.

Spencer did not return a phone call and email seeking comment for this story and land records in the city clerk's office show no sale has been made.

CBRA is a division of the Connecticut Development Authority.

CDA President Marie O'Brien said CBRA is a starting point for entities interested in brownfield reuse projects and works on them with the state departments of Economic and Community Development, Environmental Protection and Public Health.

New Haven Economic Development Director Kelly Murphy said urban centers typically have numerous brownfield sites. Even a dry cleaning business that closes down would be considered a brownfield because of possible chemical contamination.

"The laws of brownfields have changed even since I started my career," she said.

Robert Bell, assistant director of the state Department of Environmental Protection's Remediation Division, said the state has 10 to 15 different laws that address the cleanup of hazardous materials.

"Not all contamination is equal," Bell said, adding that some material stays where it is, other hazards can travel, especially if they leach into groundwater, but others might cause little to no public health risk.

NEW HAVEN SITES Of the 12 New Haven sites identified on the CBRA list, only two are owned by the city; a small industrial property at 112 Chapel St. and a 6.5-acre site at 198 River St.

The latter is part of the broader 53-acre River Street Municipal Development Plan, which seeks to revitalize a swath of mostly industrial land on the edge of the Fair Haven neighborhood along the Quinnipiac River. The plan, which has been in the works for many years and is estimated to cost \$25 million, envisions a waterfront trail, open space, rehabilitation of historic buildings and

light industry and manufacturing.

A property at 347 Chapel St. is being leased by Southern Connecticut Gas Co. to Petroleum Terminals for storage and staging purposes, according to utility spokesman Robert Brennan.

Suzio Concrete at 340 Chapel St. is still in operation, making ready-mix concrete, according to owner Len Suzio.

Also on the list is the former Robby Len swimsuit factory at 1175 State St. It has a troubled past, plagued by asbestos contamination issues and citations against its owner, Brooklynbased State Assets LLC, by the U. S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

But all the asbestos was cleaned up and the property was cleared for development in 2009, according to city Building Department records. Several new businesses have opened up inside the building, including Lumber Liquidators and CrossFit gym.

Smaller businesses, including an art studio, dance company, mortgage company and furniture store, are already moved in or planning to move in.

"We're not touching anything structural. We're working with what we've got," said site manager Henry Stern.

HAMDEN SITES In **Hamden**, two out of three locations on the CBRA list are owned by business partners Joseph Natale and former Mayor Lucien DiMeo at 385 Putnam Ave. and 1409 Dixwell Ave.

The third parcel at 1013 Rear Dixwell Ave. is a vacant lot that could be even more difficult to develop, according to Dale Kroop, **Hamden**'s director of economic and community development.

The town's available commercial area totals less than 6 percent.

"Most of the good stuff is already developed, so we're left with brownfields," Kroop said.

"There's a lot of pollution and taxes owed. The ones we're looking at are no different. "And 1013 Rear Dixwell Ave. is one of those properties.

A manufacturer of construction equipment and supplies had owned it until 1986. Another company bought the building in 1992, but taxes went unpaid and accrued to the point that about \$158, 000 is now owed.

A vacant, 19, 000-square-foot building at 385 Putnam Ave. was approved for 40 affordable housing apartments, but most recently has been eyed for a regional **animal shelter** for **Hamden** and North Haven.

DiMeo and Natale bought the lien and foreclosed on all other mortgages. The town received \$50, 000 from the lien sale and \$17, 825.81 from what was owed from a portion of the 2004 and 2005 grand lists.

"We will be taking out permits to develop it as affordable housing," DiMeo said. He expects to move forward with the plan in about 30 days.

DiMeo said he asked Mayor Scott D. Jackson to pay \$900, 000 for the building, but that has not happened. While DiMeo thinks the location would be a convenient place for an **animal shelter**, he and Natale have put their own money into the building and want to see a return.

Jackson said he told DiMeo not to stop his plans for 385 Putnam because there are no guarantees that an interlocal agreement for the construction and management of an **animal** facility could be arranged. "Also there is a significant dispute on the property valuation," Jackson said.

An outside appraiser for the town valued it lower at about \$430, 000.

The 1409 Dixwell Ave. site is the old Himmel Bros. factory, where aluminum was extruded.

However, a section of it was built on a town dump. "There's a significant amount of pollution in the ground and it will take \$1.5 million to \$2.5 million to remove it," Kroop said. "Many deals have fallen through," said Kroop, mentioning a Milford manufacturer, a department store and an educational facility.

From 1936, through World War II to the 1950s, the town used the site for the dumping of construction materials for **Hamden** High School and other WPA projects.

"We would like the town to recognize its responsibility for the dump. It's not

something that can be refuted. We are going to press the issue," DiMeo said, adding that he is waiting for a proposal from the town about the dump.

He said he has preliminary designs for a combination residential and commercial project, but the issue of the dump has to be overcome first.

Jackson said that he acknowledges DiMeo's position, but that doesn't mean he would accept any liability for the town without doing a thorough analysis and review of the property.

"What lending institution will loan us money with a dump? The government will pay for the government, but not private enterprise," DiMeo said.

DECD's Office of Brownfield Remediation and Development administers loans, tax incentives, tax credits and grants from federal and state sources to help finance brownfield redevelopment projects.