



# Across the Country, Youth Programs Bring the Issue of Brownfields Home

**I**n the more than 10 years since the inception of EPA's Brownfields Program, brownfields have been redefined. Properties that were shunned or eyed warily by those with the resources to transform them are now viewed as dormant opportunities for economic and environmental rebirth. Communities that suffered aesthetic and economic impacts through idle or abandoned properties with low or unknown contamination levels now have the options and resources available to turn them into cornerstones of positive change. EPA's Brownfields Program steered this turnaround by building upon the momentum of initial efforts, implementing new opportunities for economic assistance in the areas where it would make the most difference, and helping to modify Agency policy and federal legislation so that EPA could be seen as a supporter of brownfields reuse, rather than strictly as an enforcer for the environmental mistakes of a property's former owners. The result is a supportive culture of economic tools, resources, and incentives to help realize a brownfield's true potential. Today's brownfields stakeholders are convinced of the opportunities these properties represent.

The extent of change in the culture surrounding brownfields can be seen in the programs emerging to involve youth in brownfields identification and reuse, for the betterment of their communities. For these programs, the potential value of brownfields has never been an issue—rather, the programs encourage youth to locate brownfields and recommend reuse plans that will transform the properties and enhance the areas that surround them. Many of the programs described below, including Our Town, the Brownfield Buster Patch, and others, were introduced only within the last few years but have already been successfully replicated and expanded far beyond their original trial areas. The success of these efforts ensures that today's youth are repairing the legacy of contaminated land handed off to them by prior generations. Students today have a heightened environmental awareness and a sense of land stewardship that will help prevent brownfields in years to come.

## **The Our Town Program**

In 2003, Purdue University was awarded a competitive grant from EPA's Brownfields Program, in response to an Agency request for proposals to develop a program to educate youth about the economics and science of brownfields. The result was the Our Town program, managed by Purdue's Department of Engineering Education, which engages public school youth in brownfields-related activities appropriate for their age groups. For instance, elementary school students help to identify brownfields in their communities. Middle school students conduct health-risk assessments at these identified properties. High school science

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*Girl Scouts working toward their Brownfield Buster patches.*

## **JUST THE FACTS:**

- The first year of the Our Town program, more than 180 students from seven schools helped to identify 12 brownfields within the historically industrial city of Hammond, Indiana.
- Students in Indianapolis, Indiana presented their Our Town reports at the state Brownfields Conference in April 2006, to hosts that included the state's Department of Environmental Management and the Indiana Finance Authority.
- The Our Town Program has since been implemented in schools across Indiana, as well as in Chicago, Illinois; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Tucson, Arizona; and Portland, Oregon.

*The Brownfield Buster Patch Program generates interest and involvement among youth in brownfields redevelopment, teaching them the value of active citizenry and encouraging them to get their parents, families and neighbors involved. In Nassau County, where the program debuted, approximately 170 scouts have earned their patches.*

students research detailed property histories, review regulatory records, and examine a brownfield's geological and hydrological conditions. And high school senior economics students design redevelopment proposals for selected properties and present their reports at community brownfields forums. The idea of Our Town is not only to engage youth in brownfields, but also to generate grass-roots momentum for communities to actively pursue economic development and improve the quality of life for residents. Through student activities, the program raises awareness and builds momentum for action on local brownfields issues, engages youth in environmental science and economics, demonstrates the importance of broad-based community involvement, and encourages careers in environmental, entrepreneurial, communications, and legal fields.

The Our Town program debuted during the 2004-05 school year in Hammond, Indiana. More than 180 students from seven schools, covering grades 4-12, helped to identify 12 brownfields within the historically industrial city. Three of these properties were eventually selected for further investigation, assessments, and reuse planning. Students identified likely contaminants given the sites' histories, and confirmed the presence of two underground storage tanks (USTs). The students presented redevelopment options for the three properties at a community meeting, unveiling a plan to turn a former truck transportation property into a retail garden and landscape center.

By the following school year, the Our Town program had been replicated in multiple schools within the Indiana cities of Kokomo, Lafayette, and Indianapolis. Students from McFarlane Middle School in Indianapolis presented their Our Town reports at the Indiana Brownfields Conference in April 2006, to conference hosts that included the state's Department of Environmental Management and the Indiana Finance Authority. The students identified and selected a former gas station at Sherman and Raymond streets as their targeted brownfield, as it was located close to the school and would offer the greatest community benefit if redeveloped for commercial use. This property, and other brownfields identified by Indianapolis students through Our Town, are now being considered by the city's Director of Brownfields for environmental assessments.



*Student participants of the Our Town program in Hammond, Indiana reveal their brownfield reuse plans.*

The Our Town Program has since grown beyond its Indiana roots, being implemented at schools in Chicago, Illinois; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Tucson, Arizona; and Portland, Oregon; further expansion is expected in the months ahead. Daniel Somerville, Our Town's Program Coordinator at Purdue University, explains that, "Communities from virtually every EPA Region have expressed interest in establishing the Our Town program in their schools." EPA Region 5, which includes Indiana, Illinois, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio, offers technical assistance—including Targeted Brownfields Assessments (TBAs)—for each community participating in the Our Town Program.

### **The Brownfield Buster Patch Program**

Sustainable Long Island is a nonprofit organization with a mission to promote economic development and environmental health for Long Island, New York residents. Executive Director Sarah Lansdale had been thinking of ways her organization could help to identify and address the nearly 7,000 brownfields estimated within Long Island. A former scout herself, Lansdale realized that the Girl Scouts would be an enthusiastic and reliable group to educate and involve in community brownfields activities—particularly with more than 20,000 Girl Scouts in surrounding Nassau County alone.

In 2005, Sustainable Long Island partnered with Girl Scouts of Nassau County, and the Leavitt Foundation (a charitable organization with a focus on youth and the environment) to create the Brownfield Buster Patch Program. The program generates interest and involvement among youth in brownfields redevelopment, teaching them the value of active citizenry and encouraging them to get their parents, families and neighbors

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involved. Like the Our Town program, Girl Scouts from all ages (5-17 years old) and scout levels (daisy, brownie, juniors, cadettes and seniors) can participate.

The new patch is earned by participating in various, “girl scout friendly” brownfields activities, such as identifying and cataloguing abandoned properties in their communities, thinking creatively of alternative uses for these sites, and learning about recently passed state brownfields legislation. Older scouts also participate in civic meetings to educate stakeholders in their communities and encourage local elected officials to take action. Volunteers from Action Committee for the Environment—a group of women in the environmental sciences whose members include environmental lawyers and engineers—helped write the program’s curriculum and provide ongoing technical assistance and support to scouts earning the patch.

The Brownfield Buster Patch program was officially launched in November 2005, at the opening plenary session of the national Brownfields Conference in Denver, Colorado. The program’s curriculum was shared with the Mile High Troop—the Denver area Girl Scouts—who became the second troop to have scouts earn the Brownfield Buster patch. In Nassau County, where the program debuted, approximately 170 scouts have already earned their patches. In recognition of the program’s accomplishments, EPA awarded Girl Scouts of Nassau County with the Agency’s Environmental Quality Award in 2006. Additionally, the program is now in place in neighboring Suffolk County.

While the Our Town and Brownfield Buster Patch programs represent some of the largest and highest-profile examples of youth involvement in brownfields, there are a number of other programs with similar goals that have emerged in recent years. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, high school students at the city’s Penn Charter School partnered with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and EPA to investigate one of the city’s oldest and most storied brownfields—the 32-acre, former Atwater Kent radio manufacturing facility. Students there performed basic environmental assessments and created a detailed brochure on the property’s history.

The Heartland Foundation, a nonprofit community health organization in St. Joseph, Missouri, created the “emPower Plant” program in 2004. Their idea was to take an area brownfield—a former power company facility—and turn it into a youth development center, working with schools to promote student self-empowerment and community involvement. Heartland was awarded a \$200,000 EPA Brownfields Cleanup grant that is being used to remove petroleum hydrocarbons, volatile organic compounds, and other contaminants from the property. Once redevelopment is complete, this initial emPower Plant facility could involve as many as 15,000 area students per year.

In Southeast Michigan, Washtenaw County and Creative Change Educational Solutions, a local nonprofit organization, developed a high school course on land use, public policy, and regional sustainability. Titled “Lessons from the Land,” the course addresses local history, demographic trends, economic policies, water quality issues, redevelopment planning, and sustainable community design. In 2006, the program was implemented in six county high schools, drawing the participation of more than 300 students. Creative Change provided support and guidance for the eight high school teachers who added the course to their science and social studies curricula.

The emergence of these and other youth programs illustrate that brownfields have come to be viewed as opportunities to be addressed through community involvement, rather than as unwanted properties with unknown environmental issues, as they were in years past. For students involved in programs like Our Town, and for scouts earning their Brownfield Buster patches, an idle brownfield will always be seen as a chance to better a community through the property’s revitalization and sustainable reuse.

## **CONTACTS:**

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