

## **Public Health Involvement and Brownfields**

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### **What are brownfields?**

Brownfields are defined by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as “abandoned, idled, or under-used industrial and commercial facilities where expansion or redevelopment is complicated by real or perceived environmental contamination.”

Brownfield properties have a significant effect on local economies and property development. At the local government level, the responsibility for revitalizing brownfields is often with the planning, zoning, or economic development office. However, local public health departments can have a strong role in supporting the redevelopment efforts while assuring public safety.

There are brownfield properties in every community. Both tax assessors and taxpayers easily recognize the economic effects of brownfields on neighborhood property values. However, the public health impacts of these properties can be equally as important. The task of investigating, cleaning up, and drawing businesses back to these properties is very large. Efforts that support the redevelopment of brownfields also support the interests of public health.

### **Brownfield Redevelopment Protects Public Health**

There are many potential health hazards on brownfield properties. Most brownfields have physical health hazards, such as uncovered holes, unsafe structures, and sharp objects. Past industrial activities can leave behind chemical contamination or drums of chemical wastes. When people enter these properties there is a chance that they may be injured or exposed to toxic chemicals. While most adults show little interest in entering these properties, children often use brownfields as playgrounds and places to explore.

Public health agencies also play an important role in the development of environmental cleanup regulations. In recent years, increased flexibility in cleanup regulations have meant that some properties may have less stringent cleanup requirements than others, depending upon their significance to public health and the environment.

Cleaning up environmental contamination can be very expensive. Without incentives for cleanup and redevelopment, contaminated properties may continue to pose public health hazards long into the future. For this reason, brownfield redevelopment programs can protect public health by removing health hazards from our communities.

