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Thursday, October 30, 2003



Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

The nonprofit foundation seeks to buy contaminated properties like the former packing plant so it can clean them up and resell them to developers.

Redeemed brownfields cut blight in Macomb

Developers buy sites; towns get more tax revenue

By Edward L. Cardenas / *The Detroit News*

UTICA -- The abandoned Utica Packing Plant has been a haven for vandals and teens looking for a place to party, and has recently attracted environmentalists hoping to redevelop the eyesore.

Owners of the former pig slaughterhouse and landfill, situated on a wooded 28-acre site near Hall Road, hope to redevelop the property into condominiums with help from the We Are Here Foundation. The foundation is a Macomb County



Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

Owners of the abandoned Utica Packing Plant, on a wooded 28-acre site near Hall Road, hope to redevelop the property into condominiums with help from the We Are Here Foundation, an environmental group.

How it works

Here is how contaminated properties in Macomb County will be returned to the

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environmental group best known for its volunteer cleanups of the Clinton River and Lake St. Clair.

The nonprofit foundation seeks to buy contaminated properties like the former packing plant so it can clean them up and resell them to developers, said Tom Cleaver, president of We Are Here.

The plant in Utica, which has been shuttered for more than a decade, is an example of hundreds of unused properties in Macomb that are under-paying their potential in taxes because there is no working business on the land.

Charles Dill, a Pontiac real estate agent who owns the packing plant, was billed about \$38,000 in taxes in 2003, Utica City Clerk Catherine McGrail said Wednesday.

The same site could bring up to \$3 million in taxes with residential development, said Pat Winters, of Griffin Properties, the broker for the former packing plant.

To target potential sites, Cleaver obtained a list of 10,000 Macomb County properties with delinquent tax bills. He and the county's Brownfield Redevelopment Authority found 500 polluted sites that may be ripe for remediation.

Environmental assessments began about two weeks ago and will continue for several months, said Nicholas Maloof, president of Bloomfield Hills-based Associated Environmental Services, who is going over each site with Cleaver.

tax rolls:

▶ The nonprofit We Are Here Foundation is offering property owners cash and tax credits to buy contaminated properties.

▶ Once the property has been bought and plans to clean the site are approved, the foundation moves to clean it up by trucking in clean dirt and removing problems like leaky underground tanks. Tax credits will be used by the foundation to pay for taxes on the property until it is sold or by a developer who has partnered with the environmental group to redevelop the site.

▶ When the cleanup is completed, the property will be sold, with proceeds going back to the foundation to fund future purchases of land, youth education classes and cleanup efforts on Lake St. Clair and its tributaries.

▶ To reach the We Are Here Foundation, call (586) 778-2143 or visit its Web site at weareherefoundation.com.

Source: We Are Here Foundation



Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

Tom Cleaver, president of the foundation, and the county's Brownfield Redevelopment Authority found 500 polluted sites that may be remediated.

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The goal, Cleaver said, is to "get (properties) appraised, fix them up and get them into shape to sell them."

The point is to "reduce the environmental hazards to a community and at the same time we are creating a functional asset for the community," Cleaver said.

Contaminated former gas stations and manufacturing plants are typical "brownfields." Nonprofits and private businesses that redevelop brownfields can get free taxes on properties for several years, federal improvement grants and other incentives.

The benefit is a reduction in blight.

"This goes along with the county's overall effort to preserve open space," said Don Morandini, deputy director of the Macomb County Planning and Economic Development Department.

This gives developers a chance to reuse existing properties instead of tearing up green space, he said.

Meantime, Maloof and Cleaver are working with the Macomb County Brownfield Redevelopment Authority to find and assess other, similar contaminated properties.

The need is there because development has swallowed thousands of acres of farmland in Macomb, Wayne, Oakland and Livingston counties from 1982-92, the last year the state compiled statistics.

The number of farms has dropped from 2,830 in 1982 to 2,047 in 1992.

The number of acres of crops decreased from 262,328 to 210,652 in the same period, according to the Michigan Agriculture Department.

Recent examples of redeveloped properties include the construction of a McDonald's on 12 Mile in Warren that is being built on a vacant used car lot and the cleanup of Iroquois Industries on Groesbeck.

Developer John Secco is waiting for the economy to improve to build a 150,000-square-foot industrial building on Sims Road near 17 Mile in Sterling Heights.

He plans to use tax incentives to put up a \$15-million facility that he estimates would create 350 new jobs.

"I think it is a real win-win situation by providing a company with an incentive to redevelop, tax income to the schools, community and residents and the land is used for what it is intended," said Secco, president of Allegra Development.

"These kinds of things help businesses that want to locate here rather than Ohio or China."

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