



The area-wide approach offers new opportunities

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There are many underutilized properties in upstate New York. They are not difficult to find: you simply look into the heart of most communities and there they are. They often manifest themselves as empty storefronts with empty floors above them. Their dirty windows contain faded "for rent or for sale" signs that are framed by weathered woodwork, aging brickwork and flaking paint. You can also find underutilized properties on the edges of cities as abandoned factories, railroad yards, dumps and a hundred other businesses that are no longer viable in today's economy or regulatory environment. Even the smallest communities are plagued with abandoned gas stations or dry cleaners. These properties are utilitarian in nature and they are often ugly, contaminated, complicated by liens, judgments and title issues. They sit on the market seemingly forever and give little hope for real estate agents looking for commissions.

Were these properties simply left behind as the world economy changed and the businesses that occupied them failed to adapt or are there other reasons for their condition? Maybe community leaders have failed us by offering enough incentives or maybe it's the planner's fault for not considering sustainability in their designs for our communities? Or, just maybe, it's our fault for becoming complacent and not accepting the reality that the world is changing faster than we are.

The Federal Government has been somewhat successful in devising legislation to prevent the contamination of new properties and funding the cleanup old properties, but they have been less successful with fully recycling these properties such that they are re-integrated back into the fabric of our communities. There are many Superfund cleanups that have improved the environment, but only a few successful Superfund redevelopment projects exist. New York has its own legislative successes and publicly funded cleanups. The New York State brownfield programs were introduced in the 1990s and have since evolved into sometimes effective economic redevelopment tools for upstate communities, but unfortunately, other than the incentives currently available for private developers through the Brownfield Cleanup Program, most of these grant programs have exhausted their funding. One exception is the Brownfield Opportunity Area (BOA), which is administered by the New York State Department of State.

The BOA program takes a higher road when dealing with underutilized properties. The program is a competitive grant program that provides communities with the resources to tackle these challenging properties on an area-wide basis. It is a much more holistic approach to community development challenges than trying to deal with each property on an individual basis. The New York State BOA program has even received the attention of the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which has recently rolled out its own Area-Wide Planning Pilot Program closely based on New York State's BOA Program.

So when you are looking to expand your real estate business enterprise, look beyond individual properties and begin to visualize the bigger picture. Both the BOA and the EPA programs offer

opportunities for consultants and real estate professionals. Brownfields programs are often managed by the community with assistance from planning and engineering professionals, who rely on assistance from attorneys and professionals from the real estate industry including appraisers, market and economic analysts and due diligence services providers. Most cities and many larger communities have active brownfields programs. Talk to your community leaders to see how you might be able to contribute to their efforts. The vision for community redevelopment is much broader than just one or two strategic properties. Don't become complacent because the world is changing faster than you think it is.

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