

# Active Living Through Converting Brownfields to Greenspaces

By Kris Wernstedt and Juha Siikamäki

## The Story

Not long ago, an abandoned railway shipping yard was creating a blight on prime Mississippi River-front land in St. Paul, Minnesota. Now this area has been transformed into the Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary—and what was once an unusable eyesore has become a popular place for recreational activity.

“Brownfields”—properties that were once used but now lay underused—are an unfortunate reality in many communities. But brownfields can be replaced with greenspaces, offering a way to transform distressed neighborhoods—and provide healthy environments that are central to active living.

In Wisconsin, the state’s Brownfields Green Space and Public Facilities Grants program has awarded a total of \$1 million to 10 communities to support these kinds of transformations. This money has supported community ballfields in Milwaukee, a farmer’s market in Eau Claire, the extension of a river walk in Oshkosh, and a town park—the first one—in Geneva.

Elsewhere, broad coalitions have worked more informally to promote greenspace conversions. For example, the restoration of the 27-acre Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary in St. Paul has benefited from supporters as diverse as bike advocates, the local watershed district, development corporations, neighborhood associations, national environmental organizations such as the Trust for Public Land, and an array of federal, state, county, and city agencies.

What factors appear to influence the conversion of brownfields into greenspace?

## Lessons Learned

Since brownfields contain abandoned or underused facilities where redevelopment is complicated by real or perceived environmental contamination, such conversions often face resistance in strapped jurisdictions where redevelopments are expected to yield immediate gains in jobs, tax revenues, or housing.

We recently surveyed people who were deeply involved in conversion projects and asked them to explore the relative importance of different conditions to the likeli-



The sprawling 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century railyard on the east side of Saint Paul has given way to the Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary.

hood that local jurisdictions would undertake alternative hypothetical greenspace development projects.

The 486 respondents come from 49 states, with most working for local governments, principally as elected officials, planners, economic and community development specialists, or as staff in parks, recreation, or natural resource agencies. More than three-quarters of the respondents indicated their communities have achieved conversions of brownfields into greenspace.

The results offer several lessons to those interested in transforming brownfields to promote active living objectives:

- Respondents indicated that a mix of public and private funding—as opposed to public funding alone—is likely to increase community support for a greenspace development project.
- Community support is about twice as likely for conversion projects taking place in residential as opposed to commercial neighborhoods, which in turn are preferred over projects in industrial neighborhoods.
- Jurisdictions appear more likely to develop a vacant property into a recreational park with developed ball fields than into a nature park that lacks major facilities. However, there is some question whether ball fields provide physical activity opportunities to a broad cross-section of community residents.
- Not surprisingly, lower capital costs increase the likelihood of redevelopment into a greenspace. Operation and maintenance costs are a far bigger concern—on average, a one dollar increase in annual operation and maintenance costs is perceived to be as prohibitive as a 30 dollar increase in capital costs. Money undoubtedly helps brownfield to greenspace conversions, but financial support for longer-term operation and maintenance costs appears to offer more bang for the buck than support for capital costs.
- Public acquisition of a site through purchase is more likely to facilitate brownfield to greenspace conversions than securing the site through tax foreclosure.



The 27-acre Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary now provides ready access to outdoor opportunities for residents and workers in downtown Saint Paul, Minnesota.

- Environmental insurance and other mechanisms to reduce financial risks at brownfield properties are important options to consider in greenspace conversions, since the mere presence of contamination decreases the likelihood that the site will be developed as a greenspace, even when cleanup costs are already accounted for.
- Brownfield to greenspace conversion projects offering natural open space face a tougher road than those offering developed recreational facilities, putting the onus on advocates for open space to show evidence of its benefits.

## Replicating Change

Conversion of brownfields to greenspace does not guarantee that active living will follow. However, most respondents indicated that active living is an important or emerging policy issue in their communities, and overwhelming majorities suggested their communities have developed trails and supported recreational programs that encourage physical activity. The challenge is to find ways to marry this enthusiasm for active living environments with the need to convert hundreds of thousands of contaminated properties nationwide into community assets that can provide economic, social, and active living benefits.

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