Successful transit-oriented development (TOD) requires strategic integration of land-use planning, transportation planning, and resource allocation throughout all project steps, such that public investments leverage maximal community benefit while laying a foundation for continued economic development. Brownfield reuse is an important component of this process.

Brownfields—industrial or commercial properties where redevelopment is complicated by the presence or potential presence of hazardous substances, pollutants, or contaminants—pose impressive redevelopment opportunities when located near existing or future transit investment areas; they also pose significant challenges for TOD. Cities can struggle to maximize the redevelopment potential of an individual brownfield site due to the environmental issues arising from its prior uses; this effect can be amplified when multiple brownfield sites lie within and adjacent to a TOD corridor.

This guide identifies successful strategies used by major U.S. cities to address brownfield redevelopment within transit corridors. It also offers recommendations for the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-St. Paul to achieve their redevelopment goals.
Like many metropolitan areas that had historically underinvested in transit, the Charlotte, NC region is rapidly implementing an ambitious transportation plan to provide light rail, commuter rail, streetcar and bus rapid transit along five corridors by 2034. The initial Lynx Blue Light Rail Transit Line opened in 2007 with 15 stations, running 9.6 miles south from the Charlotte Central Business District through underutilized areas with plenty of industrial, commercial and residential redevelopment opportunities.

Charlotte’s Lynx Blue Line illustrates the successful integration of land use and transportation planning and decision-making every step of the way, from initial visioning, through project design and planning, to project implementation.

Charlotte’s strategy for redevelopment includes TOD zoning, brownfield assessment and cleanup grants, and the establishment of the South Corridor Land Acquisition Fund. Created in 2005, the Land Acquisition Fund secures and assembles land around station areas to accelerate development opportunities. The Fund provides a strategic advantage for brownfield site redevelopment in priority TOD areas.
Cleveland’s Health Line is a magnet for investment

The Health Line, a 9.2 mile bus rapid transit line completed in 2008, has revived the formerly blighted Euclid Avenue Corridor, a central commercial artery connecting Cleveland’s Downtown, Midtown, and University Circle neighborhoods. Recognizing the redevelopment potential of a corridor that includes two major universities and major health institutions, the city leveraged public and private investment to spark new projects all along the line. Initial investment of $200 million in the Health Line has attracted at least $4.3 billion in development investment.

In addition to local brownfield assessment and redevelopment funds and a land bank, the City of Cleveland Vacant Properties Initiative (VPI) makes partially forgivable, low-interest commercial property loans to encourage full reuse of abandoned, idled or underutilized sites. VPI loans may be used for property acquisition, environmental site assessments, site clearance and demolition, and new construction, allowing brownfield sites to compete economically with “greenfield” sites.

Denver’s program catalyzes corridor revitalization

The City and County of Denver’s Brownfields Program (DBP) consists of a multi-agency committee established to inform and direct the City’s brownfield redevelopment efforts. Typically brownfields programs are handled by one agency, but in Denver, the Economic Development Division and the Environmental Health Division created a partnership to jointly oversee the Denver Brownfields Program.

The DBP collaborates with developers, investors, and members of the affected community for the successful redevelopment of brownfield sites. To this end, DBP leverages resources and provides brownfields expertise, informational resources, financing options and educational tools.

The DBP partnership is leading brownfields redevelopment in priority TOD areas. In 2012, the Colfax Mainstreet Coalition (CMC) received a $900,000 EPA Brownfields Assessment Grant. The grant will fund environmental site assessments (ESA’s) on public and private brownfield properties within the project boundaries. These site assessments will help determine the extent of environmental contamination and assist in readying sites for private investment.

The DBP program has supported the revitalization and redevelopment of a number of key sites (Mile High Vista, Central Platte Campus) and two other projects, the South Lincoln Project and the Tramway Center. The South Lincoln Redevelopment Plan would likely not have moved forward without the partnership of the Denver Housing Authority (DHA) and the Denver Brownfields Program. City leadership and collaboration in brownfields redevelopment continues to have a catalyzing impact on the success of redevelopment sites in transit corridors.
Recommendations to achieve TOD goals

The presence of brownfields within TOD corridors pose additional planning, financing and implementation challenges. In general, the real estate market is not strong enough to support most TOD redevelopment activity. Brownfield presence only increases the challenge. Successful communities use a proactive strategy to address brownfields that is customized to specific market dynamics and community needs.

Communities want redevelopment that meets specific design and density criteria in transit corridors. To do so requires public leadership to clarify the magnitude of contamination and degree of risk for brownfield sites, thereby helping remove the brownfield burden early in TOD planning.

Brownfield information should also inform site and end use planning throughout a corridor. Uses may include parking areas, residential and commercial buildings, green space, and stormwater infrastructure. Once environmental assessments are completed, cities should consider adjusting land-use plans to locate uses based upon the presence of contamination burden. Then, cities should identify remediation resources or take the next step and clean the sites so they are shovel-ready for redevelopment.

Finally, potential private and public sector partners must coordinate early to enable support for individual redevelopment sites. Successful partnerships can facilitate environmental funding requests and secure appropriate liability assurances, as well as providing tools for acquisition, holding, and assembling sites in targeted TOD areas.

Collaboration is key to Twin Cities corridor development

The regional Metropolitan Council is leading development of multiple LRT and BRT lines in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area. Unique partnerships have evolved to support their work.

The Central Corridor Funders Collaborative, a consortium of local and national funders, effectively promotes collaboration across sectors and jurisdictions, and develops and implements shared strategies along the Green LRT Line.

Southwest LRT Corridor Community Works, a cross-jurisdictional public partnership, is coordinating work on the eventual extension of the Green Line along the southwest corridor through five suburban cities. These partnerships, while innovative and effective, do not explicitly address brownfields.

Meanwhile, the Metropolitan Council offers investigation and cleanup grants within identified priority LRT and BRT station areas to enable moderate to high density transit-oriented development.

The new Surly brewery will be on a former brownfield near the Green Line.

KEY: Remediation plans

Not every use requires the same extent of cleanup. Practical TOD site planning considers the severity of contamination, the intended future use, and the appropriate level of remediation. This enables developers to balance remediation costs against the market value of the redeveloped property.

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