Planner’s Digest

Making the Brownfield-Transportation Link: Smart Growth Options for States and Metropolitan Areas

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A decade ago, passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA) marked a turning point in transportation policy. ISTEA gave states and metropolitan areas much-needed flexibility to set their own transportation funding priorities: it also encouraged them to pursue their transportation goals in concert with community and environmental goals. ISTEA and its successor, the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), have opened up opportunities to coordinate transportation planning and community land use planning — which for much of the post-World War II period took place in separate spheres. Some states have run with these new options, creating not only improved transportation efficiency, but also redeveloping brownfields and reaping economic, community, and environmental benefits linked to smart growth.

Brownfields, Transportation, and Smart Growth

Increasingly, communities across the nation are looking to smart growth as a strategic alternative to abandoning existing urban infrastructure — highways, utilities, and other public services — only to rebuild that infrastructure further outside the city. Smart growth emphasizes development in existing communities and encourages reuse of brownfields as a viable way to save tax dollars, preserve open space and farmland, and protect the environment. Smart growth also encourages the availability of a variety of transportation choices to alleviate traffic congestion and enhance transportation efficiency. Smart growth is therefore a natural link between brownfield redevelopment and transportation improvements.

TEA-21’s flexibility has been especially helpful to states and metropolitan areas pursuing smart growth projects. Transportation funding under TEA-21 has supported a variety of activities from transit-oriented development to new bicycle and pedestrian facilities. TEA-21 funding has also supported projects linking transportation efficiency, brownfield cleanup, and economic development. Brownfield revitalization projects that could be significantly enhanced by transportation improvements are eligible for TEA-21 funding, as well as transportation projects that encounter obstacles related to brownfields contamination. Eligible transportation projects include highways, roads, and bridges: public transit; rail; pedestrian and bicycle access; and recreational trails.

Smart Growth Synergy — Achieving Several Goals at Once

Because of the multiple benefits, projects founded on brownfield-transportation links are highly appealing to communities and stakeholders, and many are starting to take advantage of these opportunities. Examples include the Atlantic Station project in mid-town Atlanta, where an urban brownfield — the former site of the Atlantic Steel facility — is
being turned into a multi-use development that meets residential, retail, office, and entertainment needs. As with many brownfield redevelopment projects, there is a strong transportation link. The project’s viability depends on a new bridge being built across the interstate to serve pedestrians and bicyclists as well as cars and to link the site to existing rail mass transit (for more information, see http://www.epa.gov/projectx1).

Effectively linking brownfield redevelopment, transportation, and smart growth constitutes a triple win, and often results in a synergy that can achieve multiple goals. Because of the combined economic, community, and environmental benefits expected to result, many of these projects attract additional public and private partners, and leverage additional funding. Consider these examples:

- In Lawrence, Massachusetts, transportation funds will pay for a new vehicle bridge and help to clean up a downtown brownfield (a former Oxford Paper Plant): a new park and pedestrian bridge will also be created as part of the overall revitalization project. To complete the revitalization, the city also received funding from EPA’s Brownfields Cleanup Revolving Loan Fund Pilot Program, local banks, a neighboring business, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Community Development Block Grant funds, and the Massachusetts Land Bank Grant Fund. The city will achieve several important goals: improving transportation access to downtown, supporting economic development, improving the pedestrian environment, and cleaning up environmental contamination.

- Salt Lake City, Utah, will use federal transportation funds toward the purchase, cleanup, and redevelopment of a 17-acre former Union Pacific railyard for use as an intermodal transportation terminal — a key part of the revitalization of the 650-acre downtown Gateway District. A partnership of federal, state, local agencies, organizations, and private firms is undertaking the project, which is also receiving grant funding from EPA’s Brownfields Program. The overall plan includes relocating and consolidating existing rail lines, building a light rail system, redesigning Interstate 15, and creating a vibrant, mixed-use, mixed-income community.

Know Your Options

EPA, the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (AMPO), and the Smart Growth Network recently published a report, Redeveloping Brownfields with Federal Transportation Funds, to help states and metropolitan areas understand their options under TEA-21. This report illustrates specific TEA-21 programs that can support brownfield reuse and describes the planning process for funding eligible projects.

To obtain a copy of Redeveloping Brownfields with Federal Transportation Funds, please call EPA at (202) 260-7154. For general inquiries to AMPO, call (202) 457-0710x19. The report is available online at http://www.smartgrowth.org. Other relevant Web sites include:


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