

Redevelopment & Regional Planning a Pair

By Conan Smith

Fred Zorn dons a Carhartt jacket against Michigan's February weather and jokes about the adventures that accompany site inspections in his fast-reviving town. "Hopefully I won't have to bail anyone out of jail today," he says, remembering property owners brandishing shotguns and police mistaking his staff for trespassing kids.

The economic development director of the City of Taylor has plenty of stories to tell, belying the fact that he and his staff have aggressively courted brownfield redevelopment. Zorn's approach is helping Taylor reverse the trend of out-migration and disinvestment that drove his community to the brink of bankruptcy.

"This is the kind of success story we should be seeing all over the region," he says. "This is what smart growth is really about — giving existing communities the tools to fully reach their potential."

In the coming year, Zorn's boss, Mayor Greg Pitoniak, will take over as the chairman of SEMCOG (the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments), the state's largest and most complex metropolitan planning organization. Once termed the "Arsenal of Democracy," the region's heavy reliance on the manufacturing industry

throughout the 20th century has left a legacy of polluted sites and outmoded factories and housing developments.

Pitoniak acknowledges the challenges, but he sees a place where progressive public policy and innovative partnerships are beginning to slow the pace of urban sprawl and renew interest in communities that were once thought too far-gone for new development investment.

"I have believed for many years now that quality public investment leads to quality private investment." Pitoniak says. "As we have implemented this philosophy in Taylor, the results have been very obvious and tangible. By partnering with the private sector, we have stimulated substantial new investment on properties that were a blight on our community. This is a smart growth strategy that can be a benefit to the entire region."

Ready for Redevelopment

Pitoniak was one of the founding members of the Michigan Suburbs Alliance, a coalition of 24 built-out communities in southeast Michigan advancing regional strategies for redevelopment. The organization's major venture — Redevelopment Ready Communities (RRC) — seeks to create

regional standards for local development policies, fostering a more inviting atmosphere for developers interested in urban projects.

Bren Buckley, vice president for development at the Burton-Katzman Development Company, sits on the steering committee for the RRC project. “We spent two years exploring relationships between communities and developers, trying to understand how to strengthen that partnership,” she says. “Brownfield development is harder and more complex than traditional development, so a shared vision and a collaborative atmosphere are critical to success.”

The RRC project has resulted in a set of best practices that the Suburbs Alliance is now helping cities to adopt. They include visioning and public participation strategies as well as site-plan review process reforms. An important aspect of the project is the technical assistance provided to communities to help them achieve standards.

With support from the U.S. EPA, the Michigan State Housing Development Authority, the Michigan Economic Development Corporation and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Suburbs Alliance is providing more than \$30,000 to each community participating in the program.

Most important, however, is the engagement of the development community. The public-private partnership that outlined the policy reforms must now advance to physical development challenges.

Unifying Forces

This spirit of cooperation is crucial to advancing smart growth in a region fragmented into more than 200 units of government, ranging in population from townships under a thousand people to counties with more than two million. A host of forces for redevelopment share a common goal, but often work in circles that do not overlap.

Bob McMahon, manager of community and economic development at SEMCOG, is working to bring these groups together in a cohesive strategy for smart growth. He manages the Partnership for Redevelopment, which includes groups working on site-specific development, regional approaches and state legislative reform.

“These brownfield sites serve as anchors for community development as well as regional revitalization,” McMahon says. “Integrating them into an overall smart growth approach, however, requires the cooperation and leadership of people from the local level to state government.”

The Partnership for Redevelopment has advanced fundamental reforms, such as expanding the access to brownfield redevelopment tools to “blighted” properties.

A task force of the partnership designed and coordinated advocacy around Michigan’s Obsolete Property and Rehabilitation Act helping to make brownfield redevelopment an integral part of communities’ smart growth strategies.

Strange Bedfellows

Successful redevelopment strategies are now going beyond traditional partnerships and reengaging citizen

groups — like the environmental community that helped foster interest in brownfield development more than a decade ago. Don Chen, executive director at the Washington, D.C.-based Smart Growth America says a clean environment and good planning are natural allies.

“By aligning zoning and development practices with conservation values, we can manage our water to improve its overall quality,” Chen says. “Perhaps the most effective strategy is reusing our existing infrastructure in ways that promote both economic and environmental sustainability.”

With the Michigan Environmental Council, Chen’s group has put together a conference to stimulate interest in smart growth strategies among Michigan’s water managers. Michigan is home to 90 percent of the nation’s fresh water, and protecting it is a major public policy priority. Phase II Clean Water Act standards, which impact communities of fewer than 100,000 people, are prompting consideration of unusual tactics.

Brownfield redevelopment is a central element, says Brad Garmon, land programs director at MEC. “Reusing sites that are major contributors to runoff pollution is a cost-effective alternative to expanding traditional stormwater infrastructure,” he notes. “We see real opportunities for developers to play a larger role in solving community problems through brownfields.”

Smarter Growth Through Better Design

Brownfield redevelopers have long

understood their role in community revitalization. Their projects serve as anchors to growth in adjacent neighborhoods and beacons of life in struggling downtowns.

Now, brownfields are playing a larger role in regional smart growth by helping to address the underlying causes of urban abandonment — helping to restore a sense of community, improve environmental quality and patch up the holes in core cities.

Conan Smith is a Washtenaw County Commissioner and executive director of the Michigan Suburbs Alliance. He has been interested in cleaning up dirty sites since 1978 when his parents gave him his own bedroom.