January 22, 2026

RESOURCE

Introduction to Brownfields

Brownfields are real estate sites where development or reuse is complicated by contaminants. Brownfield properties may have been used for commercial or industrial activities in the past, and now may be blighted and vacant or abandoned. Common examples of brownfield sites include old gas stations, automotive repair, mining facilities, dry cleaners, or factories — now they pose health and environmental risks and have negative economic consequences for their neighborhoods and community. However, with effective investments and remediation brownfields can become a community asset and opportunity.

The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) **Brownfields Program** provides funding to support the assessment, cleanup, and safe reuse of brownfields. Since its inception, the program has supported **assessment activities at 42,424 sites** and **clean-ups at over 3,000 properties**. The formula component of the program, which provides funding for State and Tribal partners to develop cleanup standards and policies and to oversee assessments and cleanups in their jurisdictions, has **completed over 230,000 cleanups**.

Brownfields Reuse Process

The brownfield reuse process includes four steps:

1. **Inventorying brownfields;**
2. **Environmental site assessments;**
3. **Risk-based cleanup and management; and**
4. **Land revitalization and reuse.**

The EPA's **Revitalization-Ready Guide** includes additional details on requirements and recommendations for environmental site assessments, cleanup and management planning, and the implementation of revitalization and reuse plans.

1 Inventorying Brownfields

Communities interested in brownfields reuse and revitalization should start by inventorying their brownfield sites. This involves identifying, documenting, and tracking sites that might have hazardous substances with details on location, property ownership, and prior uses. The brownfield inventory informs how the community thinks about reuse and redevelopment.

Quantitative and qualitative data is valuable for this process. The EPA's **EnviroAtlas** provides mapping data on brownfields-related topics and questions, including populations at risk for contamination, defined floodplains, and land where water runoff issues are present. The EnviroAtlas tool also identifies sites reporting to EPA as hazardous waste sites, water discharges, **superfund sites**, and other programs.

By reviewing insights from this data, and other comparable sources, alongside economic development plans, a community can align the brownfield opportunity to community needs and planned developments — opening new avenues for funding planned projects. The site and community data will also support the development of a compelling narrative around the risks and opportunities presented by the brownfield site, and illustrate how the site can be leveraged as an asset for the community. A thorough inventory provides transparency to the community and a baseline for discussions about what can and should happen on sites in the future.

2 Environmental Site Assessment

After potential brownfield sites are identified, there will need to be an environmental site assessment (ESA) to formally identify, report, and quantify contaminants. There are two phases for the ESA; the first of which is organized around getting an understanding of the site's current state and past usages, while the second phase involves a more methodical approach to scientifically quantifying the presence of contaminants.

Methods used in the Phase 1 ESA can include a visual inspection of the site and review of historical records to document past usage and determine environmental conditions on a property. This phase may also include interviews with individuals familiar with the property to better understand past uses and potential contaminants.

If the Phase 1 ESA determines there could be a contaminant present, then environmental samples are collected and analyzed in the Phase II ESA. Environmental samples could include soil, groundwater, or vapor collections which are then compared to regulatory screening levels. The goal of the second phase is to determine if the environmental conditions identified in the first phase are caused by a hazardous substance at the site and the extent to which they may remain present.

The EPA's **Assessing Brownfield Sites Fact Sheet** includes additional details on the Phase I and II ESAs.

3 Risk-based Cleanup and Management

Based on the ESA and proposed site reuse plans, project leadership and decision-makers need to develop a **risk-based cleanup and management plan** to inform site cleanup and long-term management needs.

Cleanup needs and residual contaminant allowances vary based on the existing contaminants, future reuse plans, and regulatory standards and residual allowances. To account for these considerations and potential costs, a risk-based approach, which estimates the nature and likelihood of adverse effects on human and environmental health due to the presence of and exposure to contaminants, helps project stakeholders balance the need to address health risks with cost considerations and site reuse plans. To ensure compliance with local and federal regulatory standards, project leaders and local decision-makers should engage with appropriate state and federal regulatory authorities in the planning and implementation processes for the cleanup.

Long-term management is critical to mitigating the risks associated with residual contaminants. Long-term management could include engineering or institutional controls (i.e., land use restrictions).

> In Portland, Oregon, Station Place is a multi-use development built on a 154-acre former rail yard and manufacturing site. Given the size and nature of contaminants, the site was able to use a risk-based cleanup approach to make remediation and redevelopment of the site economically feasible. Cleanup interventions included engineering controls like soil caps, a vapor barrier, and a venting system, while institutional controls exist that prohibit the consumption or use of groundwater from the site. Portland's use of a risk-based cleanup approach allowed various parts of the site to be cleaned up in accordance with the reuse plan and enabled redevelopment work to go forward on sites while cleanup was ongoing elsewhere.

> In Chanute, Kansas, a site formerly host to a gas station and auto repair shop was assessed and cleaned up, at which point site contamination levels were not suitable for residential reuse; however, the site did meet the standards for non-residential uses. Therefore, Chanute prohibited future residential use and limited groundwater usage on the site, enabling redevelopment for a new movie theater.

4 Land Revitalization and Reuse

The EPA defines land revitalization as the sustainable redevelopment of abandoned properties. EPA's **Land Revitalization Program** promotes the integration of sustainable reuse considerations into all cleanup and redevelopment decisions. The EPA's website for the Land Revitalization Program includes **fact sheets** highlighting different projects and types of revitalization projects, including for coal plant reuse and redevelopment, healthcare access, green infrastructure, and industry based initiatives.

The requirements and steps for reuse will vary based on state regulations, intended reuse plans, and the pre-existing contaminants. Local leaders should engage with environmental professionals and relevant state or federal agencies throughout the process to ensure that they are protecting the health and safety of local populations throughout the brownfields reuse process.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is critical throughout the brownfields reuse process. The general aim of brownfields investments is to turn a risk and threat to community health into an asset; hence, project leaders need to understand how the community is impacted by the site, wants to engage with it, and can gain from investment.

Like many projects, most brownfield redevelopment sites benefit from a local champion, such as a mayor, other local elected official, or neighborhood-based leader. The project champion can spur local residents and community organizations to come together and think about how a site can be reused and repurposed to be a community asset.

Local engagement to inform the vision and execution for brownfield redevelopment can enhance grant applications and attract further investment; strong, early, and sustained community engagement can forge a local consensus necessary to support the long road of redevelopment of these complicated sites. Community members' ideas and needs should inform what the end product is for brownfields investments — whether that is as housing, recreational space, an educational institution, or a new commercial center.

Funding Opportunities

The EPA Brownfields Program offers several competitive brownfield grants:

- **Assessment Grants** can fund Phase 1 and Phase 2 ESAs for sites with known or potential contamination and can be used to inventory brownfield sites, identify and characterize past site uses, conduct assessments, or for cleanup and redevelopment planning.
- **Cleanup Grants** can be used to carry out cleanup activities at one or more brownfield sites (including planning and development of cleanup alternatives documents). It is important to note that for cleanup grants, the applying entity must own the site(s) when they apply for funding.
- **Multipurpose Grants** can be used to carry out a range of assessment and cleanup activities. These are most appropriate for communities that have identified a discrete area with one or more brownfield sites. Applicants should demonstrate that grant funds will result in at least one Phase II ESA, one site cleanup, and an overall revitalization plan, if one is not already in place.
- **Brownfields Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) Grants** can be used to capitalize RLFs that provide loans and subgrants to eligible entities for cleanup activities and community outreach.
- **Job Training Grants** can be used to recruit, train, and place unemployed and under-employed residents of communities affected by brownfields.

Currently, applications for the FY 2026 Brownfields Multipurpose, Assessment, and Cleanup Grant can be submitted through January 28, 2026. More information can be found here.

Recent Brownfields Program Use Cases

Silverton, Colorado

Silverton's economy was once driven by a mining boom, but the town is now surrounded by a scarred landscape bearing the hazardous remains of their mining history. With support from the EPA's Brownfields Program, the town is focusing on three target areas: the town core, the Animas River corridor, and the Cement Creek corridor (the latter two being waterways that run through and near the town).

The Town of Silverton was awarded an **$800,000 Multipurpose Grant** to conduct:

- Three Phase 1 and three Phase 2 ESAs;
- Remediation at three sites;
- Development of three site-specific cleanup plans; and
- Three overall revitalization plans.

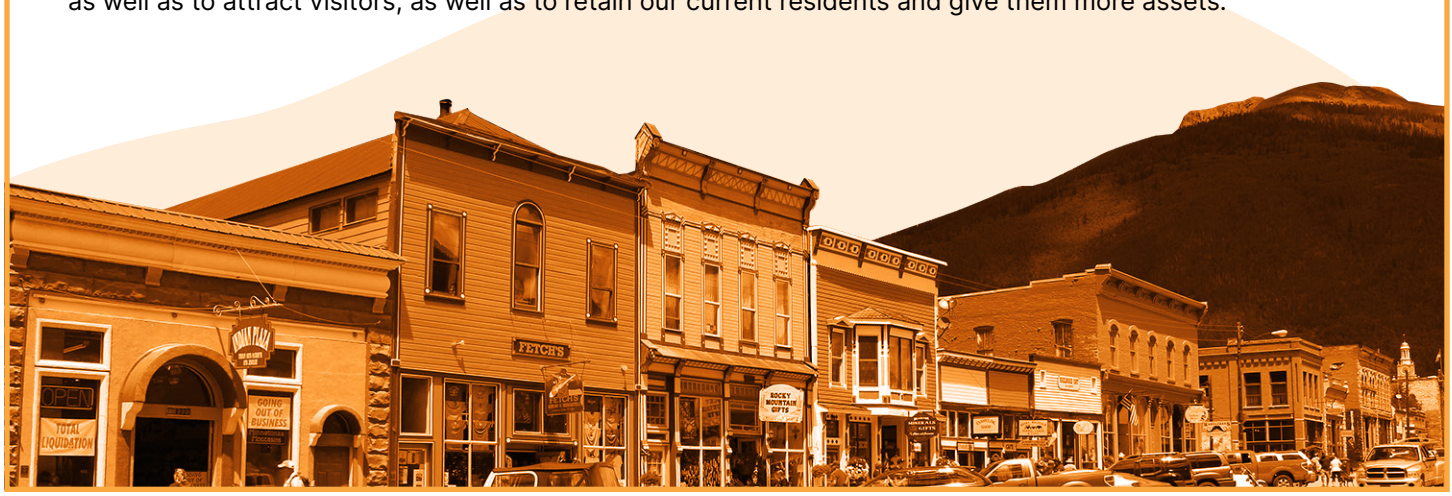
The town plans to redevelop these sites into future affordable housing developments, recreational areas, and community facilities.

Silverton sits at the south end of the Bonita Peak Mining District, a designated **Superfund site** following the August 2015 Gold King Mine Spill. While the EPA has spent over $75 million on cleanup efforts in the district, the brownfields grant is giving Silverton funding to direct towards the town's priorities.

Activities will include cleaning up waste rock piles and mining equipment in a flood plain at a former mill site and **mine tailings**, the byproduct of mining, on five acres along the Upper Cement Creek.

The sites and planned work are in alignment with Silverton's 2022 Master Plan, which identified priorities for policies and physical improvements to guide public and private investments in the town over ten years.

In **local news coverage** of the town's grant award, Silverton Town Administrator Gloria Kaasch-Buerger highlighted the wide-ranging impacts, saying that the grant will "address both the need to beautify the town, as well as to attract visitors, as well as to retain our current residents and give them more assets."



Waterloo, Iowa

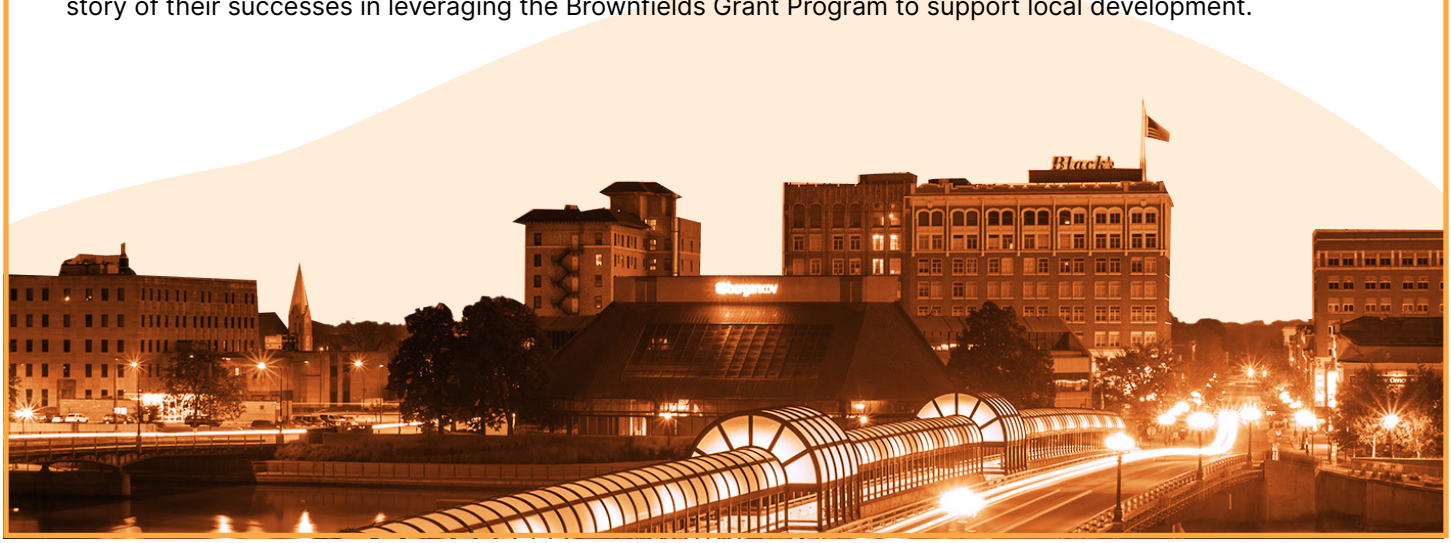
As of June 2025, the City of Waterloo's Brownfield Program has funded over 30 environmental assessments, enabling many successful redevelopment projects with support from the EPA Brownfields Program, such as the former Grand Hotel site that was converted into Grand Crossings — a four-story, 68-unit building mixed use development at the corner of Westfield Avenue and Jefferson Street.

According to Waterloo Redevelopment Project's webpage dedicated to the project, "[t]he loft-style condominiums include 28 one-bedroom units and 40 two-bedroom units, including a portion designated for low-to-moderate income families, with amenities such as a community workout room and underground parking. Its environmentally-friendly design complies with the Iowa Green Streets Guidelines. The award-winning project opened in the summer of 2017. The second phase of the project, completed in 2018, includes commercial space and lofts in a four-story building along Mullan Avenue. Businesses include a Jimmy John's restaurant and Side Car Coffee. This private investment aligns with the City's downtown master plan while also creating an exciting synergy with nearby amenities including Young Arena, Cedar Valley SportsPlex, Cedar Valley TechWorks, Iowa Veteran's Museum, and the future John Deere museum."

In 2023, Waterloo was awarded a $642,200 Cleanup Grant that was used to clean up a 4.4-acre site containing interconnected structures that operated as a meat packing plant. The Grant funds removed the contamination of asbestos-containing building materials, as well as aided the city in conducting public meetings and supporting other community engagement activities.

In 2024, they were awarded a $1 million Multipurpose Grant, which will be used to conduct 10 Phase I and 10 Phase II ESAs, as well as community engagement activities. The funding will be used to address former industrial properties in the city.

The City of Waterloo highlights local brownfield success stories on a dedicated webpage, helping to tell the story of their successes in leveraging the Brownfields Grant Program to support local development.



Conclusion

Brownfield sites pose environmental, health, and economic risks, but strategic investments can transform them into community assets. The EPA Brownfields Program provides support for communities to move from identification and assessments of brownfields through cleanup and reuse in ways that reflect local priorities. While each brownfield project will be different, it is clear that with the right tools, partnership, and funding, brownfields redevelopment can be a powerful strategy to turn legacy challenges into long-term assets.