



ENVIRONMENT: Cleaning up and rebuilding a city

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— “Brownfield” can feel like a convoluted term — like environmentalist jargon. It doesn’t sound like much in the grand context of a city trying to find its footing. Not with obvious crime and poverty issues. Not with empty storefronts, empty homes and poorly maintained roads. But the fate of Niagara Falls is tied closely with how successfully it can clean and redevelop its brownfields.

Edward Flynn, a senior planner with Labella Associates hired by the city, told about 40 people at Niagara Falls City Hall on Wednesday that brownfields are not only areas which need environmental clean up but also areas which people think need cleaning up. Perception can make an area a brownfield, he said.

Considering the city’s industrial history, that means pretty much any land where a business might want to move is going to be a brownfield. A company looking to expand here recently told another reporter at this paper they looked everywhere in the city for a clean plot of land — but their only choice was to clean a site up using the state’s Brownfield Cleanup Program.

That’s the same program being dragged through court in Albany by an environmentalist group for being ineffective. It’s the same program Gov. Eliot Spitzer has said is inefficient and is in need of reform. So the choices for potential industrial and commercial businesses in the city appear to be limited to these: Pay for expensive tests and cleanups yourself for the right to do business in a city with high taxes and old infrastructure, apply to a faulty state program for tax breaks in return for those actions or find somewhere else to build.

Which would you choose?

Efforts are under way in several sections of the city to realize the potential of redeveloped brownfields. Flynn’s presentation was on the Buffalo Avenue Industrial Corridor Brownfield Opportunity Area — a state grant the city received for just under \$100,000 to develop a plan for the area between the Niagara River and Niagara Falls Boulevard. Once realized, officials hope the plan serves as a road map for potential developers and increases the city’s chances at winning state funding.

Zach Casale of the Main Street Business Association is working with the city, the University at Buffalo, where he’s a graduate student, and the same Toronto-based consultant which put together the city’s master plan. They’re developing a similar plan for Highland Avenue as the one being formed for Buffalo Avenue.

Casale hopes to use proactive community leadership to help redevelop the Highland neighborhood into “a place primed for reinvestment and redevelopment.” He said he’s hoping to follow the lead of Chicago — a place with similar inner city dynamics as Niagara Falls that has been successful in redeveloping a large number of its brownfields.

“The biggest problem in this area is people have no clue about what’s available,” Casale said. “We have to educate people on what brownfields are.”

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