Brownfields in Ocala: Discovering Diamonds in the Rough

The late 1990s was an exciting time for communities interested in redeveloping abandoned and potentially contaminated properties, as the federal government and several states, including Florida, launched brownfields programs to encourage redevelopment. Given benefits such as tax incentives and technical assistance, it came as a disappointment to Ocala’s economic development advocates that local citizens did not embrace the possibilities offered by the federal and state brownfields programs. In fact, brownfields were seen as nothing but bad news for the community—an attitude perpetuated by the media.

After learning about how many property owners enrolled in a new voluntary cleanup program offered by the state to remove old underground storage tanks, headlines in Ocala’s newspaper screamed that the entire downtown was contaminated. Banks assumed the worst and stopped issuing loans. So when the city was awarded brownfields grant money to investigate potentially contaminated sites, many citizens saw no need to spend public funds confirming the presence of contaminants on what everyone already “knew” was tainted land. Furthermore, when the city approached owners of dilapidated sites, they were met with suspicion and resistance. Despite these challenges, the city did not abandon its faith in brownfields redevelopment and vowed to correct public misperception about contamination in the downtown, while educating citizens about the benefits of state and federal brownfields programs.

A variety of projects have helped to build the public’s confidence in brownfields, but no revitalization effort has been more instrumental than the former White’s Meats redevelopment. In 1999, city and local business leaders banded together to redevelop an abandoned and derelict meat processing plant and transform it into viable commercial space. Since then significant progress has been made including remediation of contaminants and building demolition—changes that have fueled an increase in property values, sparked adjacent development, and restored confidence in the neighborhood’s future. Residents are now eagerly awaiting construction to be completed on a new office building, which will be home to the mortgage brokerage firm Taylor Bean and Whitaker. Although the process has been lengthy, citizens have not become discouraged. Community members are adamant that brownfields incentives have been crucial to redeveloping the White’s site, revitalizing their neighborhood, and breathing life back into the local business sector.

Ocala’s North Magnolia Neighborhood and the Former White’s Meats Site

“This was my neighborhood. My father and my grandfather and grandmother lived in a house on this corner and… it’s been wonderful for me to have had a tool like brownfields to use to see my neighborhood [improve]… this is mine! I mean I saw it go down, down, down, down, down, down. Too many of us have a tendency to use something up and leave it and go away.”

Clark Yandle, Local Business Owner and Brownfields Advisory Board Member
Once a thriving industrial and commercial center, Ocala’s North Magnolia district started to decline in the early 1980s as commercial and residential activity moved to suburbia. Local business owner Clark Yandle describes how the neighborhood was perceived: “We were in a bad neighborhood. We had crime problems. We had homeless people that were living on the streets and behind our businesses. There were deaths. There were murders. We had a bad neighborhood. And it’s not that way anymore.” City brownfields manager George Roberts agrees, “It wasn’t the place to go for an evening walk.” The neighborhood’s decline took an economic and psychological toll on local residents, the majority of whom are blue-collar workers, skilled tradesmen, clerical employees, and retirees.

Although North Magnolia was generally in poor shape, the White’s facility generated much of the fear associated with the neighborhood and nurtured illegal activities. Once an active cattle processing plant, the nearly six acre site had been deteriorating for twenty years. Operations ceased in the early 1980s and the site was sold to a new owner who used it for storage. However, the original buildings remained and were not properly maintained. Yandle explains that the site “became an eyesore, a home for derelicts and was really a safety hazard.” President of the North Magnolia Merchants’ Association and local businessman Floyd Hershberger adds:

“…everyone was kind of afraid of it because of what had taken place there. It really was a detriment to the neighborhood…It had a terrible rodent problem in the area. Our business is just two blocks from there. And not only that, but the odor was quite strong and offensive at times.”

Fed up with North Magnolia’s deterioration, local business leaders banded together to revitalize their neighborhood. One of their first goals was to improve the roadways and they were able to successfully rally to get a major street one block from the White’s site repaved—a critical step in changing the neighborhood’s course. Quickly community members turned their attention to redeveloping the White’s site. Yandle explains, “After we got our roadway finished and we began to see a significant increase in traffic count, we knew, we knew that that was an eyesore over there that could really, it could very well become a diamond if we could get it cleaned up and we could get the right party over there…it would begin to create a new atmosphere in the neighborhood.”

Facilitating change at the White’s facility was not easy. Although the site’s owner began accumulating code violations and ran into trouble for storing dozens of unmarked 55-gallons drums, he was not interested in selling his property. The city ultimately took control of the site after the owner could not afford the property’s utility bills. Using funds from a federal brownfields grant, city officials arranged environmental assessments which revealed minor surface soil contamination. Buildings on-site, some contaminated with asbestos, were demolished. Once the property
was free from visual blight, project participants set out to attract a business that would increase the local job base.

With the help of brownfields program incentives, local economic development officials were able to set up an attractive agreement whereby a food processing company would purchase and revitalize the site. However, after the events of September 11, 2001 a necessary contract fell through and the company was unable to relocate to Ocala. Fortunately, not long after the mortgage brokerage firm Taylor Bean & Whitaker expressed interest in the White's facility. Familiar with the brownfields program, the company had recently moved into a former abandoned supermarket, also a brownfields site, just one block to the east. The city courted the firm, giving them priority over another company that also had expressed interest in the site, and waived water and sewer impact fees. Because the company would be bringing in higher wage jobs, the state provided an attractive economic development incentive of $3300 per job created. Although brownfields incentives played an important role in rejuvenating the White’s site, the collaborative and innovative efforts of city officials and local residents were essential to revitalizing North Magnolia’s most derelict property.

Proactive Public Officials and Citizens Who Take the Lead

City officials employed a variety of techniques to spread the word about brownfields and inform citizens of the city’s plans to declare certain sites as brownfields areas. George Roberts, a staff member of the city’s Renew Ocala program, serves as the city’s brownfields project manager. He spends much of his time out in the community, connecting one-on-one with business owners and attending local community group meetings. Additionally, Roberts hosts an annual brownfields workshop. He sends out personal invitations to all the commercial property owners in the city and some residential community members as well, although he notes, “We don’t usually get a whole lot of residential people coming to those meetings; it’s mostly the people that own commercial property.” Roberts works tirelessly to get the word out. When only ten people showed up to the city’s first realtor seminar, Roberts made sure he attended a local realtor group’s monthly meeting. He also takes advantage of more casual opportunities to spread awareness about the program’s benefits, such as sharing information with citizens “right there on the boulevard.”

Ocala’s brownfields advisory committee gives prominent local citizens a voice in the city’s brownfields redevelopment efforts. The committee is comprised of a variety of local stakeholders such as neighborhood representatives, a banker, a city council representative, and other individuals involved in economic development, who are appointed by city council. According to former brownfields project manager Wendy Bishop, “It’s a well-rounded group—and they all bring something to the table.” Roberts helps keep the committee informed by researching potential properties and bringing them to the committee’s attention. He also facilitates meetings and helps acquire grant funds, which are often used for environmental assessments. The committee then determines which potential projects will be recipients of grant money. One of the first projects nominated by the brownfields advisory committee was the White’s site.

In the early days of the program when the city was working to get portions of the community declared as brownfields areas so that properties within would be eligible for state benefits, staff members reached out extensively to the residential community. They approached local churches
and asked the pastors to present information on brownfields to church members, obtain comments, and provide feedback to the city. Going door-to-door was often the most effective way to get in touch with citizens. Bishop notes that some people do not read the local newspaper or watch news on television, so the city opted to meet with residents in person to share information about the program. She recalls:

“…we would go up and knock on doors and talk to people about it, so I stood on several porches and had conversations with people about what were their concerns in the area and did they have a problem with the designation once we explained it and you know I think some of them got it and some of them didn’t but mostly they were just thrilled to have somebody there saying ‘Hi, I’m from the city government and what are your concerns?’”

City officials find that now most of their contact is with commercial property owners. Brownfields advisory board meetings are open to the public and residents are always welcome, but few attend. City employees note that there are not enough funds to send letters to local residents informing them of every new project. Even placing ads in the local newspaper outside of the legal section would be too costly. However, Roberts reaches out in other ways. For example, he was invited to attend an environmental fair in west Ocala where he set up a booth showcasing brownfields. By displaying photographs of well-known, local dilapidated buildings, he was able to pique citizen interest in the program.

Ocala’s commitment to public involvement has played an important role in building the local brownfields program. However, successes sparked by the White’s Meats project are due in large part to extremely dedicated and proactive community groups. Two of the most influential are the North Magnolia Merchant’s Association and the North Magnolia Corridor Redevelopment Corporation, which was formed to continue the positive developments brought on by the new road redevelopment.

The North Magnolia Corridor Redevelopment Corporation holds regular meetings and reaches out to residents to invite their participation. The Corporation’s president and local businessman Floyd Hershberger explains, “We did have some very active participation of some of the residents in the beginning…Since the road is finished and since the activity hasn’t been as in the forefront like it was for a period of years…we haven’t had as much residential participation.” Yandle and Hershberger would sometimes turn meetings into casual social events where citizens could receive updates on the redevelopment’s progress. Yandle recalls, “…we would have meetings on a quarterly basis and we met here and we cooked hamburgers and we’d invite the neighborhood.”

After years of hard work, community members are seeing their neighborhood transform into a thriving and safe community. They are enthusiastic about what has been accomplished and look forward to more exciting changes. North Magnolia’s business district has even acquired a new nickname—the Miracle Mile. Yandle explains, “We think it’s the Miracle Mile because…it’s just hard to describe how far down we had gone and then to see something resurrect itself and have a vibrant economy and a reduction in crime…there’s a lot of people that feel happy about this.”
Sharing the Wealth: Lessons Learned

Over the past ten years Ocala’s citizens have revised their opinion about brownfields. Not only do they realize that their entire downtown is not contaminated, but they recognize that brownfields redevelopment is a powerful tool to bring life back into the city. The local newspaper, which at one time hindered efforts to build enthusiasm around brownfields, now regularly showcases the North Magnolia business community.

From the outset the city made a commitment to community outreach and participation. Staff members utilized a variety of techniques to interact with citizens, from proactively contacting potential program participants to attending local community group meetings. Furthermore, city officials were aware that the only way to effectively reach some populations was to go knock on peoples’ doors. Finally, the city had the foresight to develop a citizen-run brownfields advisory group that created a partnership between the city and the community.

The city’s intensive public awareness and citizen outreach efforts have paid off. The community now understands brownfields redevelopment and the benefits it brings to the city. Community members seem content with the amount of information the city has shared with them as well. Bishop explains, "There’s sort of this base awareness that they feel like they don’t require anything else is how they convey it anyway." Most importantly, citizens have evidence that the program works; they just look out their front windows.

Business owners and residents in the city’s North Magnolia district, in particular, have seen tremendous improvements in their neighborhood. The initiation of redevelopment on the White’s site generated a burst of optimism in the neighborhood. Property owners began cleaning up buildings adjacent to the site and criminal activity declined. Now that ground has been broken on the site, the community will soon be the proud home of a multistory office building as well as an additional couple hundred local, well-paying jobs. Citizens expect to welcome many more similar developments in the future.

Community members are adamant that brownfields incentives were largely responsible for bringing revitalization to their community. Yandle exclaims, “We’ve really seen good results—the things that we thought could happen and frankly had it not been for the brownfields program, I really don’t think that could have happened.” He continues, “…but what this program has done, has enabled us to take and revitalize and turn people into areas where we can restore something, instead of just moving away from it, leaving it, and letting it become derelict.” Residents point out how beneficial the program has been at bringing income to the city and the county as well as to the local tax increment financing (TIF) fund. Citizens also celebrate the employment—literally hundreds of jobs—that the program has brought to the community. One community member believes that brownfields “restored confidence in our government too. It really restored confidence because many people had lost confidence.”

Redevelopment has begun!
North Magnolia’s accomplishments were not simply handed to the community but were built through the persistent, focused efforts of many city and community leaders. Yandle shares his perspective on the project’s success: “We’ve had some nice write ups in magazines that have told us that we have done a unique job. But we haven’t done anything that anyone else couldn’t do if they would just catch the vision…Any city can do it with the right tools. You know, there’s a mix. You’ve got to have the tools to do the job, you’ve got to have the people to operate the tools, and if you create the enthusiasm, you can do whatever you like.” Community members emphasize that residents need to take responsibility for their neighborhoods and find ways to revitalize them. Yandle explains, “Nobody wanted to come out here. So it was incumbent upon us to gather ourselves together and hey, find a way and we found a way and went for it. We hit the Miracle Mile. It’s a diamond in the rough!”