Winter Garden, Florida: Former Grayline Trucking

As Citrus Moves South, Winter Garden Plants New Seeds for Prosperity with Brownfields Redevelopment

Times are rapidly changing in Winter Garden, Florida. Once a sleepy town with an economy based almost entirely on citrus and associated production and transportation industries, this booming city has become a bedroom community for Orlando. While Winter Garden’s population continues to swell, city officials are working to provide more commercial spaces and recreational services to keep up with the influx of new residents. Already the city has invested $6 million to revitalize the downtown’s main thoroughfare. Just a few years ago, their downtown district had no restaurants or retail businesses. Now the city boasts several restaurants and other businesses and looks forward to welcoming a theater. Assistant City Manager Marshall Robertson shares how successful Winter Garden’s initial redevelopment efforts have been: “The ambience of these old street lights, the ambience of that fountain and the swing sitting there and the little gazebo and the clock tower... people come up here and walk. They drive from other cities and come, park. They walk up and down the street and just spend quality, casual time.”

City staff members hope that additional redevelopment ventures, both public and private, will permeate other areas of Winter Garden, starting with an abandoned former truck storage facility located at the gateway to the city, just minutes from downtown. The city recently enrolled the site in Florida’s brownfields program, run by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). The program guides participants through the process of conducting environmental assessments and remediation, while providing liability protection for all future owners.

City officials believe that brownfields redevelopment will be an essential tool for revitalizing Winter Garden’s idle, potentially contaminated former industrial facilities and agricultural lands, bringing them back into productive use. While farming and citrus packing still play a role in the local economy, these industries continue to dwindle and the number of potential brownfields properties is expected to increase in the coming years. The city views its first brownfields redevelopment effort as a pilot project that, once successfully completed, will motivate other property owners to participate in the program.

The Former Grayline Trucking Site

Previously owned by Grayline Trucking, the 5-acre former truck depot is almost entirely paved over—a sea of asphalt surrounding a small, abandoned structure. After the company went out of business the site sat vacant for several years until the city purchased it. However, former city officials neglected to conduct an environmental assessment prior to acquisition. Later on when the city finally decided to have the site assessed, consultants discovered petroleum contamination in the soil. Since the next generation of city leaders “did not want the tax payers strapped for cleaning up something we had nothing to do with,” they decided to enroll the...
site in the brownfields program, which offers affordable expert guidance throughout the remediation and redevelopment process.

Initially the site was zoned for industrial uses, but the city quickly rezoned the property to accommodate commercial businesses, including retail and office space. At first, however, it was difficult to attract a developer whose plan for the site was compatible with the city’s vision:

“There was a company that wanted to come in that was in the garbage business and they wanted it as a place to put their garbage trucks and run garbage out of there. And we certainly didn’t want that because we see that road some day as a corridor coming into our downtown. The next guy owned a junkyard and he wanted to put a car junkyard there. There again, we didn’t want that to happen…we were hoping someone would come in and want to buy that and put office space or whatever and not have trucking companies because I could have sold it a thousand times for that.”

Marshall Robertson, Winter Garden Assistant City Manager

Recently, Winter Garden has attracted a suitable potential developer for the site. An Orlando-based commercial building contractor is interested in relocating his company of 40 employees to Winter Garden and has already made the city an offer for the site. In addition to moving his business, the potential owner plans to build additional office or commercial space on the remainder of the site. These plans fit perfectly with city officials’ vision for Winter Garden and, once realized, may help attract further commercial enterprises and redevelopment activity.

In addition to increasing the amount of office space and revitalizing the downtown core, the city hopes to encourage redevelopment to spread beyond the downtown proper. Mr. Robertson explains that there is “tons of redevelopment coming in these few blocks…that’s going to be real quality redevelopment and we want it to continue going down that street.” If redevelopment continues to spread past the former Grayline Trucking site, it will fall right in the middle of a disadvantaged African American community in an area known as East Winter Garden. Although the community could benefit tremendously from an influx of resources and new services, community members may not have an awareness of how to participate in planning processes that would allow them to express their opinions or secure benefits from redevelopment activity.

Public Participation in Winter Garden: Meeting Requirements, Not Citizens

The legislation that guides Florida’s brownfields program contains two provisions which provide citizens opportunities for comment and involvement. First, in order to designate a site a brownfield, the property owner is required to conduct a public hearing. Second, a community advisory group must be created to guide decision-making regarding the site’s clean-up. Although these provisions
acknowledge the significance of public participation, in practice they do not usually generate much citizen involvement. For example, community members frequently fail to attend public hearings. Additionally, since it is permissible for pre-existing community redevelopment or economic development groups to be designated the brownfields advisory group, often new community members neighboring the project are not invited to become involved—especially if the site does not lie in a heavily populated area.

Despite the city’s compliance with public participation requirements, there has not yet been any citizen involvement in the Grayline Trucking project. Although the public hearing was advertised and held, not one unaffiliated citizen attended. Furthermore, the city designated their Community Redevelopment Act (CRA) advisory group as the brownfields advisory group in an effort to keep planning committees integrated. However, this prevented additional citizens from becoming involved in the Grayline trucking site’s redevelopment.

Winter Garden’s public officials note that it has been difficult to motivate community members to participate in local redevelopment efforts. Although learning about citizens’ needs firsthand is preferable, Winter Garden is fortunate to have some very active and representative community leaders serving as commissioners and members of the CRA advisory group. These individuals work tirelessly to improve the conditions of disadvantaged citizens, such as those living near the site in East Winter Garden. The involvement of community advocates such as the late Mildred Dixon helps to ensure that community needs will be incorporated into redevelopment discussions for the Grayline Trucking site. Ms. Dixon shared her hopes for East Winter Garden and the project:

“Well, my goals for the redevelopment…is to be some economic development in this blighted area and affordable housing…that would be something that the people that make $6 and $7 an hour can afford. So we also should put in some more jobs that would pay more…[Mostly what] we want is something for the seniors like little townhouses. We’re not ready for a nursing home or assisted living. And so, the things that we need is not foreign to what other people have. We just need to get on with getting it!”

Although redevelopment is generally perceived as a good thing for the city, one community advocate expresses disapproval that the majority of redevelopment funds appear to be earmarked for downtown while other parts of the city remain very much impoverished. She does not believe that redevelopment along the main corridor will automatically translate into a better life for citizens in Winter Garden’s east side, even if projects reach all the way up to the neighborhood’s edge. She laments, “I’m not happy…[with] them even coming this way but I can’t help it, they coming anyway.” Instead, she would rather see the city focus on other projects more relevant to East Winter Garden such as improving nearby recreational areas and putting in a much needed traffic light. Nevertheless, the Grayline Trucking site is currently one of the city’s main priorities. Although community advocates may not agree with the city on the project’s level of priority, there is agreement that office space would be an ideal use for the site.

Community Involvement Challenges and Opportunities for Excellence

Already in compliance with public participation requirements laid out by DEP, Winter Garden still has the opportunity to initiate its own community involvement strategy. By proactively soliciting citizen input for the sites’ redevelopment, the project will be well on its way to being successful from not only an economic standpoint but from a social perspective as well. Discussions with neighborhood residents would help the city identify and better understand community goals for the
site and any additional redevelopment opportunities that arise in East Winter Garden. Although the site’s potential developer already has a firm end use in mind for the majority of the project, the city could still facilitate a meeting between the developer and the community. By establishing contact with neighborhood residents, the developer would learn about any potential concerns community members may have. Furthermore, he would have the opportunity to incorporate residents’ design ideas so that the site’s appearance, aesthetics, and possibly even services coincide with the neighborhood’s goals and vision.

However, like many places, one of the challenges Winter Garden faces is to motivate citizens to become involved in the affairs of their city and to attend planning meetings to ensure their voices are heard. Former Commissioner and community advocate Mildred Dixon shared her vision for bringing positive change to the east side of Winter Garden and for motivating citizens to get involved:

“We got to bring in some black folks from somewhere else to help us and some white folks with the same mind to help us and we going to bring the newspaper to help us and we’re going to turn the spotlight on the east side. That is how you get something done.”

An aggressive public awareness campaign will be necessary to inform community members about redevelopment projects that are going on in their neighborhood. Community advocate Mildred Dixon explained that many disadvantaged citizens are not aware of redevelopment activity because they do not attend city council meetings or keep up-to-date with the formal affairs of local government. Dixon explained:

“Some of the public don’t know about it. You holler about the brownfield, I’ve been hollering for years but…they don’t come to the meetings. But what we’ve got to do is we are going to put out information.”

Although it will take time, energy, and creativity to inform citizens of future participation opportunities and to motivate them to attend, there are several possible approaches to capture citizens’ interest. Hosting an informal discussion at the nearby Maxey community center would be one opportunity for city officials to learn firsthand about disadvantaged community members’ needs and to take in their everyday surroundings. Since many disadvantaged or elderly citizens do not have access to reliable transportation, hosting a meeting in a location convenient to them removes a significant barrier to attending. Furthermore, by assembling on familiar turf, community members might feel more trust in the local government’s ability to understand, respect, and meet their needs.

Advertising meetings directly in the neighborhood at locations visited frequently by most citizens, such as the corner store, would make it more likely that residents would take notice of the information. However, even if they are well-informed, citizens may still choose not to participate in planning activities if they feel that redevelopment visioning or their participation in it will not significantly affect their lives. By providing incentives to participate, such as a door prize or food during the meeting, organizers may convince residents that there is short-term benefit to participation. Hopefully after this initial engagement, citizens would be given information on regular opportunities to discuss their needs. Ideally, community members would feel empowered by the participation process and would come to recognize the long-term benefits of civic engagement.

Despite the city’s initial attempts to involve citizens in the brownfields redevelopment process, community members have not formally expressed their needs and desires for the site. Fortunately,
however, there are indications that the City of Winter Garden will keep disadvantaged citizens’ needs in mind. For example, the vision of representatives such as Mildred Dixon—who was acutely aware of the community’s problems—will help to ensure that community needs are considered in redevelopment plans. Furthermore, Assistant City Manager Marshall Robertson understands the difference between the type of redevelopment that brings community benefits and the type that relocates or squeezes people out of their neighborhoods. Robertson explains, “The problem is a lot of redevelopment—we looked at some in Tampa and St. Pete—the way people redevelop, is the old people that’s there end up getting routed out. And it’s redeveloped, but it’s redeveloped with new people…so it’s not truly [beneficial] redevelopment…[since] you relocate people and locate new people in.” By paying careful attention to the kinds of development that it encourages and by ensuring that any citizen relocation due to redevelopment activity is temporary, the city is working to ensure that disadvantaged residents benefit from revitalization efforts.

With downtown’s renaissance and the completion of an impressive new library, the region’s quality of life has been steadily increasing. City officials are optimistic about the benefits brownfields projects will bring to Winter Garden. However, Mr. Robertson hints that the best is yet to come. He confides: “We’re just in the crawling stages of something that’s really going to be nice.”

A Revitalization Success: Winter Garden’s New Library