

RECLAIMING THE VALLEY

By *Laura L. Hunt*



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Faculty members (from left) Joel Rast, Linda McCarthy and Chris DeSousa enjoy a moment near the Sixth Street Viaduct. The new bridge heralds the city's recent investment in cleaning up the center of the Menomonee Valley, the state's largest industrial "brownfield." Research from each of the four members of UWM's Brownfields Consortium is guiding the economic and environmental revival.

UWM is providing the research behind a huge effort to restore environmental and economic health to the state's largest 'brownfield.'

In 2001 and again in 2002, an unusual census was under way in Milwaukee's blighted industrial Menomonee Valley. Chris De Sousa, UWM assistant professor of geography, and members of the Milwaukee Audubon Society were tallying bird species, but not as a leisure activity. Instead, the information gathered launched a long-term effort to gauge the environmental health of the Valley.

The Menomonee Valley, a largely abandoned industrial area that extends from the Third Ward westward to Miller Park, is the state's largest brownfield—an unused or underused industrial site that is, or could be, contaminated with pollutants.

The number and variety of birds are excellent indicators of an area's environmental health, says De Sousa, co-director of UWM's Brownfields Consortium, a group of UWM faculty with research expertise in the redevelopment of these often difficult-to-recycle sites.

What they found looked promising: 36 different species, including birds such as the American Redstart, usually found in areas with larger habitat patches.

"You are seeing success in the little kingdoms," says De Sousa. The count is already being updated, as are scores of other indicators, in a unique benchmarking initiative that will provide a snapshot of the state of the Valley over time. "The Menomonee Valley Benchmarking Initiative is a long-term assessment," De Sousa adds. "Five years from now we can take another picture and compare."

Twenty-five years after the U.S. government created the Superfund to help communities clean up properties that had been polluted by previous industrial owners, reversing the fortunes of the faded Menomonee Valley appears possible.

The Valley's fortunes began to turn in 1999, when the Sixteenth Street Community Health Center (SSCHC) won a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency to assess the potential of redeveloping the Valley. For data collection and survey support, SSCHC and the Greater Milwaukee Foundation turned to UWM's Center for Urban Initiatives and Research (CUIR), which compiled the first benchmarking project in 2001-02.

New faculty made the timing right. Three of the four faculty members who now comprise the Brownfields Consortium had arrived at UWM, just as the city was acquiring a 140-acre tract of brownfield property east of Miller Park in 2001.

"The Valley was one of the reasons for forming the consortium," says Joel Rast,

assistant professor of political science, who co-directs with De Sousa. "We saw an opportunity to do applied research in terms of the redevelopment that people were trying to spur there."

Linda McCarthy, associate professor of geography, and Nancy Frank, professor of urban planning, complete the group.

The aim of brownfield redevelopment is not only to restore the afflicted areas, but also to make them better than they were in the first place. "These sites are examples of mistakes that have been made in the past," Rast says. "Industrial areas don't have to look like this."

The consortium's research on resources for cleaning up and redeveloping brownfields in poor neighborhoods, and strategies that encourage job creation, promises insights that will benefit cities grappling with brownfields across the U.S.

The partnership working on the Valley has crafted a sustainable vision, trying to link the economy with the environment and the community for lasting change.

Job creation was found to be the best use of land in the Valley, according to a 2002 study by CUIR's Sammis White, an urban planning professor. About 300,000 people live within a three-mile radius of its borders, and 40 percent of them are unemployed. White's study centered on determining the cost of cleaning up contamination and other expenses of doing business in the Valley.

"We were quite surprised by what we found," he says. For instance, for some





community health threats. They attract vandals, tend to plague poor neighborhoods, and they contribute to urban sprawl because they are discarded rather than recycled," he says.

But Milwaukee can benefit from ample state and local aid, including grants, financial incentives, insurance and technical assistance. In fact, De Sousa says, Milwaukee is recognized as having one of the best brownfield programs in the country.

There are a number of potential obstacles to the redevelopment of such a

huge area – including a weak economy, public indifference and the loss of government commitment, he says. But the good news is that the state of the environment isn't one of them. "There is a good indication that it is not too far gone," he says.

A bigger challenge for now is refining the model they have for tracking progress. From his work on the benchmarking initiative, De Sousa and graduate student Kevin LeMoine, who has taken over the project for 2004-05, have discovered that much of the data they seek doesn't exist. (See sidebar, page 13.)

Although Milwaukee is new at green thinking, De Sousa says cleaning up the Valley is "do-able."

"There are so many spots in the Valley that are golden opportunities," he says.

BENEFITS FOR THE POOR?

Near downtown and adjacent to Brewers Hill, city efforts have helped promote upscale condo developments flanking the river in the 'Beerline B' neighborhood that was constructed on what were once brownfields.

Proximity to downtown and a waterfront location made the once industrial site appealing, but to what extent are brownfields in poor sections of Milwaukee also being developed with public sector assistance? To find out, Linda McCarthy first had to compile a master list of all existing brownfields in the city and plot which ones already had been developed with some public funding.

"There are so many of them, and one frustration was no one had a comprehensive map of where they all are," she

companies, the cost of raising the flood plain and mitigating other environmental problems was less than the cost of locating in the suburbs, where a smaller available work force demands top wages.

The health and welfare of the many residents surrounding the Valley is at the root of SSCHC's involvement in renewing the Valley, says Ben Gramling, coordinator of environmental programs at SSCHC and co-coordinator of the Menomonee Valley Benchmarking Initiative. "Jobs are really critical to the health of families," he says.

Besides light industry, the plan calls for extending Canal Street from Sixth Street to Miller Park, improving the Hank Aaron State Trail and constructing Stormwater Park, a natural area that will be specifically designed to filter stormwater runoff, a major source of urban pollution.

ECO-OPTIMISM

De Sousa, who has studied the greening of port areas and industrial corridors in Toronto and several U.S. cities, says Milwaukee is poised to follow other cities that have rejuvenated urban waterways running through brownfields.

Brownfield redevelopment is a slow, complicated process, he says, involving the political, social and economic arenas. He should know. He is also researching the benefits to residents of brownfield-to-greenspace projects in Chicago and Minneapolis, the role of local government in redevelopment in Canada, the effect of nonprofits on redevelopment success, and measures for increasing residential development in Milwaukee and Chicago.

"Not only are they polluted; they are

says. The Dublin-born geographer studies the redevelopment of brownfields, and the economic and social justice implications that come into play when brownfields are redeveloped.

Backed by a grant from the UWM Graduate School, McCarthy produced a consolidated map. Overlays of sites already redeveloped with public assistance provided the answer to her question: They showed there were some redeveloped brownfields in poorer neighborhoods, but not as many as in the prime locations along the river.

"Since public money is used to redevelop, part of the dialogue should be to make sure the beneficiaries of such development are not only the higher income residents," she says.

After interviewing developers a year ago, McCarthy found that, even with city and community support, many of these sites will languish because they are not attractive to developers. But she also uncovered brighter news. Although the learning curve on the first brownfield project was steep, many developers said the second time was easier and they felt it presented some worthwhile opportunities. Also, developers generally had a positive impression of working with the city on their projects.

McCarthy has experience producing resources that can encourage redevelopment. Working at the Urban Affairs Center at the University of

GRADUATE FELLOWS GET LESSONS IN URBAN RENEWAL

—Laura L. Hunt

Kevin LeMoine and Kristin Stieger are used to throwing themselves into unknown territory. Between them, they have worked in five countries on four continents.

Now the former Peace Corps volunteers are involved in a unique fellowship program that allows them to combine working for a community organization with their graduate studies at UWM.

The Milwaukee Idea Economic Development (MIED) Fellows program, funded through the Helen Bader Foundation, is an initiative of the UWM Consortium for Economic Opportunity that aims to help local nonprofit organizations achieve their neighborhood economic development goals. It is open to alumni of the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps programs.

Though they are in different fields, LeMoine and Stieger are linked by their community assignments. LeMoine, a geography student, is helping the Sixteenth Street Community Health Center in its quest to track progress in renewing the Menomonee Valley. An urban studies student, Stieger is also involved in the Valley, working for the public-private partnership that is guiding the revitalization effort, the Menomonee Valley Partners (MVP).

Armed with a bachelor's degree from the University of Florida, LeMoine taught English to children and served as a summer camp director in the former Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan. In 2002, he and his wife signed on to teach middle-school boys from inner-city Baltimore at a school in the Kenyan bush. It was in Kenya that he became hooked on human geography.

At SSCHC, LeMoine is compiling a detailed "state of the Valley" report, with data on topics such as environmental health, job growth, crime rates, property values and the prevalence of health problems among residents. The goal is to track the progress of the area over the next few decades.

The first published report will be done by the end of 2005, but LeMoine believes that much more significant change will occur between 2005 and 2010.

He is hopeful about attaining the vision. "There is a relatively small, committed group working on Valley redevelopment now. Hopefully, a larger base of community members will become active in ensuring that the vision is implemented."

A Whitefish Bay native, Stieger is part of the committed group LeMoine refers to, working on park planning, fund-raising and economic development strategies for the MVP.

Stieger, whose bachelor's degree is in psychology, spent two years as an agriculture extensionist in rural Paraguay before moving to the capital city of Asunción to serve as coordinator for the Peace Corps' agriculture and beekeeping sectors in the South American country. She also has experience working for other community development projects.

On the Valley project, she is most impressed with the momentum of the project since 2000 and the variety of people joining the effort.

"One of the things that amazes me is the breadth of public and private involvement," she says. "This is the most visible brownfield redevelopment initiative in Wisconsin, and if we do it right it has the potential to serve as a model for brownfield redevelopment across the nation."

Kristin Stieger and Kevin LeMoine, graduate fellows working on the Menomonee Valley project, see a chance to link South Side neighborhoods with the Valley by building footbridges over the river. Construction of an ecological "stormwater" park is under way just east of Miller Park's overflow parking lot.



UWM AND THE VALLEY

Center for Urban Initiatives and Research
Center for Economic Development
School of Architecture and Urban Planning
Department of Geography
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Department of Biological Sciences
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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Brownfields Consortium:
www.uwm.edu/MilwaukeeIdea/CEO/brownfields/index.html

Menomonee Valley
Benchmarking Initiative:
www.mvbi.org

Menomonee Valley Partners:
www.restorethevalley.com

MIED (see sidebar):
www.uwm.edu/MilwaukeeIdea/CEO/mied/index.html

Toledo, she produced a guide for developers and other stakeholders that she believes could be replicated for Milwaukee.

“The problem with formulating best practices is that every site is different in terms of its location, zoning and the extent of environmental contamination,” she says. “And that’s why a multidisciplinary approach to the research is so valuable.”

ZONING FOR JOBS

City officials in Chicago experienced the complexities firsthand when the trendy condos of the Lincoln Park neighborhood began expanding into an area historically zoned for industry.

“That’s one of the misunderstood things about brownfields,” says Rast. “It’s not necessarily the case that they will be redeveloped as industrial. In fact, most are not.”

Zoning is one method cities like Chicago are using to preserve and encourage industrial and manufacturing jobs in the central city while blocking the advance of gentrified residential development. Rast’s research focuses on this zoning, called “planned manufacturing districts” (PMDs). The idea is to keep higher-paying jobs in the city, where most

brownfields are, instead of losing them to the suburbs, where the labor pool is much smaller.

In Chicago, he is compiling a study of several brownfields near downtown that have been designated as PMDs.

“The question is, ‘How successful have PMDs been in retaining and growing industry?’ That’s the key piece of information that’s missing,” he says. “My data will partially show whether the strategy is working.”

Although the study is being done in Chicago, Rast’s research points to perception as an important factor in the success of PMDs.

“They hold lessons for the Menomonee Valley,” he says. “With a PMD, manufacturers know the zoning isn’t going to change, and they know there will be stability.”

Although entertainment and industry can sometimes co-exist, he says, as has been proposed for the Valley, altering the character of the area is risky. “The danger is, people won’t perceive it as an industrial area,” he says. “Establishing the identity of an area helps attract more tenants.”

Besides Chicago, other urban areas, including Boston, New York City and Portland, are using the specialized zoning to deal with gentrifying areas.

‘GREENING’ PUBLIC POLICY

The location of some brownfields makes them unsuitable for either residential or industrial use. Recreation and habitat restoration could be an option.

The principal grant program created initially for brownfield cleanup, the “Commerce Brownfield” grants, tended to score projects according to their probability of increasing the tax base and creating jobs. Greenspace projects were unable to compete well in this program, Frank explains.

Along with Joy Stieglitz and other study group members, Frank advocated for a grant to encourage developing green-spaces as well.

They won.

The first “Green Spaces and Public Facilities” grants were recently awarded. One of them went to Stormwater Park, the centerpiece of the Valley’s west-end redevelopment by the city.

“Having that open space becomes an asset that can fuel development in an area,” says Frank, who specializes in land use policies that preserve open space and reduce the impact of development on the environment.

In fact, she says, just clearing and physical cleanup of an area can spur the redevelopment process. “Clearing ramshackle buildings and equipment, replacing weeds with grass and approaching owners of abandoned properties—those things can really help turn an area around.”

Frank has provided the vital political contacts that enable the Brownfields Consortium to make a difference, says McCarthy.

Also president of the state’s Urban Open Spaces Foundation, Frank has played a role in revising state laws governing environmental cleanup, and also in adding incentives to brownfield redevelopment.

The good news: Local government efforts have increased, new laws are making brownfield redevelopment a less daunting task, and state agencies are better at packaging grant money and explaining the process. Helping the cause is an effort by the DNR’s Bureau of Remediation to educate developers on the aid available, she says.

“There’s been a huge growth in the number of people who now understand that environmental contamination isn’t an insurmountable barrier to development.”



Nancy Frank, professor of urban planning and a Brownfields Consortium member, has fought to include state funding for redeveloping brownfields into greenfields. The first award is going toward recreational areas in the Valley.