



Earth Day: How it Set the Course for Brownfields Redevelopment

by Sean Vroom

The 1960s were a time of great societal upheaval in the United States, much of it stemming from the civil rights movement as well as the growing opposition to the war in Vietnam. One man, an environmentally conscious governor and eventual United States Senator, Gaylord Nelson, recognized the potential in the methods employed by these movements and sought to use them to bring attention to what he viewed as the environmental issues of the day. His efforts ultimately culminated in the first Earth Day, April 22, 1970, a day in which an estimated 20 million people across the nation marched, demonstrated and participated in massive rallies to promote a healthier and more sustainable environment. This national movement was the impetus for the creation of many new federal and state regulations that protect the environment and the Earth's natural resources, assuring a cleaner habitat and sustainable future for all earth's creatures. Prior to the 1970s, industry and manufacturing essentially operated unchecked by any environmental regulation or accountability, resulting in the degradation of water and air quality, sensitive ecosystems, as well as the human environment. Around the same time that the environmental movement gained traction and more regulations were created with the intent of minimizing additional human impacts to the environment, the US experienced an economic shift that resulted in the decline of manufacturing and other industries. This shift left a multitude of shuttered industrial sites across the nation, many with contamination issues and located in socially disadvantaged communities.

Recognizing the negative impacts these properties have on communities, the federal and state governments created brownfield programs to

encourage and enable the cleanup and redevelopment of these contaminated, or perceived to be contaminated properties. The state of New Jersey created the Site Remediation Program – Office of Brownfield Reuse (OBR) within the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) which coordinates remediation and reuse efforts at specific brownfield sites, pilots innovative approaches to expedite the revitalization process, and offers funding via the Hazardous Discharge Site Remediation Fund (HDSRF). The New Jersey Economic Development Authority (NJEDA) offers various funding resources to eligible entities via its Brownfields Loan Program, will be launching a number of new funding opportunities such as the Brownfields Impact Fund, and collaborates with NJDEP on a number of brownfields initiatives. NJEDA has also funded the New Jersey Brownfields Assistance Center @NJIT, the first-of-its-kind and only center that provides free technical assistance to New Jersey's municipalities, counties, and non-profits pursuing brownfields cleanup and redevelopment. Taken as a whole, these resources comprise a robust effort by the state to improve environmental quality, promote economic development, and address environmental justice issues in New Jersey's communities. Since its creation in early 2020, the New Jersey Brownfields Assistance Center @NJIT has engaged every county and over 70 municipalities in a variety of free services including brownfields learning labs, brownfields inventories, brownfields blueprint development, technical document interpretation, brownfield funding identification and much more. As one examines these focused state brownfields efforts, it's very easy to trace their roots back 50 plus years to a day designed to mark a nation beginning to turn it's conscience not only to the environment in which we live but to one another.

