



‘Re-Energizing Communities’

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— The 2009 West Virginia Brownfields Conference helped communities make connections and provided inspiration.

Approximately 180 people attended the two-day state Brownfields Conference, which took place at the Waterfront Place Hotel in Morgantown on Sept. 1 and 2.

A brownfield is any property that would normally be reused or redeveloped but is hindered by either an environmental perception or a real environmental problem. The conference, which featured experts on this topic, was an effort to try to help break down those barriers. Communities showcased their projects during the event.

The theme for 2009 was “Re-Energizing Communities,” and the sponsors were Triad Engineering, Jackson Kelly, Thrasher Engineering and H.C. Nutting.

The Northern West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Center at West Virginia University and the Southern West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Center at Marshall University worked together on the event, which was in its fourth year. In previous years, the conference was held in Charleston, Bridgeport and Huntington. “We hold it to bring all the different resources around redevelopment of properties in West Virginia to the forefront and connect everyone,” Patrick Kirby, director of the Northern West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Center, said.

He said the annual event brings together the business community, the governmental community and private citizen stakeholders. It allows participants to network, identify funding resources, and learn how to build up their communities so they can accomplish their goals.

“All communities have their own to-do list. They’re all busy,” Kirby said. “This provides a time to look at what everyone else is doing and identify new strategies to move your project forward.”

To kick off the conference, West Virginia Secretary of Commerce Kelley Goes gave the keynote address. She said West Virginia has traditionally been a state involved in manufacturing and factories, but those properties may not be in the best shape anymore. Communities are working toward economic development and manufacturing good land out of property that has been used in the past.

More than 450,000 brownfields exist in the United States. A lot of West Virginia is trying to find ways to clean up brownfields in local communities and repurpose those sites. Goes encouraged communities to really start breaking down those problems in order to solve them.

“There are a lot of ways we can advance these projects,” she said. “We have to look at environmental liability (of properties).”

With revenues and budgets tightening, obtaining funding for these projects is a big issue. Goes said it’s going to take money to clean up the brownfields, and West Virginia has to figure out where that money will come from and who it will benefit.

The process for brownfields takes time, she said. The phases include pre-development, securing resources, cleanup and development, and property management. Not every state has universities that step up and take a role in brownfields development like West Virginia.

“This is your time to shine. Green is in,” Goes told the audience. “We are all about being better stewards of the land. You’re actually trend-setters. You’re recycling land.”

During a session called “Brownfields 101: Identifying and Implementing a Brownfields Strategy,” George Carico from the Brownfields Assistance Center at Marshall University provided general information on

brownfields and what’s going on in the state.

He said brownfield redevelopment has the potential to create jobs and increase the tax base and economic development, as well as transfer blighted properties into productive assets. The West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Centers help communities with writing grants, coordinate efforts to secure brownfield funding, hold conferences and more, Carico said.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency offers brownfields grants for site assessment, cleanup, revolving loan fund, job training, and research and technical assistance, he said. The EPA funds brownfield projects with variable property end use, which means not just cleaning up a property because it’s dirty but for positive redevelopment.

In 2008, the EPA awarded \$600,000 in brownfield funding to three communities in West Virginia. This year, four entities in the state have received a total of \$1 million, Carico said.

Another conference class focused on several brownfield project case studies in the state. Representatives from three communities involved in the FOCUS West Virginia Brownfields Mini Grant program, which is funded through the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, gave presentations on their projects.

Friends of Deckers Creek works for clean water in the Deckers Creek watershed and focuses on water pollution, Martin Christ said. The organization partnered with the Town of Reedsville to use underutilized land and attract investment to the area.

Mary Luckini, also from Friends of Deckers Creek, talked about their efforts to develop the J&B Filling Station parcel and include it within a larger scale revitalization plan. Friends of Deckers Creek held five community meetings in Reedsville to come up with design elements for the project, which include a town center, sidewalks and crosswalks, a traffic light and a veteran’s memorial.

Emma Patterson from the City of Shinnston spoke about the former city garage site. This property, which used to be the site of the municipal swimming pool, is extremely visible and located in the heart of downtown Shinnston, she said.

“Because of its visibility, we really want to make it a nice green space again,” Patterson said.

The City of Shinnston spoke to all the interested stakeholders and also got input from school children about the city park project, which has helped create a great sense of ownership among the community. She said the ultimate goal is to make Shinnston a place where people return home and spend their time with recreation. Mark Zatezalo from the Weirton Redevelopment Authority gave a presentation about the Weirton railroad project. The city received a FOCUS grant for a feasibility study and has been able to leverage dollars. The authority held a visioning session with the stakeholders and has prepared a grant application for a detailed economic study.

Zatezalo said the FOCUS grant has helped open a lot of doors in terms of people’s thinking.

During the conference, five entities received \$12,000 in phase two of the FOCUS West Virginia Brownfields Mini Grant program. Marion Regional Development Corp., Brooke-Hancock Regional Planning and Development Council, Friends of the Cheat, Friends of Deckers Creek, and Rowlesburg Revitalization Committee were awarded funding.

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