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# Transformation

Vacant sites rehabilitated for homes

Former quarry to house 5,000 people

ANNE PAPMEHL  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Rehabilitating brownfields sites can translate into plenty of green for municipalities and developers.

With land becoming scarcer, brownfields — or infill sites as they're often called — take underutilized, vacant land, clean it up and recycle it into usable real estate.

Revitalizing previously unwanted land represents a practical way to curb urban sprawl, spruce up drab parts of the city and increase the tax base without taxing the municipal infrastructure. One of the latest examples of this kind of turnaround is the Cooksville Quarry development in Mississauga. Just two more land parcels to go and the project will be complete.

Some 5,000 people will live in the 650 single-family and semi-detached homes, 350 to 400 stacked townhouses, and 700 units of low-rise apartments. There is also an elementary school, a 10-hectare park and 4 hectares of retail space.

No fields or forests were bulldozed to make way for this mixed-use area at the now-closed Cooksville Quarry, located in Mississauga, at Dundas St. W. and Mavis Rd. Though more common in Europe and the United States, "brownfields have been done in Ontario on a very limited scale for some time," explains Mitch Fasken, president of Kimshaw Holdings Ltd. and past-president of Jannock Properties Ltd., the project's developer. "They're often found on the more conventional sites that are easy to clean up, but now we're moving to the more difficult sites."

With the Cooksville Quarry, as with many brownfield sites, "all the infrastructure was in place, including water, wastewater and transit," says Fasken.

The development has sold out quickly, in part due to its convenient location: The Huron Park Community Centre is just around the corner, and the library and city hall are a five-minute drive up the street.

The area, which operated as a brick plant and quarry site from 1912 to 1991, was one of the largest employers in Cooksville during its heyday. With half a million feet of derelict buildings,

uneven grading and steep slopes from quarry extraction, the site resembled more a scene from the moon than a prime urban location, says Fasken.

After in-depth environmental studies were carried out, the site was decommissioned and remediated using various techniques.

"We were able to recycle some of the soils, but others had to be disposed at an off-site location," he explains. It cost \$15 million dollars and took four years of intense work to transform the site, says Fasken. But other brownfields are even more challenging. "There are still many sites in Ontario that linger undeveloped because they are highly contaminated and costly to clean up," says Fasken, citing the Toronto Port Lands as an example.

Other sites in Toronto have been cleaned up for condominium developments, including the former Stelco plant operation in Swansea, close to High Park. Complicating matters are the liability issues which have not been sufficiently addressed by all three levels of government, says Fasken. "If people want to come in and redevelop these sites, they inherit the liabilities of the previous owner."

A potential deal killer for certain, but with cheaper and more effective remediation technologies available, that may soon change. The city of Hamilton has taken a lead in advancing brownfields redevelopment by appointing its own Brownfields Co-ordinator, Luciano Piccioni, and putting in place some serious financial incentive programs. One program pays for half the costs of the required environmental studies, up to a maximum of \$10,000 per study to a maximum of two studies per property. "Before you can clean up a contaminated site, you have to find out how contaminated it is, what it's contaminated with and whether that contamination is going off site, and to do that you need to do an environmental study on the property," says Piccioni. Another Hamilton incentive is a redevelopment grant.

"It's essentially a tax rebate of the municipal share of the increase in taxes for a period of up to 10 years or up to the point where we've repaid the eligible costs of demolition, land remediation and infrastructure upgrading," says Piccioni.

The city has also started partnering with some developers to clean up tainted sites on its own lands. One of them, on Beach Blvd. at the beach strip on Lake Ontario, is the former site of a gas station.

It had contaminated a couple of neighbouring properties, but the city is sharing cleanup costs with local developer, Beach Community Real Estate Development Inc. The site will eventually contain 93 residential units.

Cleanup is being done on site through a technique called bioremediation. A mixture of naturally occurring agents like yeast, bacteria or fungi is injected into the soil and groundwater to break down chemicals and contaminants, so that they no longer pose a threat to human health. "It's very low impact on the neighbourhood because you do the remediation on site, so you don't have a lot of truck traffic or mud and dirt tracked all over the road, or a lot of noise," says Piccioni.

While on-site bioremediation takes longer than traditional technologies to carry out, it can also be cheaper. With the Beach Blvd. site, says Piccioni, "the traditional dig and dump approach would have taken approximately one and a half to two months at a cost of about \$1.2 million. Bioremediation will take about nine months but will cost about \$450,000." Piccioni feels that improved remediation technologies will help spur further growth of brownfields in Ontario. "If we start to curb urban sprawl in any significant way, you're going to see a real emphasis on existing downtown and old industrial areas."

Apart from the sprawl and pollution issues, Piccioni says "people are getting tired of commuting an hour and a half to work each day, so there's more pressure to redevelop some of these infill sites." But that won't happen without a lot of work on the legislative front, he adds. "I think all three levels of government have to come to the table with funding to start to deal with some of the more difficult sites."

One good thing, notes Piccioni, is brownfields are becoming an easier sell. In the past, their only proponents were environmentalists. "Now more municipalities are pursuing them for planning, financial, aesthetic and community benefits. They realize that they have these under-performing assets on their hands as far as the tax base is concerned and the services are already there and paid for."

Mitch Fasken agrees, adding, "I always say you have to look at brownfield sites as invested capital. The municipality, other levels of government and previous taxpayers have invested capital and put in the infrastructure, which right now is sitting dormant."

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