Recycling Industrial Land in Michigan Cities

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Introduction

Michigan, situated in the heart of the U.S. manufacturing belt, has hosted a variety of industrial operations (see chart). However, in the wake of deindustrialization, the state has been left with a legacy of brownfields: vacant industrial facilities that likely contain contamination and inhibit redevelopment.

Between 1970 and 1930, nearly one third of the Grand Rapids’ workers were employed in a furniture-related industry. While many furniture factories remain abandoned, others have been recycled, primarily into apartments and breweries. Focus on downtown redevelopment, however, has created an uneven distribution of public cleanup funds with peripheral industrial districts in low-income areas receiving little funding (see map above).

Benton Harbor:

Situated on the coast of Lake Michigan, Benton Harbor hosted a variety of industrial operations including manufacturing for the Whirlpool Corporation. Maintaining a commitment to local development, Whirlpool partnered with developers to initiate Harbor Shores. The project involves redeveloping 500 acres of former industrial land, including former Whirlpool factories and a Superfund site, into a premier 18-hole golf course, hotel, housing, and marina. The images below show the industrial facilities (left) that have since become the Harbor Shores Golf Club (right).

Flint:

In 1978, over half of Flint’s residents were employed by General Motors. By the early 2010’s, hundreds of acres of long, empty factories were demolished leaving unemployment and heavy contamination in their wake. Due to the expanse of sites (see map above) and lack of developer interest, redevelopment options are severely limited. Approximately 22 acres of the Chevy Commons site has been remediated for parkland.

Conclusions

Using a combination of field observations of brownfield sites, conversations with city officials, and consultation of historical images and city directories, each Story Map Journal details successes and room for improvement in the respective cities. Amenity-rich cities such as Traverse City, have transformed their lakefront and riverfront industrial districts into new greenspace, commercial and residential uses that benefit residents and tourists. In Michigan’s celebrated system of public subsidies for remediation and redeveloping contaminated sites emphasizes a market-based approach. The state provides grants and property tax-based incentives for private sector developers who wish to redevelop brownfield sites.

While this approach has been effective in the remediation of contaminated sites, it has also allowed prosperous cities with relatively small industrial legacies to receive a disproportionate share of public subsidies for redevelopment (Bjelland & Noyes, 2016).

References