

Bringing Knowledge to Life in

Ionia County

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Jobs and investment replace contaminated sites in Ionia County

Brownfield properties exist in every neighborhood, often sitting as reminders of past economic activity. Whether it's a boarded up factory, a former gas station or an old auto repair shop, a property may sit vacant for years because of unknown contamination.

The cost of assessing contamination can be too high for a developer to finance. To encourage consideration of Ionia County sites for future use, MSU Extension community development educator Diane Smith obtained a \$400,000 grant from the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to fund Brownfield assessments. That effort has led to the following activities.

City of Belding: The former Breimayer Chevrolet building, a long-time source of blight, sat directly across from the Belding City Hall. Using Smith's EPA grant resources, the city worked with the property owner to use \$40,000 to fund testing on the property.

The city has since invested more than \$100,000 in the site and a \$156,000 grant from the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) has funded property purchase, remediation of extensive contamination and building demolition for redevelopment into green space.

Belding's Richardson Mill is a large building sitting in the heart of the downtown. A private development group used MSHDA funds to renovate the site into housing in the mid-80s. The building went into foreclosure last year and went back to MSHDA to manage the property.

The Brownfield grant enabled a prospective purchaser to use more than \$22,000 in grant funds to conduct required assessments before purchasing the property. It will be returned to use.

Village of Lyons: The former Chrysler Plant on the banks of the Grand River has been vacant and deteriorating for years. About \$33,000 in EPA grant funds were used to enable a developer to conduct assessments, create a Brownfield plan and lay out the incentives for the proposed new owner to use the site.

The developer is proposing to create more than thirty jobs and collaborate with the village to develop river trails and improve the local island park. The redevelopment of this site will be a huge boost for Lyons Township and the Village of Lyons.

Village of Lake Odessa: Village Lumber in Lake Odessa used more than \$38,000 for site assessments that resulted in a property sale and enabled the company to retain 13 area jobs.

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Michigan State University Extension helps people improve their lives through an educational process that applies knowledge to critical issues, needs and opportunities. Offices in counties across the state link the research of the land-grant university, MSU, to challenges facing communities. Citizens serving on county Extension councils regularly help select focus areas for programming. MSU Extension is funded jointly by county boards of commissioners, the state through Michigan State University and federally through the US Department of Agriculture.



Brownfield redevelopment—continued

Lake Odessa Village Lumber had closed its lumber operation and had scaled down its hardware operation and the owners wanted to sell the business. They had funded a Phase 1 environmental review and found they needed the next steps for a Phase 2 and a baseline assessment.

The funding requirements for these assessments were beyond the abilities of the owners and were delaying and threatening the possibilities of the sale.

“Ionia County MSU Extension and the Ionia County Brownfield Authority stepped up to the plate, funded necessary tests in a very short period of time, and made the sale of the hardware store a success with the lumber business opening up again shortly,” said Mark Bender, Lake Odessa village manager. “To date, the new owners are keeping all employees and will be adding several in the coming months.”

Former Village Lumber owner John Calcott told Smith and the staff of the Ionia County MSU Extension office, “You are our hero.”

Local 4-H’ers travel to Puerto Rico for environmental study

The 4-H motto “Learning by Doing” was exemplified on a trip that twenty Michigan 4-H’ers, including six from Ionia County, embarked upon this past summer.

The youth, along with MSU Extension 4-H horticulture specialist Dixie Sandborn and North Carolina’s Delta County MSU Extension 4-H educator Dave Radloff, traveled to Puerto Rico to see environments they had never experienced and learn about a culture that was new and exciting.

Natalie Blackmer, Stacy Bettinghouse, Melissa Cody, Adam Platte, Kendra Riker and Brandon Rockey joined their peers from Michigan’s Iosco, Oakland and Van Buren counties and North Carolina’s Delta County to learn about Puerto Rico’s ecosystems and take part in hands-on community service.

During a nine-day trek across the small Caribbean island located about 1,000 miles southeast of Florida, the twenty 4-H’ers encountered a vast diversity of plants and animals.

While on the island the youths encountered leaves large enough to use as umbrellas and saw roots dripping down from tree tops. They marveled at Coqui frogs--a national symbol of Puerto Rico that live inside bromeliads in the tops of trees.

The teens paddled through a mangrove swamp in the pitch black to look at dinoflagellates--organisms that glow like fairy dust in the night. These were just a few of the tropical wonders that the Michigan youths experienced.

The 4-H teens studied the many diverse environments of Puerto Rico. They were encouraged to compare the environments and they began to understand how plants and wildlife adapt to their habitats.

Their primary objective was to participate in two service learning projects. Both projects focused on grassroots environmental movements that are helping to preserve the island’s dynamic natural resources.

At the El Yunque National Rainforest they transplanted trees to be used to help reforest the island after hurricanes and at the Casa Pueblo Environmental Station they helped package coffee, a project that enables the environmental station to be more sustainable.

The youth also traveled to the Guanica Dry Forest Reserve and to coastal mangrove forests. They took part in kayaking a bioluminescent bay and snorkeling the coral reefs of the Canal de Luis Pena Nature Preserve near Culebra.

While study tours to the tropics have not been traditional 4-H experiences, community service efforts that help youngsters understand that one person can make a difference are right in line with everything that is great about 4-H. Like every outstanding 4-H experience, this tour will be something that contributes to shaping how these teens face the world and what they do to improve it.