

Land Banks and Brownfield Redevelopment

A Step-by-Step Overview

Land banks have unique powers that make them ideal entities to clean up brownfield properties and return them to productive use. Remediating and redeveloping brownfields **improves public health, revitalizes neighborhoods, and can spark economic development**—goals that align with land banks' missions. More land banks should engage in brownfield redevelopment, but many do not know where to start.

This brief guide outlines the main steps for land banks who are interested in brownfield redevelopment. While the brownfield redevelopment process can be complex, the steps below attempt to offer a clear starting point.

Definitions

Brownfields are properties where the presence or potential presence of hazardous chemicals or pollutants make it challenging, risky, and potentially costly to redevelop the site.

Land banks are public agencies granted special authorities by state law to help return vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties to productive uses that align with community goals.



Learn more about land banks and brownfield redevelopment on Community Progress' website.

Important Note: Community Engagement

Proactive and ongoing community education and engagement is critical to a successful brownfield redevelopment project. It advances environmental justice and helps ensure redevelopment meets the needs of existing community members. Discriminatory land use policies have unjustly burdened low-income communities and communities of color, forcing them to shoulder a disproportionate share of the negative impacts of brownfield properties.

Land banks must prioritize and center these populations in their community engagement efforts at all stages of the redevelopment process. Federal [Environmental Protection Agency \(EPA\) grants](#) provide funding for such activities. EPA brownfield [technical assistance providers](#) and others offer [free resources](#) to help land banks craft meaningful and inclusive engagement opportunities.



Learn more about land banks and brownfields at communityprogress.org/brownfields

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Brownfield Redevelopment for Land Banks



STEP 01

Learn the Basics

Start by learning more about what brownfield redevelopment involves and what it could look like in your community.

- **Read brownfield redevelopment guides** designed for land banks and local governments. Good resources to start with include [Community Progress' brownfield resources](#) and the EPA [Anatomy of Brownfields Redevelopment](#) and [Revitalization-Ready Guide](#).
- **Join webinars** hosted by regional and specialized [technical assistance providers](#).
- **Connect with other land banks and local governments** doing brownfield redevelopment to learn from their experiences. Consider attending a national or regional brownfields [training conference](#) or search the list of [recent EPA grant recipients](#) to identify potential connections.
- Meet with your state's [brownfields or voluntarily response program](#) to **understand how your state oversees brownfield cleanup** activities.
- Familiarize yourself with **state and federal environmental laws** governing brownfield liability, including the federal Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA). The EPA's [Revitalization Handbook](#) is a good place to start.



STEP 02

Identify Resources

Free technical assistance and funding is available to help land banks at all stages in the brownfield redevelopment process. Start by contacting your [regional technical assistance to brownfield communities](#) (TAB) provider. TAB providers offer free assistance including help preparing grant applications, identifying sites, and creating cleanup plans. EPA [regional offices](#), [state agencies](#), and local and regional governments can also help.

The EPA provides [significant funding](#) to help local entities like land banks remediate and redevelop brownfields. You can use these **grants to engage community, provide job training, identify and prioritize brownfield properties, assess potential contamination, clean up the sites**, and more. Many states also make funding available for brownfield cleanup and redevelopment. You should also explore additional [federal programs and tax incentives](#) that could help support redevelopment.



Note

Before engaging in brownfield work, land banks should understand their potential state and federal legal liability and available protections. Review [EPA guidance](#) on local government environmental liability and [All Appropriate Inquiries](#). Consult with EPA staff, appropriate state environmental regulators, and legal counsel.



STEP 03

Develop a Plan

A general plan to guide your land bank's brownfield redevelopment work could include an inventory of known or potential brownfield properties, identification of community needs and supporting planning efforts, and market studies to assess what redevelopment types are feasible. An EPA assessment and multipurpose grant can cover these [planning activities](#).



STEP 04

Identify Partners and Stakeholders

Brownfield redevelopment is a team sport requiring technical expertise, funding, regulatory knowledge, community engagement support, and marketing strategies. Developing strong partnerships with entities that can provide these things is **critical to overcoming complex issues** that commonly arise when dealing with brownfields.



Free technical assistance and funding is available to help land banks at all stages in the brownfield redevelopment process.

Contact your regional [TAB provider](#) to learn more.



STEP 05

Select Sites

To identify sites where brownfield redevelopment will be feasible and impactful, your land bank should consider the following factors:

- **Community input and data** on what properties are causing harm to neighbors and neighborhoods
- What properties are **already in the land bank's inventory** or eligible for acquisition through processes like delinquent tax enforcement
- Existing local neighborhood or community and economic development plans
- Market conditions

Land banks new to brownfield redevelopment may want to **start with smaller projects** like gas tank removals or asbestos abatement to get a sense of how the process works and develop their expertise before tackling larger, more complex sites.



STEP 06

Assess the Sites

Once you have narrowed potential sites, you need to know whether a site is contaminated and, if so, what will need to be done to clean up these contaminants. This is done through a [site assessment process](#) that includes Phase I and Phase II Environmental Site Assessments (ESAs). **Federal funding is available for these assessments**, which are conducted by [qualified environmental professionals](#) or directly by the EPA through its [Targeted Brownfields Assessment](#) program. These assessments can also help secure important [federal CERCLA liability protections](#) for land banks and potential purchasers.



STEP 07

Develop a Site Reuse Plan and Cleanup Strategy

After understanding the degree of contamination you can develop a plan to address it and return the property to productive use. Under [risk-based cleanup programs](#), what needs to be done to clean the site will vary based on factors such as the intended end use, extent of contamination, and applicable regulations. Replacing an abandoned factory with a solar field, for example, will likely require less cleanup than if your land bank plans to build housing on the site.

To develop an overall plan for the site, your land bank should consider both the amount and nature of cleanup needed and many other factors, including community input, local plans, available funding, and market conditions. **This is a key point for community engagement** where visioning exercises or design charrettes may be helpful.

Land banks in communities that lack local workforces trained in environmental assessment, cleanup, or preparing the site for reuse should consider EPA's [Brownfield Job Training](#) grant program, which provides funding to train individuals from communities impacted by brownfields in these skills.

EPA's Brownfield Job Training grant program provides funding to train individuals to assess, clean up, and prepare contaminated sites for reuse.

Learn more about the program [here](#).





STEP 08

Conduct the Cleanup

Some land banks carry out cleanup activities themselves while others transfer or sell the property to public, nonprofit, or private developers to complete the cleanup and potentially take advantage of available tax incentives.

Land banks can access [federal](#) and sometimes state grant funding to carry out cleanup activities. The cleanup process is usually overseen by [state voluntary cleanup programs](#). Examples of common [cleanup activities](#) include asbestos abatement, gas tank removal, and removing or capping contaminated soil.



STEP 09

Hold or Redevelop the Property

Land banks have several options after cleaning up the property. They can, for example, **hold and maintain the property for future reuse, redevelop the property themselves, or sell or transfer the property** to public, nonprofit, or private developers. These developers can often use state and [federal tax credit programs](#) to help finance redevelopment. Communities have transformed brownfield properties into a sweeping variety of new uses, including [stunning parks](#), [much-needed housing](#), and new [manufacturing facilities](#).



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