

Biloxi Brownfields Workshop

A brief report

Lenny Siegel

Center for Public Environmental Oversight

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On August 11, 2007 more than 25 people gathered at the Faith Tabernacle Church in Biloxi, Mississippi for the Southern Mississippi Community Brownfields Workshop. The all-day event was sponsored by the Center for Environmental and Economic Justice, headed by Bishop James Black of the host church, and the Center for Public Environmental Oversight (CPEO). It is one of a series of “Brownfields 101” workshops being organized by CPEO across the country. Both the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality and U.S. EPA’s southeastern region (Region 4) provided support and presenters.

Participants heard talks on site assessment, risk management, community engagement, and Mississippi’s programs designed to aid communities engaged in (or likely to begin) brownfields redevelopment. Wilma Subra, the Louisiana-based community technical consultant, presented papers on dioxins in St. Louis Bay, Mississippi, and a human health survey in coastal Jackson County, Mississippi. Bishop Black led a discussion on opportunities for public-benefit redevelopment along the Gulf Coast in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.



Southern Mississippi Community Brownfields Workshop—Biloxi, August 11, 2007

For me, the most interesting talks—because they covered material I was unfamiliar with—were case studies presented by two African-American environmental consultants. LaVonne McGee of Technical Aspects, LLC described the restoration of the historic Farish Street neighborhood in Jackson, Mississippi’s capital. Charles Ray of PPM Consultants recounted the redevelopment of the Mercy Hospital site in St. Petersburg, Florida. The Farish Street district is an EPA Brownfields Showcase Community. The Mercy Hospital project won EPA’s coveted Phoenix Award in 2005.

The two projects were remarkably similar. The Farish Street District was one of Mississippi’s largest “economically independent, African-American communities” in the era of segregation. The City of Jackson converted an old dry-cleaner into a police substation, and it restored the landmark Alamo Theater, driving the restoration of entire area. Mercy Hospital, a Jim Crow medical center, was closed in 1966. It was abandoned in 1986 due to asbestos contamination. With direction from the local African-American community, St. Petersburg cleared and cleaned the site, incorporating portions of the original building into a museum about African-American hospital, and it built a new structure with medical and dental clinics.



Redeveloped Mercy Hospital Site, St. Petersburg, Florida

Throughout the South, landmarks from the segregation era have been abandoned, ignored, and destroyed. Perhaps both white and black communities want to forget this blot on our history, but it’s important, in understanding continuing racial disparity, to remember both the shame of legal racism and the resiliency of African-American communities. These two projects represent a refreshing response: Old properties are being cleaned, restored to their historical significance, and made available for beneficial reuse.

I remember Mississippi from my brother's stint as a civil rights worker in 1964 and Phil Ochs's memorable lyric, "Mississippi find yourself another country to be part of." Environmental injustice and social inequality remain, but times have changed. African-Americans are accepted and respected as environmental leaders and experts.

Finally, our Biloxi workshop brought together black and white community activists, private consultants, academia, and government officials. We believe we have helped lay the groundwork for new partnerships to turn contaminated sites into projects, such as affordable housing, to serve the most underserved residents of the Mississippi Gulf Coast.