

THE WATERTOWN ARSENAL, MASSACHUSETTS

A Restoration Success Story

a visit report by Lenny Siegel
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On November 15, 2006, I toured the former Watertown Arsenal, on the banks of the Charles River in Watertown, Massachusetts. My host was Susan Falkoff, a long-time leader of Watertown Citizens for Environmental Safety, Co-Chair of the Restoration Advisory Board, and a former member of the Watertown town council. The Arsenal, as a whole, stands as model of successful public participation, cleanup, and reuse. In fact, the 48-acre BRAC (Base Realignment and Closure) parcel is slated for deletion from the “Superfund” National Priorities List (NPL) this month.¹



The Arsenal’s signature smokestack

Originally built in 1816 to manufacture cannon balls and other weapons of that era, the Arsenal later became the Army Materials Technology Laboratory, complete with its own nuclear reactor—which was removed in 1994. Lacking the

¹ Some of the background information in this report comes from U.S. EPA’s August 2006 Site Reuse Profile. For more information see http://yosemite.epa.gov/r1/npl_pad.nsf/701b6886f189ceae85256bd20014e93d/d98829ad20e19d6f852568ff005adb08!OpenDocument.

sprawling buffer zones required at 20th century Army Ammunition Plants,² the Arsenal at its peak covered only 131 acres. The federal government sold 55 acres to the town of Watertown in 1968. This section was converted into apartment buildings, Arsenal Park, and the Arsenal Mall shopping center in the 1970s. Another 12 acres were transferred to the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) in 1967. Congress approved the closure of the remaining 48 acres in 1988, and the flag was lowered in 1995.

Meanwhile, in 1994 EPA placed the BRAC parcel on the NPL, due to surface water contamination. Cleanup consisted primarily of the removal of contaminated soil, leaving levels low enough to allow unrestricted use over most of the property. Institutional controls outlaw sensitive uses in some buildings and in areas where soil pollution remains above residential standards. And the Army is stabilizing the Charles River shoreline to prevent future erosion and possible contaminant releases.



Charles River shoreline restoration

² For an example of such a larger facility, see my August, 2006 site visit report on the Joliet Arsenal at <http://www.cpeo.org/milit.html>.

In 1998, the Army transferred a 7-acre parcel, site of the opulent Commander's Mansion, to the town, which uses it to host public functions. It sold 30 additional acres to the town, for a cost of \$7.6 million, through a development corporation created for this purpose. Finally, the eleven acres along the Charles River, known as Squibnocket Park or Charles River Park, were conveyed to the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) in 2005.



The Commander's Mansion

In 1998, the Watertown Arsenal Development Corporation (WADC) sold its entire parcel to O'Neill Properties for about \$24 million, \$1 million of which was to support the creation of an the Arsenal Center for the Arts on site, and another \$1 million of which funded the renovation of the Commander's Mansion. On top of that, \$1 million was donated to create a fund for local charities. O'Neill improved the roadways and other infrastructure at the Arsenal, built direly needed parking structures, and renovated the historic buildings.

In fact, the restored brick buildings are the most striking aspect of the 757,000-square-foot "Arsenal on the Charles" complex. The entire site is listed on the National Historic Register. The buildings now contain modern offices, a health club with a swimming pool, a day care center, restaurants, and other uses,



Old gantry-crane in the back lobby of a bank

yet they also retain remnants of the Arsenal's industrial history. According to U.S. EPA, 2,000 people are now employed on the property. In 2001, O'Neill sold all 30 acres to Harvard University, which owns the property as an investment, for over \$100 million. The town received an agency fee of \$2.45 million as part of the sale, and tax-exempt Harvard agreed to pay \$480 million to the town over 52 years, "in lieu of taxes."



Arts Center entryway, with theater doors at the top of stairs



This building, containing a restaurant and offices, was contaminated with uranium

The success of the redevelopment appears to derive directly from the cooperative approach pursued by the Army, the town and its residents, EPA, and state regulators. But one problem area remains: The GSA parcel, never part of the NPL listing, remains abandoned and blighted.



Buildings on the GSA parcel

Under Nuclear Regulatory Commission oversight, the Army removed contaminated soil from 12 acres, and even though the GSA parcel is not part of the BRAC site, the Army agreed to combine public oversight in a single Restoration Advisory Board. The Massachusetts DCR hoped to develop the parcel as active recreational open space, first proposing a hockey rink and later planning playing fields, but RAB members argued that most of the property is a wetland, suitable only for passive recreation and stormwater recharge. The Army Corps, as the agency responsible for cleanup at Formerly Used Defense Sites recently re-delineated the wetlands, showing them to be larger than previously believed. However, disagreement about cleanup levels is ongoing since the eventual reuse remains uncertain.



Wetlands in need of restoration

For now, the state and the community are stuck with the Army's old, graffiti-covered buildings. Even though the 1986 Defense Environmental Restoration Act specifically authorized building demolition and debris removal, the Army by policy generally refuses to remove such structures from land planned for transfer. Thus, as the community, state, and federal officials celebrate the administrative milestone of NPL deletion, everyone should remember that the job of cleaning up the historic Watertown Arsenal is not yet complete.