

Brownfields

Success Story

Continuing a Legacy of Learning Aberdeen, South Dakota

The Bethlehem Lutheran Church has long been part of Aberdeen, South Dakota. Over the years, the parish grew along with the community and, to accommodate this growth, a two-story school was built on church grounds in 1956. Nearly 40 years later, the parish moved to a new location, and the old buildings began to slowly deteriorate. While the other buildings on site were ultimately razed, the school remained. A private company later purchased the property but never moved forward with plans to develop it into apartments and offices. In 2011, the city of Aberdeen purchased the property with plans to construct a new public library. But first, the city needed to assess the property for any environmental contamination that could threaten demolition workers or the public.

The Assessments

The city purchased the parcel—a full city block in downtown Aberdeen—for \$700,000 with support from the Alexander Mitchell Public Library Foundation. The old school building had become derelict and a safety hazard, as many of its windows had been knocked out.

“The old building was no longer viable,” says Kim McIntosh, an environmental manager with the South Dakota Department of Environment & Natural Resources (DENR). “The department was excited to assist with an opportunity to find better use for the property.”

The city applied to the DENR for funding to complete an Environmental Site Assessment. The assessment revealed asbestos in building materials and petroleum-contaminated soil.

The Cleanup

The DENR worked closely with the city to ensure the asbestos was removed prior to demolition and that the demolition was handled properly. The DENR also monitored the groundwater to ensure contamination wouldn't pose any risks to the public.



Grant Recipient:
South Dakota Department of
Environment & Natural Resources

Grant Type:
Brownfields CERCLA 128(a)

Former Uses:
Sunday School, Chapel,
Youth Center

Current Use:
Public Library



By 2011, the old Bethlehem Lutheran Church school building was crumbling.



The K.O. Lee Aberdeen Public Library opened in September 2017.

“The Brownfields Program is happy to get behind projects with so much community support—to help turn a dream into a reality.”

*Christina Wilson
Brownfields Project Manager
EPA Region 8*

For more information:

Visit the EPA Brownfields website at www.epa.gov/brownfields or contact Kim McIntosh at 605-773-3296 or Kim.McIntosh@state.sd.us.

Using U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Brownfields CERCLA 128(a) funding, the DENR spent approximately \$45,000 to conduct the site assessments, develop a cleanup plan and remove the asbestos. The state also provided approximately \$7,000 through the DENR Abandoned Tank Program to assess, remove and appropriately dispose of contaminated substances associated with a 6,000-gallon underground petroleum tank. Funds for the construction of the library were raised by the city (\$5.5 million with a city sales tax initiative) and from private donations (\$2.5 million).

“The willingness of Aberdeen to seek help from funding agencies for the environmental cleanup really helped make this a success,” says Christina Wilson, an EPA Region 8 Brownfields project manager who assisted with the effort. “Without that initial help, it would have been hard to overcome the environmental challenges.”

The Benefits

After remediating the property, construction of the new library began. Nearly six years in the making, the 29,400-square-foot K.O. Lee Aberdeen Public Library—named after a donor who pledged \$900,000 for construction—opened on September 18, 2017.

The library features self-checkout stations and separate spaces for youth, adult and children’s books, as well as a local history and genealogy reading space and meeting rooms (available during and after hours). An additional section is dedicated to helping newcomers to Aberdeen, with a focus on resources for non-native English speakers.

In essence, the library is more than just a place to house books—it’s a full community learning center, a place where everyone in Aberdeen can visit and learn. “I was so pleased to see how the library turned out,” adds McIntosh. “It’s incredibly satisfying to revitalize a former brownfield and to restore a space for learning upon these historic grounds.”