



Waukegan, Ill., Cleanup and Revitalization Plan

For more information...

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Vision and Purpose

Recent experience throughout the nation has shown that by linking environmental cleanup to community revitalization goals, environmental remediation projects can be a vital catalyst for unleashing environmental, economic and social benefits. An emerging case-in-point is Waukegan, Ill., an industrial “rust belt” city on the shores of Lake Michigan in northeast Illinois. The Waukegan community is planning and seeking ways to implement a city revitalization plan which will include transforming the city’s worn industrialized downtown waterfront into a vigorous and inviting waterfront with new residential condominiums, commercial establishments, recreational land uses and an adjacent community sports complex. A collaboration spearheaded by the Coalicion Latinos Unidos de Lake County, the City of Waukegan, the Waukegan Harbor Citizens Advisory Group (designated CAG), and federal agencies have been working to ensure that all Waukegan communities are both meaningful participants and beneficiaries of this revitalization process.

Background

In addition to the city hosting three Superfund sites (the Johns-Manville site, the Outboard Marine Corporation site, and the Yeoman Creek Landfill site), as well as numerous other brownfield contaminated sites, the city’s lakefront has been plagued by asbestos contamination and the harbor with PCB-contamination. The three Waukegan Superfund sites are at various stages of cleanup. The environmental degradation of the area has led to restrictions on dredging activities, numerous beach closings due to various contaminants, degradation of phytoplankton and zooplankton populations, and the loss of fish and wildlife habitat. These environmental impacts prompted the International Joint Commission to designate the Waukegan Harbor as an International Area of Concern in 1991. The city of Waukegan qualifies as an environmental justice area due to the high percentage of low-income and minority residents in the area. According to the 2000 Census, 19.2 percent of the community is African-American and 44.8 percent of it is Hispanic. Waukegan has seen the biggest increase in poverty rates in Lake County, rising to 13.9 percent in 1999 from 9.5 percent in 1989.

In the past, the Waukegan community has not been actively involved in projects affecting the environment in their community. Consequently, project planning did not necessarily consider

community concerns at an early stage, resulting in disagreements, delays and additional costs. This is illustrated in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' 19th proposal to place Waukegan Harbor sediment dredging in a portion of the Johns-Manville site. While this disposal alternative may have been a cost effective remedy for the dredge material, it failed to accommodate city redevelopment planning around the Johns-Manville site. Just as unfortunate, redevelopment ideas lack the direction for success provided by a process. A developer recently appealed to EPA for assistance to create an automobile museum at the Johns-Manville property without having first made property lease arrangements with the city. It is expected that a revitalization plan, understood by all citizens of the community, will reduce conflicts which inhibit coordinated development.

Project Description

The Waukegan community is planning and seeking ways to implement a city revitalization. The city of Waukegan plans not only to ensure that these Superfund sites are cleaned up, but also to make them community assets. The plan focuses on reclaiming valuable lakefront property blighted by aging contaminated industrial sites. Clean up of contaminated sites is the first step of the city's revitalization vision. The city's revitalization plan is proposing to transform the Outboard Marine Corp. site into commercial and recreational uses, the Johns-Manville site into active recreational uses, and the Yeoman Creek Landfill site into passive recreational uses.

Through community involvement, education and training best practices, the Waukegan environmental justice collaboration is seeking to ensure that the city's predominantly Latino and African-American population become knowledgeable in identifying and addressing issues of environmental justice, communicate with one

another more effectively and improve the quality of the environment for the community. Best practices protocol dictates meaningful community involvement will focus on ensuring that this partnership-building and community involvement effort endeavor to go beyond that achieved in any single site, to ensure that the best results for the community can be achieved through communications and synergistic decisions among all sites. A current example is the developing plan by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to use the Yeoman Creek Landfill as a disposal site for sediments to be dredged from Waukegan Harbor. This may result in significant cost savings for the dredging project, and therefore to the community which must pay a portion of the costs. The dredging project is a major step toward improving the environmental conditions in the harbor, redeveloping the downtown and ultimately removing the harbor from the International Joint Commission's list of Areas of Concern. The project will provide lessons about how better coordination and holistic decision-making can maximize community benefits, protect the environment, enhance community end uses of the properties, increase property values and address environmental justice concerns.

Partners

Federal:

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Local/Regional/State:

City of Waukegan
Coalicion Latinos Unidos de Lake County
Waukegan Harbor Citizens Advisory Group
Illinois EPA