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Neighborhoods

Mill towns face blocks to economic progression

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By Karamagi Rujumba, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In Homestead and in other Mon Valley boroughs that supported steel mills, there is a common, false perception that brownfields are only the ruins of what was left behind when the mills closed.

Meredith Meyer Grelli contends that misperception is an economic development obstacle for communities like Homestead, West Homestead and Munhall, which are trying to pull themselves out of a decades-long malaise.

"There is definitely an impression that brownfields are only big pieces of unusable land, and yet they are more than that," said Ms. Grelli, program coordinator of the Western Pennsylvania Brownfields Center at Carnegie Mellon University.

In economic development terms, she said, there is a broad definition of what qualifies as a brownfield. More than just a swath of chemical-drenched land, it can also be an unused piece of property crumbling under the decay of years of abandonment.

And in the three Mon Valley communities that sit just over the train tracks from The Waterfront -- a big shopping and entertainment complex seated on 430 acres formerly used by the Homestead Works of U.S. Steel -- there is about 40 acres of land to redevelop.

Much of it is made up of brownfields, which include many of the long-abandoned light industrial and manufacturing properties in Homestead and West Homestead, Ms. Grelli said. She is coordinating a redevelopment push in the three boroughs focusing on community input from residents and business owners.

And what may seem mostly a question of semantics is a key part of the recommendations a panel of national experts gave to borough residents, community leaders and county officials last week, after a three-day workshop on how the three boroughs can redevelop their business districts while using The Waterfront as a resource.

The panel's key recommendations from last week's workshop titled, "The Avenues: Beyond the Waterfront," include forming an intergovernmental agreement among the boroughs, hiring a facilitator to steer the redevelopment efforts and asking the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to provide an official to help the communities seek funding for development efforts.

Getting an EPA official attached to the tri-boroughs' redevelopment is critical because the federal agency can leverage grant funding for a wide range of projects, said Marshall Williams, a railroad and strategic connections expert from Tennessee.

"You need an advocate who can work with you to secure funding you might not otherwise get," said

Mr. Williams, one of six national experts, including academicians, architects and community planners, at the workshop.

So far, Allegheny County has invested about \$10 million for infrastructure upgrades in the three boroughs, and is working with Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Charlie Batch and others to rehabilitate buildings in the area, said Dennis Davin, director of the county's Department of Economic Development.

Ms. Grelli, together with community leaders, started this redevelopment push last year, conducting interviews with residents and small business owners. She said much of the work involves marketing and getting economic development groups in the Mon Valley on the same page.

"There are a lot of groups trying to do the same thing in the area, and our goal here is to make sure that we're all working together on a clear plan," she added.

A planning committee, formed last year to study the area, presented the recommendations from last week's workshop at a public hearing held at the Moose Building on Eighth Avenue in Homestead, last night.

The next step of this project, Ms. Grelli said, "is all about establishing a strong community vision going forward. We want to establish who is accountable and how this [redevelopment plan] will work for these communities."

Karamagi Rujumba can be reached at krujumba@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1719.

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