

RL Community Discusses Brownfield Development N and S of Town

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On Thursday, April 30, at least 80 people filled up the tables at the Roosevelt Center's main room, in Red Lodge, to hear about current progress with the north end of town's "brownfield" and to contemplate new uses for the brownfield at the south end of town, the site of the former Rocky Fork Inn, destroyed in the 2022 flood when Rock Creek poured over its banks.

According to the federal government, the term "brownfield site" means "real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant." It states, "Cleaning up and reinvesting in these properties protects the environment, reduces blight, and takes development pressures off greenspaces and working lands."

Jason Seyler is one of the Montana DEQ Brownfields Coordinators on Brownfields projects and he gave a presentation. Seyler explained that there is an impression made when one first comes into your town from the north or south—what do you want it to show? "A thriving community or a declining community?"

Beartooth Resource, Conservation & Development's (BRCD) staff: Director of Finance, Nan Knight and Myrna Latusky, Program Manager, and members of the Red Lodge Urban Renewal Agency attended. Red Lodge's City contract planner, Jeremy Fadness, presented the history of the north area.

The North Community Entrance Plan Urban Renewal District (NCE-URD) is a 160 acre area located on both sides of Highway 212 at the north end of Red Lodge. Uses along Hwy 212 there are generally commercial with a number of vacant or unused parcels scattered throughout. Beyond Hwy 212 frontage,

properties are a mix of commercial, institutional and a small number of residential uses. Red Lodge High School and the Yellowstone Wildlife Sanctuary are located within the NCE-URD.

The goals with the formation of the NCE-URD are to: Increase housing units near downtown; Support business development; Improve public infrastructure; to Promote historic preservation and cohesive urban design identity.

The information obtained is not just for vacant lots. Red Lodge Mayor David Westwood explained how the designation and assessments could help, "Where brownfields COULD/WOULD come into play, is if a private developer wanted to have that information to determine if they wanted to move forward with a site, they could ask for a phase 1 or phase 2 study to learn about what the risks are. Generally, these are done in conjunction with municipal grants, although they did step in and do one for the old hospital, which is privately owned. The other part where Brownfields could be involved, is if the municipality is doing improvements with city-owned land after reclamation is complete — i.e. Rocky Fork Inn. But most of what is in that URD area is privately owned."

Nan Knight said, "Brownfields can apply to both public and private properties, depending on eligibility and access, and these assessments can help property owners, developers, and the community better understand site conditions and make informed decisions about future use."

Kate Lucas, Kansas State University (KSU), was there with the Technical Assistance to Brownfields (KSU TAB) team. The TAB team presented an overview of the recent community visioning for the North Community Entrance Urban Renewal District. They also sought to gather input for possible reuse of the former Rocky Fork Inn property in

the future.

Lucas explained that the Kansas State University TAB program empowers communities in EPA Regions 5, 6, 7, and 8 to revitalize brownfield sites through expert guidance and no-cost technical support. Montana is Region 8. They equip communities with the tools and resources needed to stimulate economic and community revitalization through engagement and education. They also offer nationally accessible online tools to help create site inventories and develop competitive EPA grant proposals.

A survey taken by 211 local people online showed that 76 percent visit the NCE-URD area 1-2 times a week; 89 percent agreed the area's development was "important" or "very important" and that this northern entrance should reflect the character and heritage of Red Lodge.

The general survey responses wanted to create welcoming places for community youth to gather and recreate together, create green spaces and one noted youth "are the future of the community." Most youths talked to said they want to come back after college to the area to live and work. Additional community input wanted a "welcome and attractive site", increased landscaping to improve the aesthetics and increased connectivity to Red Lodge. Affordable workforce housing was also needed.

The team showed a variety of options for development of the district, with attractive rowhouse housing, shorter blocks, garages underneath in the lower story of two and three-story residences, with open space and green corridors worked into the plan. Mixed use and low density was recommended. Resources are limited with federal and nonprofit grants and loans the likely next step. For example, "Coutts Park" could be mixed use with the lowest density.

In the south of town, explained Fadness, there is FEMA money to purchase

and clean up the Rocky Fork Inn property. Although the FEMA requirements need 25 % from the community, the state provided that match and the feds the rest totally covering the costs. They expect to have the area bank stabilized by this fall.

At the meeting, the community embraced the opportunity to dream up future uses on Rocky Fork Inn site maps but had to keep the visioning within FEMA requirements. First off, that meant there could be no new structures such as residences or commercial buildings on site only minimal and open structures and such as gazebos, picnic tables. That immediately focused the group on green areas and related multiple uses that became extremely creative.

Creative ideas posed for the site, located along Rock Creek, included permeable bikeways and roads, spaces for handicapped parking, landscaping that directed water from rain or flooding circling it back into the creek, trails, recycling bins and a bike camp. There were many ideas for play areas from a playground or water slide for children, to a synthetic climbing boulder for older kids and adults. Connecting this green site with Finn Park and other parks in town was often a goal.

As for visioning turning into reality—that will have to wait since money is not available yet. It will all be green lawn for now.

Planner, Jeremy Fadness explained, "There is not money from FEMA for recreational improvements. We are working on applying for FEMA funds to purchase the Eagles Nest property in order to remediate similar to the Rocky Fork property. We are currently not applying for any funding for recreational improvements for Rocky Fork."

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