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# Brownfield Revitalization Initiative

Helping the City of Richmond, California, redevelop contaminated sites

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Richmond, California, has over [440 contaminated sites](#), known as brownfields, that are ripe for development. The city has the opportunity to take advantage of increased brownfield funding and technical assistance from state and federal governments to revitalize these spaces, in keeping with the city's Business Development Strategy. **We advocate that the City of Richmond's Office of the City Manager should create a Brownfield Revitalization Initiative (BRI) to take advantage of this assistance and funding.** The BRI should (a) inventory sites, identify catalyst sites, and prioritize contaminated site remediation; (b) attract and find funding to pay for cleanup; (c) support cleanup and mitigation on the contaminated sites for redevelopment as desired by the community; (d) build and attract community-centered development; and (e) market the desired sites to developers, business owners, and locally owned franchisees. This initiative should be implemented in 2 phases, beginning with hiring an economic development-focused fellow to scope out and set up the BRI, and ending with implementation of the BRI initiative.

## BACKGROUND

### Brownfields in Richmond

Brownfields are defined by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as “a property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant.” Chemicals and heavy metals from agricultural practices, chemical manufacturing, and industrial activity contaminate the soil and groundwater, posing barriers to redevelopment and health risks for the community. There are more than 440 identified brownfields or contaminated sites around the city<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1), which limit the city’s ability to attract outside retail and development. This in turn makes it more difficult to attract businesses and services desired by the community.

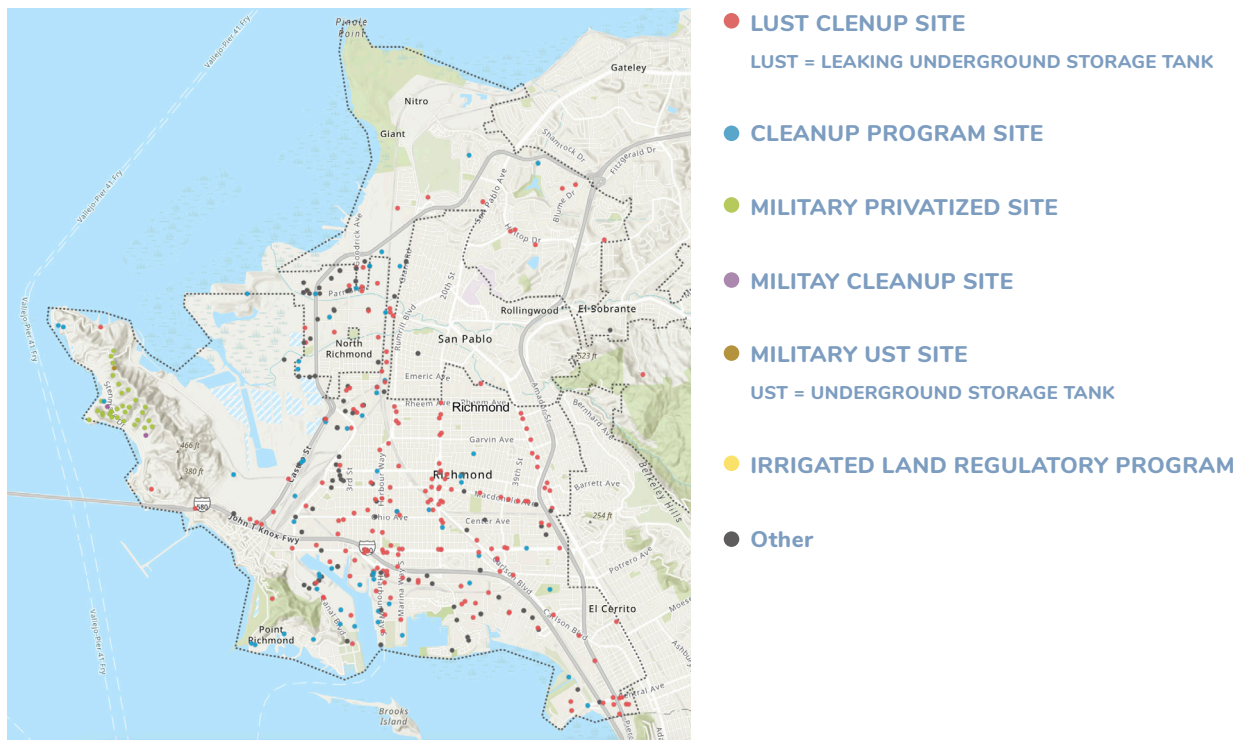


Figure 1. Brownfield sites identified by the ArcGIS Layer “Merge EPA CIMC DTSC EnviroStor SWRCB Geotracker April 2020.”

Brownfields have made it difficult to encourage economic development in Richmond. The city has had trouble attracting outside development because many businesses do not see a viable market there to support their businesses.<sup>2</sup> Developers who are interested in building in the city may face extra costs of brownfield remediation, further hindering the city’s business attraction position. In addition, because of brownfield contamination, developers face increased public scrutiny<sup>3</sup> to clean and monitor contaminated sites. Economic development and planning within the city have also been [understaffed](#), making it difficult for the city to support local businesses, address community concerns around brownfields, and implement community-wide commercial corridor planning.

Over the past 2 years, the City of Richmond engaged [HR&A Advisors](#) to design a [Business Recovery Action Plan](#) and a [Business Development Strategy](#) to create a better business environment. The city’s [FY 2022–23 Budget](#) indicates that the Mayor’s Office will work to finalize and adopt these draft plans. The strategy report made several recommendations, including that the city needs to increase capacity; improve community trust, which has declined from lack of transparency, capacity, and accessibility; and clean up its built environment. In addition, the [Richmond General Plan 2030](#) states that the city will implement appropriate mitigation measures and cleanup of sites that are known to contain toxic materials.

*“This is a great time to build momentum [around brownfield revitalization] because of the additional funds we have.”*

— Nova Blazej, EPA Region 9 senior project manager<sup>4</sup>

### **Brownfield Revitalization**

Brownfield revitalization involves a series of steps, including environmental site assessments, cleanup and mitigation, and reuse and redevelopment of the contaminated sites. For more details, see Appendix A.

Significant resources are available to help communities like Richmond revitalize brownfields. Because of internal capacity constraints, the city has not been able to take full advantage of the influx of federal and state infrastructure funding and assistance, including free technical assistance and capacity building support provided by organizations such as the [Center for Creative Land Recycling](#), and additional economic development focused [funding for brownfield revitalization](#) specifically allocated for disadvantaged communities.

## RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that the Office of the City Manager create a Brownfield Revitalization Initiative (BRI) within the Office of Economic Development to achieve the **stated** city goals of increasing staff capacity, strengthening community trust, improving business attraction, and **cleaning toxic sites**. The Richmond BRI is intended to be a city-run program developed to accelerate cleanup and redevelopment of contaminated sites by leveraging available brownfield funds and resources. The BRI would be responsible for presenting clear and attainable information about the city's brownfields or potential brownfield sites, and answering community concerns around project development. Cleanup of these sites will provide a safer and healthier environment for Richmond and revitalize much needed community retail and commercial corridors, in keeping with the city's Business Development Strategy.

Having a bespoke brownfield team in the Office of Economic Development will be invaluable to the City of Richmond because the city has a significant history of contamination, which has led to tensions between community members and development related to contamination cleanup.<sup>5</sup> The BRI would quell longstanding mistrust between the city and its residents by putting the health and well-being of the community at the center of its economic development plans. It would also leverage additional grant funding for economic development.

The BRI should seek to accomplish the following 12 key actions, described in more detail in the attached [operational plan](#):

1. **INVENTORY:** Keep an ongoing, up-to-date inventory of brownfield sites and development stages, in order of development priority, within the city.
2. **SITE PRIORITIZATION:** Biannually reevaluate priority sites with input from the community.
3. **CAPACITY BUILDING:** Develop and lead internal city educational webinars and meetings to ensure that city staff are up-to-date on available technical assistance and capacity building resources to redevelop brownfields. Join the California Community Economic Development Association (CCEDEA) to access federally subsidized technical assistance for brownfield revitalization design and economic redevelopment.
4. **BUSINESS FUNDING SUPPORT:** Help developers apply for and access funding. Maintain a list of financing mechanisms, resources, grants, programs, and organizations that fund brownfield revitalization and redevelopment (including development financing and private investment), organized around project stage and type of project they support.

5. **GRANT APPLICATIONS:** Apply for brownfield and economic development grants from the state and federal governments and philanthropic organizations.
6. **BUSINESS TECHNICAL SUPPORT:** Maintain a list of technical assistance resources, people, programs, and organizations that support brownfield revitalization and redevelopment organized around project stage and type of project they support. Maintain relationships with regional technical assistance and grant providers as well as brownfield remediation oversight agencies. (See Appendix A for more information on brownfield remediation oversight agencies.)
7. **REPRESENT RICHMOND’S INTERESTS IN REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLANS:** Represent Richmond on the Bay Area Community-Based Solutions Unit and other local, regional, or state brownfield remediation and economic development groups.
8. **COMMUNITY VISIONING:** Organize, support, and attend community visioning and development meetings.
9. **COMMUNITY EDUCATION:** Organize, support, and present community educational webinars and meetings around brownfield remediation, available technical and financial support for brownfield remediation and development, market opportunities, and priority sites.
10. **BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT:** Work with the economic development and planning offices to organize and present market opportunities to potential businesses or developers based on community needs in priority sites (including maintaining an online marketplace with opportunities for development).
11. **PLANNING AND INCENTIVES:** Ensure that local business codes are enforced so that existing commercial space is appealingly presented and not filled with absentee investors. Simplify the zoning process for commercial corridor-focused businesses. Explore new and creative ways to finance brownfield remediation and redevelopment around the city. Explore incentives for business placement in remediated urban infill locations and Opportunity Zones.
12. **LEARNING AND SHARING:** Attend local, regional, state, and national conferences to remain informed and up-to-date on available funding and technical assistance for brownfield revitalization and redevelopment. Present on Richmond success stories at these conferences.

These 12 steps will guide city leaders to create an economic development program that starts where they are and provides a blueprint to where they say they want to go. The recommendations incorporate existing blight reduction strategies and would build capacity within the city government, enabling it to



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take advantage of the current momentum to rapidly distribute federal and state funding and resources.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

The BRI should be implemented in 2 phases:

**Phase I:** The City of Richmond should engage a 2-year economic development-focused fellows (or hire a new full-time staff member) whose role will be to build capacity with existing city staff and to set up and implement the BRI.

In particular, the City of Richmond may seek to hire a FUSE Corps Executive Fellow to scope out the program. The [FUSE Executive Fellowship program](#) is a 1- to 2-year, full-time public service role in city or county government. [FUSE Executive Fellows](#) “work alongside senior government leaders and the community to lead strategic projects” defined by the city. In contrast to many other programs, [FUSE Executive Fellows](#) are “seasoned professionals” and executives with “15+ years of experience under their belt.” In addition, the FUSE program can provide more than 50% of the cost of a fellow through philanthropy and has expressed an interest in this project.<sup>6</sup>

**Phase II:** The City of Richmond should build out the BRI team with 2 additional staff members and expand community and business engagement.

We have provided a BRI [operational plan](#) that describes how the BRI should be implemented and what it will do. We have also provided an [onboarding manual](#) and resources for the new staff/fellow to guide them through the process of standing up the BRI.

## **CONCLUSION**

The BRI would be a core component of Richmond’s economic development team, supporting community and business relations and enabling critical brownfield cleanup. Because of the timely nature of available funding and resources as noted in the background section, the city should take the first step to stand up the BRI as soon as possible.

# Appendix A: The Brownfield Revitalization Process

What follows is a brief description of each stage in the brownfield remediation and redevelopment process summarized from the [EPA's Brownfields Road Map](#). Oversight of brownfield assessment and cleanup in California is shared by the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) if it is water contamination, and the Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) and the California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) if it is soil and/or air contamination. The Center for Creative Land Recycling is the primary technical assistance partner with the EPA Region 9 and DTSC that helps support communities with revitalization projects.

## Environmental Site Assessment Phase I

A brownfield revitalization process can be initiated by a community, a developer, or the city. Typically, [if a property changes owners, has suspected contamination, or has zone use changes, it will need to undergo an Environmental Site Assessment \(ESA\)](#) before redevelopment can begin. If the project is initiated by a developer, the city will not be involved in the assessment. A [Phase I Site Assessment requires that an environmental professional](#) be hired to interview individuals with knowledge of the site, search for records about the site's past owners and uses, and conduct a walk-through inspection of the site and visual inspection of adjacent sites. They may or may not collect samples. Generally, at this stage, it is also important for the developer to have reuse plans and consult with the community.

If no evidence of contamination nor of possible contamination is found, the developer must confirm the results with the local regulatory officials (DTSC, SWRCB, or CalEPA) before redevelopment can begin.

## Environmental Site Assessment Phase II

If the Phase I Site Assessment suggests there may be contamination on the site, a [Phase II Site Assessment is conducted](#) to confirm and locate the source(s) and characteristics of contamination. This is also referred to as a "[site investigation](#)." Phase II will include [sample collection and analysis, and analyze the nature and extent of contamination and the potential risk of contamination migration](#) through soil, groundwater, or air. It will also include an evaluation of potential cleanup options and an assessment of cleanup costs, long-term maintenance, and monitoring.



### Cleanup/Remediation and Mitigation

If contamination is found, the project team should [share the results](#) of the investigation with the community and solicit feedback and comments on the cleanup options they are considering. (This stage is where the city's BRI would come in if the investigation were initiated by a developer. If it were initiated by the community or the city, the BRI would come in from the start.) The project team should determine the best cleanup method based on community desires, costs, reuse plans, and type of contamination, and work with the oversight agency to confirm their cleanup plan. The approval of the cleanup plan by the oversight agency depends on the proposed reuse of the site. If the site is intended to be reused for housing, the cleanup is required to be more thorough than for a site that will be used for industrial or commercial purposes.

During this stage, it might be determined that the project is not feasible given the required clean-up costs, in which case other reuse strategies should be examined. Alternatively, a remediation plan might involve capping the contamination with an impermeable concrete seal and implementing a monitoring plan to be sure that it is not escaping (i.e., mitigation). In the more costly cleanup cases, the contamination might be removed from the site.

### Reuse and Redevelopment

Once the contamination is adequately remediated according to the regulatory agency, reuse plans and development can begin.



**ENDNOTES**

- 1 From ArcGIS Layer “Merge EPA CIMC DTSC EnviroStor SWRCB Geotracker April 2020,” accessed using GIS Online, July 29, 2022. All sites outside Richmond were filtered out, leaving 442 sites in the city.
- 2 City of Richmond employees, confidential conversations with authors, July 2022.
- 3 North Richmond Municipal Advisory Council meeting, [August 2, 2022](#).
- 4 *CCLR's East Bay Environmental Justice Forum*, CCLRtv, YouTube video, accessed August 10, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWYfdo6\\_Zs8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWYfdo6_Zs8).
- 5 North Richmond Municipal Advisory Council meeting discussion about a revitalization plan for the Brookside Drive brownfield site, August 2, 2022. Minutes not yet available online. [Link to agenda](#).
- 6 James Weinberg, CEO, FUSE Corps, via Zoom, August 23, 2022.