

Opportunity in recycling Superfund sites

Aug. 2, 2006

By Tim Zorn / Post-Tribune staff writer

GARY — Sitting between 25th Avenue and the Borman Expressway, a 40-acre site on Gary's west side could be an attractive development site.

But because it was once heavily contaminated with industrial waste, it's fenced off, vacant and unused.

Now environmental agencies and developers are thinking of new uses for places like Lake Sandy Jo, one of Gary's former Superfund sites.

The Superfund program, dedicated to cleaning up the nation's most polluted places, removed the most threatening contamination from Lake Sandy Jo but never considered re-using the land.

"Everybody understands now we could have been spending our money better," said Dorreen Carey, director of Gary's Department of Environmental Affairs.

Environmental consultant Karla McDonald agreed.

Reusing former Superfund sites — for example, as ball fields or shopping areas — is difficult and time-consuming.

But, McDonald said, "it can be done and has been done."

Carey, the director of Gary's Department of Environmental Affairs, spoke about that and other land-reuse challenges Tuesday with fellow members of the National Brownfield Association.

The national group's Indiana chapter toured Gary's brownfield sites and heard presentations in the afternoon.

"I think people think of Gary as an industrial area," Carey said afterward. "What people are not aware of is what a green city it is, and what globally unique resources still exist here."

Gary's brownfield program concentrates not just on cleaning up and reusing formerly contaminated sites — as it is at a former gas station at 25th Avenue and Chase Street, which is being turned into a park — but also on connecting them to green spaces.

It's also looking, Carey said, to turn the J-Pit, once a potential waste site on the west side, into a "green, light industrial area" and developing an industrial park — and protecting wetlands — east of Cline Avenue between 5th and 15th avenues.

Kay Nelson, the Northwest Indiana Forum environmental director, said the Forum later this year will start assembling an inventory of vacant but reusable sites across Northwest Indiana.

"Everybody who's here is because of the location, the location, the location," Nelson said, "and that's what's going to bring them back, too."

Contact Tim Zorn at 648-3073 or at tzorn@post-trib.com