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Lawrence Gateway Project Opens the Door to Economic, Environmental, and Community Improvement in One of Massachusetts Most Historic Urban Communities

Success in US EPA Assessment Grant Program

Lawrence, MA

(February 2, 2004)

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\$1 Million in US EPA Brownfields Funding Helps Lawrence Meet Redevelopment Goals

Among the Northeast's oldest and most historic mill cities, Lawrence sits along the rushing banks of the Merrimack River. This once booming industrial center now faces one of New England's largest poverty and unemployment rates. However, through a coordinated effort between public agencies, businesses, and community groups, an all-encompassing plan for economic, environmental, and quality of life renewal and development called the Lawrence Gateway Project was created.

Named after the historic downtown canal district that comprises the redevelopment target area, the Lawrence Gateway Project, is funded through private and public sources including - over \$1 million in US EPA Brownfields funds that have been provided to the city since 1996. The multimillion dollar project focuses on transportation and infrastructure redevelopment, assessment and cleanup of the many mill complexes located in the target area, transformation of landfills, creation of affordable housing, and the implementation of numerous quality of life and community organized programs.

Lawrence was a prominent industrial center in the mid-nineteenth century. The production of textiles was the primary industry during that time. Using the transportation power of the Merrimack River, the city's industrial roots were planted on an extensive system of canals, penstocks, and turbines that powered and transported raw materials to the city's huge mills. By the 1970s, industry began to collapse due to the increase in foreign importation of textiles and thousands of workers were laid off. Dozens of factories shut down operations. Many of these abandoned factories stood abandoned or underutilized for a generation.

Today, the city is among the poorest in New England. The average household income in 1999 was only \$24,500. Over 21% of the population lived below the poverty line in 2000. The city encompasses a large and community-oriented Latino population. People of Latino heritage make up over 54% of the city's population. 22% of Latino residents are of Puerto Rican heritage.

The Lawrence Gateway Project will utilize private and public investments to revitalize the city's downtown residential, commercial, and industrial centers that have been hard hit by economic and environmental hardship. The Gateway Project promotes a practical and balanced leveraging of projects, that taken collectively, make up a new and stronger foundation for the community. The well-balanced plan encompasses all levels of city, community, state, and federal assistance and will create lasting change in Lawrence through various focused plans of action and remediation.

Transportation improvements center around the Interstate-495 Interchange project made possible by the Massachusetts Highway Department (MHD). The new interstate interchange will create a defined gateway into the downtown corridor and become a catalyst of change. As more traffic flows into the area, so does more potential business and the need to improve the area's appearance for passerbys. The link to I-495 would also improve traffic flow patterns into the Gateway area and link the interstate to the improved Spicket River Bridge. In addition to the new interchange, ramps will be realigned and roads and bridges (like the Spicket River Bridge) will be constructed or reconstructed.

The problem of the vast abandoned or underutilized mills will also be addressed with the program. The project targets priority sites and calls for environmental site assessments at each site using portions of the grant monies offered through the US EPA Brownfield Assessment Grant Program. To date, the Assessment Grant Program has awarded the city of Lawrence \$400,000 to help assess several key properties within the Gateway area including the former Oxford Paper site.

The Oxford Paper property, formerly used to manufacture paper products, is now entering its final stage of remediation following the extensive efforts of the city and local contractors. A portion of the property is set to become a park that will offer the urban population a chance to enjoy open greenspace everyday.

The remediation of the nearby GenCorp property is also a major cornerstone of the Gateway project. The GenCorp site, an 8.6 acre brownfield property within the Gateway area, has an industrial history dating back to 1848 and has an extensive history of contamination. GenCorp, a Fortune 500 company, purchased the property in 1955 and manufactured rigid and soft plastic products until the plant closed down in 1981 due to poor economic conditions and excess capacity. The estimated \$100 million investigation and remediation of the GenCorp site is in its final stages and has been conducted voluntarily and entirely at the expense of GenCorp under the approval authority of EPA. The property will eventually be redeveloped into needed parking and landscaped community spaces.

Another highlight of the plan is the Landfill Conversion Program. This plan has already achieved significant environmental restoration by transforming a nearby former landfill site into a clean, safe, and fun recreational park right on the banks of the Merrimack River. This successful cleanup was made possible through a joint effort between the City, US EPA, MHD, and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MADEP) and offers open green space and river views to all members of the community.

The all-encompassing Lawrence Gateway plan will bring needed and permanent change to the urban community and has already inspired the very culture-oriented community to come together in the spirit of community involvement and education. Three major community groups have developed together alongside the Gateway Project.

Lawrence CommunityWorks, Inc is a non-profit organization that focuses on job training, improved housing, and the creation of economic opportunities during Gateway remediation. The organization has successfully implemented the Summer Street Home Ownership Project and the Our House Family Learning Center.

Groundwork Lawrence was established by the city of Lawrence in partnership with the EPA and the National Park Service. The goal of Groundwork is to bring improvement to the environment through community partnerships. Groundwork supports park improvement, clean-up and planting days, Adopt-a-Space programs, and environmental education



Demolition of Oxford Paper Mill

initiatives.

The Groundwork team also partnered with the Reviviendo Gateway Initiative, a 38-member steering committee, that formed a guide to development that keeps the safety and happiness of the community in mind through all aspects of the Gateway remediation project.

The extensive and far-reaching Lawrence Gateway plan is already well underway. The always improving Lawrence community has already become a beacon of economic and environmental renewal throughout Massachusetts and many other disadvantaged communities are beginning to follow their very successful and very impressive first act.

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