



Land & Community Revitalization

## BROWNFIELDS SUCCESS IN NEW ENGLAND

# Fitchburg, MA: Leveraging EPA Brownfields Grants to Achieve Community Redevelopment Goals

## Introduction

Fitchburg, Massachusetts is an old industrial city with a host of economic and environmental challenges. Once a vibrant manufacturing hub, the city, like many others in New England, has suffered over the past century as industry has moved away, taking with it the high-paying jobs that fueled the local economy and leaving poverty; unemployment; and abandoned, contaminated properties in its wake. After the devastating loss of the local General Electric (GE) plant in 1998, the city decided to take action and embark on a comprehensive 20-year urban renewal plan with ambitious economic development and community revitalization goals. Since the early days of the plan's adoption in 2000, EPA Brownfields Grants have played a critical role in the city's redevelopment efforts, funding environmental assessments and cleanups that have paved the way for site reuse and economic growth.

EPA has provided funding and technical assistance to help communities assess, cleanup, and redevelop brownfield sites since 1995. EPA defines a brownfield as a "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." Annually, EPA provides grants to public, quasi-public, and non-profit institutions to fund environmental assessments, cleanups, and job training activities. Fitchburg, which has received four assessment grants since 2001, demonstrates the importance of brownfields assessments to redevelopment efforts. By identifying the extent and character of any contamination present, an environmental assessment greatly reduces the risk associated with a brownfield site, smoothing the path to redevelopment. Fitchburg has also been able to leverage these relatively small grants into greater public and private investments to successfully cleanup and redevelop several key properties.

## FITCHBURG FACTS

**Population:** 41,000



### Challenges:

- Economy never recovered from loss of industry in 20<sup>th</sup> century
- High rate of poverty and low per capita income
- Blighted and underutilized downtown

### Redevelopment Goals:

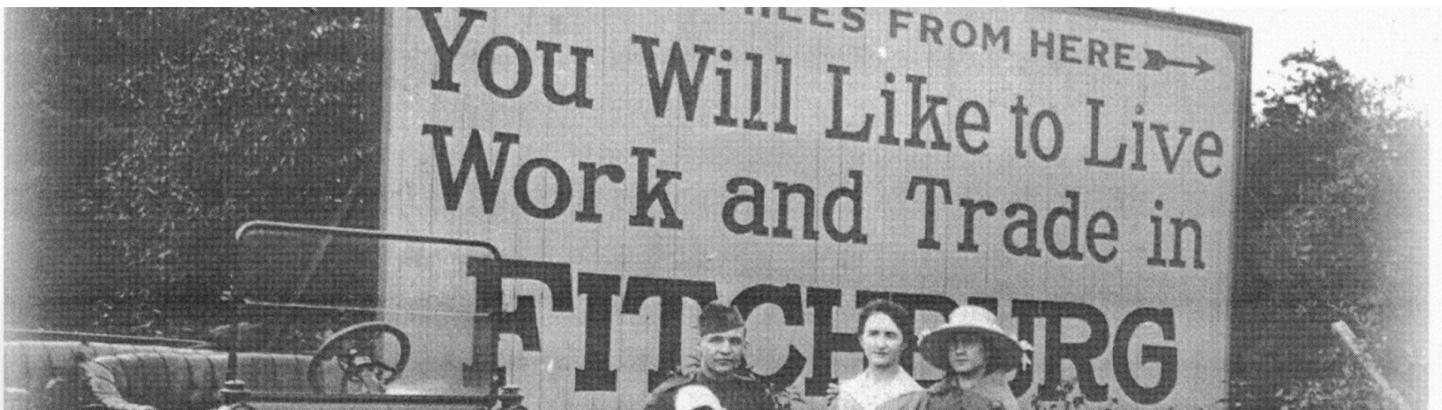
- Create a vibrant main street
- Encourage more prominent presence for Fitchburg State University in the downtown
- Make a safe and stable neighborhood for a diverse group of people
- Create spaces for new industrial uses
- Increase amenities and access to the Nashua River

### EPA Brownfields Funding Received:

- Assessment Grants (4): \$1,000,000
- Cleanup Grant: \$200,000

### Key Redevelopment Successes:

- Assessed 28 brownfields, 16 of which are in the redevelopment area
- Many parcels successfully redeveloped or in the process of being redeveloped
- Leveraged EPA Brownfields Grants to secure more than \$12 million in additional federal, state, and private funds to redevelop 2 brownfields
- Renewed relationship with local university and several brownfields being redeveloped for university uses



Discover your future in Fitchburg (photo courtesy of the Fitchburg Historical Society)



Interior of machine shop at GE's Fitchburg plant, 1942

## Fitchburg Background: History and Challenges

The City of Fitchburg is located in North Central Massachusetts, on the banks of the Nashua River. The river's powerful current offers a natural source of power, which was harnessed by dams as early as the mid-1700s. After the construction of a rail line to Boston in 1845, the area experienced rapid growth, becoming an industrial center with paper, cotton, and textile mills along with heavier manufacturing. Wealth from the industrial operations spilled into the downtown commercial district, creating a vibrant regional shopping destination full of stately buildings, many of which remain today.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, industry in Fitchburg began to decline as mills moved to be closer to raw materials and cheaper labor, and suburban sprawl drew residents and businesses away from the downtown core. Although the city's manufacturing base never fully recovered, it remained an important part of Fitchburg's economy. One of the largest employers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was GE, which took over an abandoned Fitchburg facility during the Second World War to manufacture turbines for naval ships. GE operated the facility

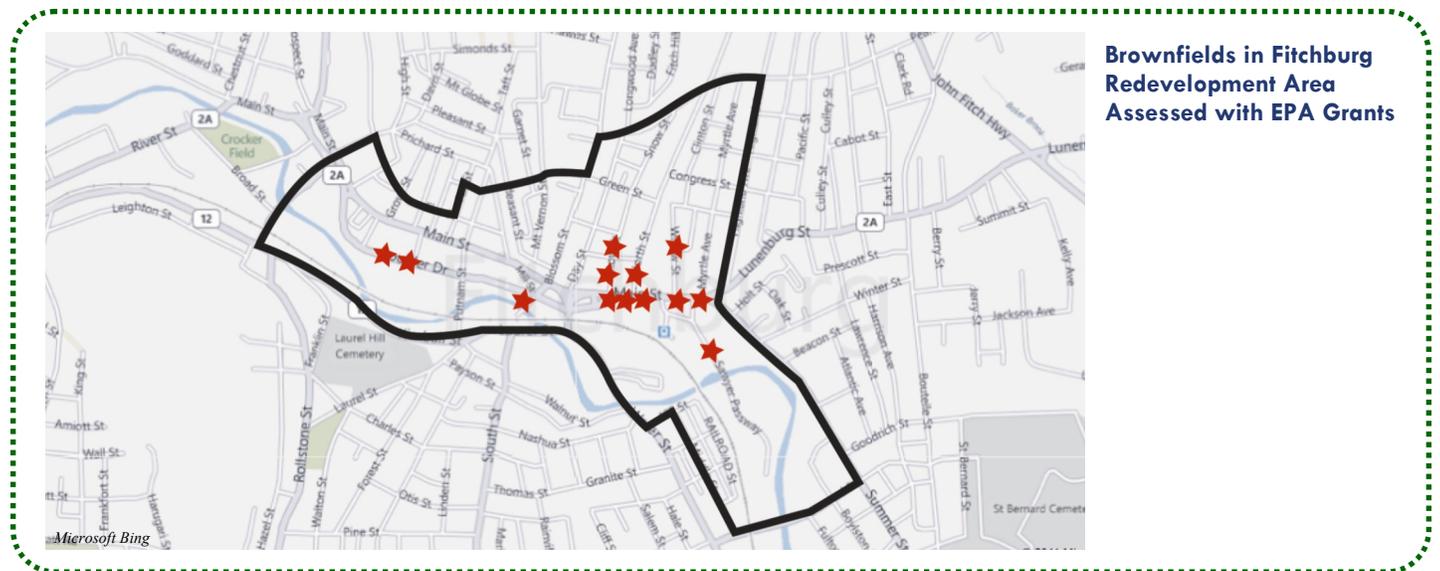
until 1998. When the factory closed, the community lost 600 high-quality jobs with a \$30 million annual payroll.

The GE closure was a devastating blow Fitchburg's economy, reverberating across ancillary economic sectors throughout the city. The city's economic issues were worsened by the closure of a local hospital the previous year. At the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Fitchburg's struggles were evident in its poverty rate, which was nearly double the state rate, and its per capita income, which was only two-thirds of the state's at that time. The effects of years of decline were also manifested physically. Downtown Fitchburg was a shell of its former glory, filled with vacant, trash strewn lots; abandoned and deteriorating buildings; and brownfield sites. In 2000, 33% of building square feet in the downtown area was blighted with a significant number of properties vacant or in tax foreclosure (Fitchburg Downtown Urban Revitalization and Development Plan).

## Fitchburg's Redevelopment Plan: The Path to a Better Future

In response to its growing challenges, Fitchburg developed a comprehensive redevelopment plan in 2000, the largest downtown revitalization effort in the city's history. The 20-year plan is "designed to revitalize and stabilize the city's 224-acre, blighted and underutilized downtown area by creating a comprehensive strategy to promote redevelopment through limited public action and major incentives for private enterprise." Specific objectives include the following.

- Create a *vibrant main street* by removing obsolete, deteriorating buildings, encouraging residential uses downtown, and attracting more visitors through improved quality of life.
- Encourage a *more prominent presence for Fitchburg State University* in the downtown area by supporting institutional expansion and strengthening relationships with the city.
- Make a *safe and stable neighborhood* for a diverse group of people.



- Create spaces for *new industrial uses*.
- Increase *amenities and access to the Nashua River* to draw people and businesses to the downtown.

By meeting these objectives, Fitchburg hopes to attract private investment, create jobs, and become a more desirable place to live, work, and visit.

## Role of EPA Brownfields Grants in Fitchburg's Redevelopment

Given the large number of brownfield properties in Fitchburg's redevelopment area, grant funding from the EPA Brownfields Program has been critical in helping the city implement its urban renewal plan. Fitchburg received its first Brownfields Assessment Grant in 2001. With this initial \$200,000 grant, the city assessed eight properties, all within the redevelopment area. Later grants awarded to the Fitchburg Redevelopment Authority (FRA) in 2003, 2005, and 2007 were used to continue assessment of these properties and assess additional properties in the redevelopment area. EPA funds were also used to assess critical properties in other parts of Fitchburg such as:

- *Coolidge Park*: the most used greenspace in Fitchburg and thus a priority to keep clean,
- The *Central Steam Plant*, an old power plant adjacent to a nature trail, and
- A *former auto body shop* in a depressed residential area. The property is being cleaned up and converted into affordable housing through a joint effort with the Twin Cities Community Development Corporation's Elm Street Initiative, helping to bring a distressed neighborhood back to life.

Many of the urban renewal area properties assessed with EPA grant funding have been successfully redeveloped, helping to revitalize Fitchburg's economy and urban center, or positioned for redevelopment in keeping with the objectives of the redevelopment plan. For example:

### *Riverfront Park*

The Hope Rubber factory used to stand on the banks of the Nashua River in the heart of downtown Fitchburg. The factory closed in the 1990s, and a subsequent fire reduced the building



*Riverfront Park*



*Clockwise from upper left: Coolidge Park, Central Steam Plant, site of new affordable housing on Elm Street*

to a pile of rubble. The site was an eyesore and liability given the unknown level of environmental contamination. Funded through the 2001 and 2003 EPA grants, the Phase I and Phase II Environmental Site Assessments (ESAs) initiated the redevelopment process. After the assessments were complete the city was able to leverage other funding sources, such as a \$825,000 Urban Self Help Grant from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, to complete the site cleanup and redevelopment as a public park.

The design and construction process of the new park was a collaborative effort that included citizens, local business leaders, the city and its redevelopment authority, and federal agencies. In 2003 the 1.6-acre waterfront park opened. The park features a promenade, benches, and open lawn and is the setting for annual events such as the Fitchburg Forge-In Blacksmith Festival and the Nashua River Brewers Festival. The Hope Rubber redevelopment project helps Fitchburg achieve several specific objectives of its plan including improving access to the river and enhancing quality of life in the downtown.

### *Putnam Place*

EPA grant funding has also been used to assess contamination at the old GE factory, a property specifically called out in the redevelopment plan for reuse. The FRA leveraged a suite of public and private funds to complete the rehabilitation, including:

- A \$6 million Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Section 108 loan,
- Two \$1 million Economic Development Administration (EDA) loans,
- A \$1.3 million Massachusetts Opportunity Relocation and Expansion (MORE) Jobs grant,
- A \$500,000 Community Development Action Grant (CDAG) to construct a new truck entrance,
- A \$600,000 CDAG for a new tenant fit-out,
- A \$1.3 million private loan from Rollstone Bank for a tenant fit-out, and
- Urban renewal funds.

The entire complex has been renamed Putnam Place and features office space and a gas turbine testing facility—one of three in the country, which has retained over 180 high-quality jobs. To support these uses one factory building will be torn down and replaced with a parking lot.

**150 Main Street**

Another brownfield site in Fitchburg’s redevelopment area has been converted into a new transit hub for the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART). Formerly a dilapidated, substandard retail and office building, the new complex includes a bus depot, commuter rail station, commercial and retail space, and a parking garage. The project enhances Fitchburg’s attractiveness to commuters and provides the parking necessary to attract people and businesses to the downtown.

**26 Willow Street**

The site of an old sawmill, 26 Willow Street is in the process of being redeveloped as privately owned student housing. EPA Brownfields grants have been used to fund Phase I, Phase II, and supplemental assessments to initiate the privately funded redevelopment process. The completed project will rehabilitate a blighted, deteriorating structure in the heart of Fitchburg, provide tax income for the city, and bring students to the downtown.

**Sawyer Passway**

Fitchburg’s redevelopment plan calls for industrial growth in the Sawyer Passway area of downtown. A series of assessments funded by EPA Brownfields grants have been conducted on several parcels along the corridor, paving the way for its reuse.

**North Street Corridor**

North Street is a major thoroughfare in downtown Fitchburg that leads to Fitchburg State University with underutilized real



*Intermodal Transportation Center at 150 Main Street*

estate. The FRA has been working with the university to redevelop a section of North Street to become a formal gateway to the campus. This effort has involved assembly of parcels and EPA-funded assessments, which have cleared the way for construction. The enhanced entrance will bring the university physically closer to the downtown and symbolically strengthen ties between the institution and the city, helping meet a key objective of the urban renewal plan.

**Summary**

The City of Fitchburg is over halfway through the implementation of its 20-year urban renewal plan and has made considerable progress towards meeting the plan’s objectives. Since 2000, over \$185 million in public and private funds have been invested in more than 30 projects. Many of these projects are brownfields, and grants from the EPA Brownfields Program have helped initiate their successful cleanup and reuse. Fitchburg’s redevelopment efforts have created over 250 new jobs, cleaned up and increased access to the Nashua River, created new residential and industrial opportunities, and strengthened the presence of Fitchburg State University downtown. The city is poised to build on the momentum generated from these successes to realize its urban revitalization vision.



*Top: Future site of student housing at 26 Willow Street  
Bottom: Future gateway to Fitchburg State University at North Street*

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EPA New England Brownfields Section  
<http://www.epa.gov/region1/brownfields/index.html>