

DEKALB COUNTY MARKET REPORT

REDEVELOPMENT

Brownfields giving way to new projects



Michele Ritan of East Decatur Greenway is working to clean up an area off Columbia Drive. The site will become a trailhead for a new 1.1-mile segment of a PATH Foundation trail.

BY DOUG DELOACH

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As the remaking of metro Atlanta continues apace, cleaning up and re-purposing some of the area's most problematic properties requires more than a motivated developer with a permit, a bulldozer and a construction crew.

In 2012, DeKalb County secured from the **Environmental Protection Agency** a \$900,000 Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) grant to spur reclamation of hazardous sites known as "brownfields." In 2015, the county received an additional \$300,000 to continue working on brownfields, which are properties where past use indicates the likely presence of contaminated soil or water. The RLF program is being administered by **Decide DeKalb Development Authority (DDDA)** through an intergovernmental agreement.

"Through the RLF program, EPA and DDDA are seeking to strengthen the marketplace by encouraging stakeholders in DeKalb County to leverage available resources to clean up and redevelop brownfields," said Roger Register, National Brownfields Practice Leader at **Cardo Consulting**.

RLF loans are made to private for-profit entities while subgrants are awarded to nonprofits or governmental organizations. When the loans are repaid, the funds are again made available to other eligible borrowers.

"The first step for any applicant is to get the property assessed to determine the potential contamination," Register said. "The RLF program can fund cleanup only after an assessment is completed."

To date, two projects in DeKalb County have been officially funded through the RLF program. One is the former Lithonia Shopping Plaza parcel owned by the **city of Lithonia**, which received a subgrant of \$182,000 to assist with the abatement of



PHOTOS BY JOANN VITELLI

asbestos in preparation for the development of Granite Crossing, a mixed-use housing project.

The public-private partnership between the city and **Wendover Housing Partners** calls for building 75 apartment units and completely transforming the plaza. Construction, which began in November 2016, is slated for completion by the end of the year.

"We are now researching to determine whether there are other opportunities to reclaim these types of sites," said Lithonia Mayor Deborah Jackson.

The other recipient of a loan from the DDDA-administered RLF program is the former Doraville GM Assembly Plant, which is under redevelopment by **The Integral Group**. Integral received approximately \$502,000 to assist with remediation of petroleum and hazardous waste in certain areas of the 165-acre site. The original loan, which paved the way for construction of the Nalley Collision Center, Nalley Infiniti and Nissan dealerships along I-285, was repaid with interest in 2017.

"The developer's vision is a walkable and transit-connected residential and business hub, which will bring new parks, restaurants and other amenities, as well as a sense of place, to Doraville," Register said.

The **East Decatur Greenway**, a nonprofit entity, recently received a favorable recommendation from the DDDA Brownfields Subcommittee for funding a subgrant in the amount of \$86,639. The funds will be used to complete remediation of petroleum-contaminated groundwater and soil at 890 Columbia Drive, site of an abandoned gas station originally built around 1941. During the past three years the greenway organization, which will provide \$21,325 in matching funds, has been working to transform the property into community greenspace and provide a trailhead for the new 1.1-mile segment of a **PATH Foundation** trail. Approval of the recommendation, which will be reviewed by the full DDDA board, is expected.

"The initial remediation occurred in November and December of 2015, but we

► CLOSER LOOK

WHY DEVELOP BROWNFIELDS?

- Improves human and environmental health
- Protects water quality
- Increases the tax base
- Reduces sprawl
- Spurs economic development
- Creates jobs
- Eliminates blight
- Helps attract and retain businesses



SOURCE: DECIDE DEKALB DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

were unable to complete the work with the funds we had," said East Decatur Greenway founder and director Michele Ritan who has a background in nonprofit fund-raising in higher education. "The site was built on fill dirt and the petroleum had migrated into the ground in ways the contractors did not anticipate."

When Ritan contacted the **Georgia Environmental Protection Division** about registering the property in the state's brownfields program, the head of the agency suggested contacting Region 4 of the EPA, which is headquartered in Atlanta.

"They were already interested in the site," Ritan said.

The EPA extended about \$120,000 to dig up three 8,000-gallon underground storage tanks. In addition to contaminated soil and groundwater, asbestos was found in an abandoned convenience store, which had operated on the property for some years after the gas station closed.

Georgia EPD officials recommended installing a rain garden to help control storm water and facilitate phytoremediation. Phytoremediation is a cost-effective technique, which takes advantage of the natural ability of plants to accumulate, degrade or render harmless contaminants in soil, water and air. According to Ritan, the EPA sees the East Decatur Greenway project as a model for communities facing similar problems.

"The EPD and EPA have been tremendously supportive," Ritan said. "They believed in the project and wanted to see it completed."