Polluted “brownfields” and asphalt “greyfields” were once dismissed as land too blighted for revitalization. Perceptions have changed.

Oil tanks once serviced the Oregon Short Line where the rails crossed into Boise. In 1947 the railroad rerouted the traffic, but the perception long remained that the rail corridor west of downtown was too blighted for urban renewal. Perceptions, however, are changing as new roads reconfigure the district. Planners now imagine a rail corridor revived with walkable streets and transit. Greenbelt improvements, a rising demand for downtown living and a proposed baseball stadium complex have generated excitement. Boiseans are rethinking the void.

In February 2013, at the invitation of city officials, Boise State joined planners and community experts in a town-gown reconnaissance of the void. Talking to stakeholders, reading soil reports and combing the historical record, we tracked connections between modes of transit and development patterns. How might the patterns continue to change when a new boulevard remakes the west end of Main Street? How might blight be leveraged? And how might historic uses of land inform the urban renewal?

Our study confirmed some conventional wisdom about the nature of disinvestment, but there were surprises as well. We learned that abandoned lots could be brown or grey, whether the “brownfields” that Boiseans perceive as toxic or “greyfields” of surface parking. We were surprised to learn the extent to which investors had come to embrace the blight as an under-capitalized asset. Brown and grey would be golden in the next phase of Boise’s downtown.
In an obtuse triangle at the far western corner of downtown Boise, hemmed in by freeway and river and surrounded by cyclone fencing, sits a former petroleum storage yard. From the 1920s through about 2009, it was the Northwest base of operations for Goodman Oil Company, which owned gas stations in Idaho, Oregon and Washington. In 2000, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found 35 chronic underground storage tank violations at multiple Goodman properties across the region and issued more than $736,000 in fines against the company, the largest tank fine ever issued in the Northwest.

Until summer 2013, the Goodman Oil property, along West Fairview in Boise, was rundown and abandoned, thought to be highly polluted and a general thorn in the side of city officials intent on crafting a recreation and technology corridor just west of downtown.

The Goodman triangle anchors a corridor of vacant commercial lots along West Main and Fairview. Once the corridor was a flood-prone warehouse district with maintenance shops for the railroad. Later it served the coast-to-coast traffic of U.S. Highway 30. In 1969, U.S. Interstate 84 bypassed the Main-Fairview couplet. Motels, gas stations, and car lots suffered. Boise Towne Square Mall (opened in 1989) and the I-84 Connector (1992) further divested the rail corridor. Bob Rice Ford Dealership lingered on 10 acres of West Main river frontage. So did Enterprise Rent-A-Car and the quirky, dog-friendly Symposion [sic] bar. At 29th Street, in a barnlike shed near Whittier Elementary School, the Main Street Auction still sells furniture, windows, and collectable cars. “Void of services” is the euphemism the City of Boise has used to describe the disinvestment. In 2000, the City of Boise ranked the area around Whittier School as one of two neighborhoods most at risk for vacancies and disinvestment.

The Goodman property, likewise, is now scraped clean and vacant. Boise developer Dan Yanke purchased the 3.5 acre parcel in 2012. Deeded with the purchase was a certificate from the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality promising that the state will not sue for any further environmental cleanup. The certificate offers some protection to future investors from pollution litigation. So far, the reclamation of the Goodman Oil site in Boise is a textbook case of brownfield redevelopment: a property troubled with both real and perceived pollution has been cleaned to an agreed upon standard — future owners will not be able to use groundwater at the site — and cleared for prime urban development at the vertex of a proposed western gateway to downtown Boise.
A study in beautiful blight

Goodman sits at the southwest corner of the new 30th Street Urban Renewal District, just west of downtown Boise. The district starts at State Street and the newly aligned Whitewater Park Boulevard at 30th Street, a wide thoroughfare that diverts downtown-bound traffic off of State Street, past what will soon become Esther Simplot Park and the popular, roiling whitewater park on the Boise River.

City plans, developed in part with community and private sector input, call for an ambitious mix of housing, amenities, technology jobs and creative/athletic people flooding the west side over the next five, 10 and 20 years. Mayor Dave Bieter calls it “a new urban form,” indigenous to Boise, that we don’t even have the language to describe yet, though a 200-plus page master plan for the area describes it in great detail. But the years of studies of the 30th Street area have ignored one potential roadblock to development: the existence of dozens and maybe more than 100 potential brownfield sites within the redevelopment area, including properties that at one time stored petroleum, manufacturing sites, former dry cleaners and even a few small-scale gravel mining operations.

Brownfields are vacant or underused properties that contain some real or perceived environmental contamination. Federal and state economic development programs that focus on brownfield cleanup are increasingly popular in Boise as evidenced by several recent projects including reclamation of the land at the Goodman site, the establishment of The Linen District, anchored by a former dry cleaner, and a retrofit currently underway at the old Idaho Linen building on 8th and Fulton streets, near the main library.

Recent trends in brownfield redevelopment suggest that looking at area-wide environmental cleanup rather than assessing brownfields one property at a time can speed redevelopment, better protect adjacent communities, provide green cachet for up and coming areas and make urban renewal more cost effective. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has issued two rounds of area-wide brownfield planning grants to date, awarding money to cities from Toledo to Shreveport to Vancouver. A third round of area-wide grants is expected, though renewed funding for the EPA brownfield program has been stalled in Congress. The 30th Street area in Boise’s “West End,” which for a century has struggled to find an identity of its own, could benefit from an area-wide brownfields approach, something the city has not considered since losing three consecutive EPA grant requests for brownfield assessments in 2008, 2009 and 2010.

“I used to drive through the area and just cringe,” Bieter said in a recent interview. “With this job your perspective just changes ... It’s a heckuva opportunity if we make the most of it.”
There is a cringe-worthy, 20-year gap in the collective memory of this stretch of Fairview Avenue, and a glance south and slightly up reveals the reason: In 1992, I-184, known as “The Connector,” established a freeway terminus at 13th Street in Boise, bypassing the 30th Street area completely. The Connector literally flies over the “West End,” robbing Main and Fairview of thousands of daily travelers. Prior to The Connector, Fairview Avenue was one of the main ways into downtown Boise.

Catherine Chertudi, solid waste programs manager for the City of Boise and resident brownfields expert, remembers Main and Fairview as the primary corridor in and out of town. Chertudi grew up in Caldwell and her grandparents lived in the 30th Street area, at 27th and Davis, in an upper middle class neighborhood; the police chief, a catholic priest and several prominent Basque families lived on their block. Even in those days, Chertudi dressed up to go downtown with her grandmother. The 30th Street corridor — full of hardware stores, auto repair shops, service stations and other light industrial uses — was never a destination.

To this day, the area does not even have a proper name. Historians have taken to calling it the “West End,” a parallel to the historic North and East ends that wrap downtown. Some have referred to it as SoNo, South of the North End, and the city’s Cultural Arts Plan (2012) for the area reserves future naming rights for residents of the 30th Street neighborhood. Lack of clear boundaries and historical identity complicates urban renewal. West Main Street delineates the southern end of what Boise planners call the Veterans Park Neighborhood. Ada County highway planners mark the west Main-Fairview couplet as a subdistrict of the 30th Street Extension where “sizable tracts of vacant or underutilized land could be transformed into lively mixed-use, transit-oriented, urban-style activity centers — bringing new housing, employment and shopping.”

The historical record is sparse. Turn-of-the-century Sanborn Fire Insurance maps show a corridor of rail yards with storage tanks and lumber. In 1906, Coast Lumber Company extended its Northwest operation to Fairview north and east of the Boise River. By the 1920s there were slaughter houses, petroleum tank farms, gravel pits and car lots. Historian Tully Gerlach, writing in 2010, explained that Boiseans valued the light-industrial district for its gravel pits and rail access. Flood prone, the river corridor, said Gerlach, was “far from being considered the civic and environmental amenity it is today.” Boiseans viewed the river west of downtown as “unfit for residential development and best suited as an industrial waste and sewage-removal system.” Not until the early 1960s, with the levee and channel improvements that followed the 1957 completion of Lucky Peak Dam, did Boiseans begin to see the river’s recreation potential. And not until 1975, after federal clean water legislation, was the river deemed safe enough for swimming and floating.

This riverfront industry was aided by the proximity of the Oregon Short Line railroad tracks, which crossed the Boise River near 30th Street, just behind Goodman, and headed into town. Meanwhile, North of Main Street, residential neighborhoods developed in place of what had been agricultural land and the original site of the county fairgrounds. The city annexed the area in 1912, riding a wave of Progressivism and civic spirit and beginning, “the process of bringing the suburbs into the city,” as Gerlach put it.

In the mid-20th century, Main and Fairview remained largely a transportation corridor, the domain of...
service stations, car lots and the trades. But over time, the car lots fell victim to sprawl and the loss of passing traffic (and eyeballs) when The Connector was finished in 1992. Many of the larger parcels were abandoned. Part of the city’s justification for establishing the urban renewal district here is a finding that The Connector led many retail businesses to abandon the area in recent decades.

Walk along Fairview and Main today and some small signs of its former glory remain. The Capri Restaurant appears frozen in time, serving classic American breakfasts to travelers and locals who line up outside the door on weekends. Buck’s Bags, Inc., established in 1979, continues to manufacture outdoor gear and clothing for Boise State fans and outdoor enthusiasts. The Symposion [sic] — or Sympo as patrons call it — hides behind a windbreak along Fletcher Street, a relaxed bar that welcomes dogs. And the Main Auction, established in 1937, still draws crowds in search of deals on everything from furniture to tools to leftover construction supplies. But it’s difficult to walk the long blocks; traffic whizzes by and the sidewalks are cracked and uneven. And large, vacant lots toward the western end of the district pose both challenges and opportunities for redevelopment.

In the 1959 Polk Directory, the Main and Fairview corridor listed approximately 16 auto sales or repair businesses, nine construction related businesses, five gas stations and a laundry. There were also several places to dine and some bars. Other notable locations included the state materials testing lab, a butcher, several markets and a handful of residences.

“What seems so disconnected today was really connected by sidewalks, streetcar, etc.,” said historian Barbara Perry Bauer.

In grant applications to the EPA, the city identified approximately 188 brownfield sites linked with 71 different assessed parcels in the 30th Street planning area. According to an initial brownfields inventory commissioned by DEQ that is not available to the public, the 188 sites include: 70 auto repair sites, 52 petroleum distributors, 41 manufacturing and/or industrial sites, 10 agriculture sites, 6 dry cleaners, 6 waste and/or disposal sites (which include salvage yards), 5 mining sites (which includes concrete, gravel and asphalt sites), 3 assay laboratories and 2 carpet cleaning sites.

In recent years, as plans for a redevelopment area solidified and road construction began at 30th Street, the real estate market picked up. Eberlestock, a company that makes high-end hunting, shooting and military accessories and bags, rebuilt its headquarters and distribution center at 29th and Main streets after a 2010 fire destroyed the original building. The company invested $1 million into the project, according to the Idaho Business Review. A medical office, also about a $1 million investment, is slated for 30th and Main. Art-related businesses, like Riverworks Imaging, a photo re-printer, and architects like Steve Trout have moved into the area in recent years, capitalizing on the low rent but keeping an eye on the redevelopment efforts.

Gerlach characterizes the neighborhood north of Main Street and east of 30th as a kind of alternative foil to the North End. While the North End gained its activist reputation fighting development in the 1970s and has since become expensive and somewhat gentrified, the West End, including many new, younger residents, has gotten into the development discussion at the ground floor and is involved in shaping the character of the city plans. The neighborhood is also one of Boise’s more diverse neighborhoods — economically, racially and even religiously, with an infusion of international residents and one-time locus of both a synagogue and a mosque. The West End contains a higher proportion of rental units and lower per capita income than other Boise neighborhoods.

Derick O’Neil, the new planning and development services director for the City of Boise and developer of Bown Crossing in East Boise, said that the next step, for the first three year phase of revitalization in the 30th Street area is “to start communicating and sharing the vision in the master plan with more people ... it has an enormous amount of opportunity. Someone is going to have to have a lot of vision; it’s our job to share that vision.”
Plans for redevelopment in the 30th Street area go back more than 40 years. The 1968 Greenbelt Comprehensive Plan called for extending and reconfiguring 30th Street as a more useful north-south route, preferable to 27th Street. In 2002, the Ada County Highway District began designing the extension in earnest and in 2005, the City of Boise incorporated the 30th Street extension and calming of 27th Street (to become more of a neighborhood thoroughfare) into a larger master plan for the West End.

The 30th Street Extension

In the winter of 2013, the 30th Street extension, now called Whitewater Park Boulevard, is complete and work on 27th Street and the construction of Esther Simplot Park is scheduled to begin in the near future. Kayakers and river surfers have been rolling, spinning and cartwheeling for more than a year at the whitewater park on the Boise River. The City Council approved a new urban renewal district in January 2013, which incorporates the commercial parts of the larger district. Recently the city appointed a brownfield savvy commercial realtor to serve as coordinator for the 30th Street area.

Jay Story, the new 30th Street coordinator, ticks off a list of amenities for the area: a diverse, established neighborhood, churches, refugee communities, 1.5 miles of river frontage, 55 acres of water, some 75 acres of developable ground and $20 million in investment so far, from the new roadway, to the pedestrian bridge to Garden City, to two significant private developments already in place. The 30th Street planning district includes the area around State Street where the current Idaho State Department of Transportation building stands and a significant, undeveloped acreage of state land behind it. It extends to the new whitewater park and future Esther Simplot Park. Planners envision a mixed-use neighborhood center around the existing Jerry’s Market at 27th Street and Stewart.

The Master Plan suggests rezoning much of the 30th Street Area to match the city’s goals for pedestrian friendly “mixed use activity centers,” particularly along Main and Fairview, and other uses including various types of commercial centers and residential neighborhoods. The city planning department has only just begun the lengthy process of changing zoning on many of the 30th Street area parcels with an eye to flexibility within preferences for higher buildings, more density, walkability and accessible storefronts. The plan also suggests that the city work with the Ada County Highway District to revise the street grid and road designs in the major corridors, especially along 27th Street, Main and Fairview.

One useful summation of the city’s hopes for the area is an attractive cultural and arts plan, designed by planner Stephanie Inman, that provides a revealing, aesthetic window into the way stakeholders view the diverse neighborhood. A branding survey in the report emphasizes a “utilitarian” no-frills, working-class neighborhood with affordable working class housing and eclectic architecture. Public art would emphasize the adaptive reuse of recycled materials. The branding might incorporate retro 1930s WPA-style poster art.

Other possible catalyst projects under consideration include a spur of a future downtown streetcar system, a minor league baseball stadium and public parking facilities. The new urban renewal district contains many parcels that are vacant and available for development, including several large, city-owned lots. But one factor that any developer is going to have to consider is the environmental history of the land, and that presents several additional opportunities for public investment.
Greyfields are moribund places — the strip-mall dollar stores in greying aprons of asphalt, the derelict shopping center. The shopping center is grey, economists say, when its sales drop to $150 per square foot or less. More generally the label has come to describe acres of aging pavement flattened for surface parking. Think Overland Park Shopping Center or the greyflied at Ustick and Cole. In Boise’s 30th Street Urban Renewal District, a corridor zoned commercial, running west along Fairview and Main from 23rd Street to the river, 13 of 18 city blocks are entirely treeless. Eight blocks are mostly barren with weeds patched through the pavement. More than an eyesore, these barrens mean a loss of tax base and jobs.

But one man’s disinvestment can be another’s under-capitalization. Greyfields can be golden for the full spectrum of smart growth innovations. Streets can be regridded through strip malls. Restaurants and service centers can be reconnected to homes. The Congress for the New Urbanism, reporting in 2001, listed greyfields high among America’s best places for mixed-use infill. “As mall sites,” said the report, “these properties might suffer from being too far off the freeways. But such locations may be advantages for new urbanist reuse.” The report points out, nevertheless, that mass transit is essential. Mass transit, for Boise, is always the rub.

Brownfields predate the grey in the parlance of city planners. Brownfields are the post-industrial, mostly urban parcels of vacant or underused land. Fields are said to be brown if they seem to be polluted. The toxic contamination can be real or perceived. Brownfields are often contrasted with greenfields of farmland or open spaces patched through suburbia’s sprawl.

Grey and brown are gold

The brownfield concept came into vogue in England in the 1960s as a strategy for reusing former mining lands. British planners remained more focused on ways to reclaim abandoned or derelict land than with the conditions that caused it to be abandoned or the type of contamination, according to a 2010 study by U.K. planners David Adams, Christopher De Sousa and Wisconsin urbanist Steven Tiesdell in Urban Affairs. The U.S., on the other hand, focused for many years on regulating polluters and cleaning up the contamination itself, rather than potential future development. In 1980, the U.S. Congress passed the Superfund Act, which put developers on the hook for toxic cleanup and, ironically, further hampered the reuse of former industrial sites for many years — private developers were loathe to invest in sites deemed contaminated. Many Superfund sites remain contaminated and unusable to this day.

In 1995, the EPA, recognizing that developers had been discouraged from tackling difficult redevelopment projects because of the environmental liability that the Superfund Act had created, launched a Brownfield Action Agenda. The brownfield program sought to relieve some liability concerns on
contaminated parcels that were not part of Superfund sites and to provide federal funding for brownfield assessment and cleanup. It also provided a less harsh way of describing contamination, a key factor for image-conscious developers.

Adams, et al. note that while some studies show that U.S. developers are more attracted to brownfields because of location and surrounding amenities, rather than attributes specifically associated with brownfield sites such as the low price of land, lot size and availability of buildings for reuse, etc., “a truly mature policy thus concentrates not so much on changing sites as changing markets. This requires clear integration between brownfield land policy and broader urban strategy, which demands a high level of innovation and learning among policymakers.”

Brownfield redevelopment is complicated, but the 30th Street area is not overly complicated in terms of the types of contaminants present. The 30th Street area in Boise is not home to any Superfund sites — Superfund sites are not eligible for brownfield funds. The contamination or potential contamination in Boise’s West End is at a much more manageable level. At the Goodman site, the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, which distributes hundreds of thousands of dollars of EPA brownfield funds every year, found that the most problematic contaminant present was lead paint (and bullet casings) from an old homestead on the property. The petroleum contamination was not as severe as imagined. Eric Traynor, brownfields program manager at DEQ, spoke to many investors about the property, but all of the deals hinged on out-of-state financing, he said, financing that never materialized.

In general, a public or semi-public agency like a city, county or redevelopment agency needs to request that DEQ pursue an initial brownfield assessment on behalf of a landowner. DEQ will subsidize the Phase 1 assessment, which costs about $4,000, according to Traynor, and involves chasing down a paper trail history of the site, including historical uses and any documented contamination. If necessary, DEQ can follow this with a Phase 2 assessment, which includes soil testing and can cost $25,000-$50,000 depending on the size and types of contaminants involved. Both phases had been done for the Goodman site prior to the current owner purchasing the site.

A representative of the Yanke family declined to discuss plans for the property, but the fact that a local investor with an existing relationship with the City of Boise and an emotional and financial stake in the future of the city picked it up may be more than coincidence. It is not known if the Yanke family is going to develop the site on its own or seek a new buyer for all or part of the land. Developers have shown some interest in the parts of the site since Yanke acquired it, according to informants. Brownfield redevelopment is not for everyone — even though DEQ and the feds make certain guarantees about liability, the certainty may not be enough for some national banks or large investors not used to the intricacies of environmental cleanup.
Just east of the 30th Street area, on the way into the downtown core, is another emerging neighborhood dubbed The Linen District. The area’s anchor project, The Linen Building, was Boise’s first brownfield project and also the pet project of another local developer with a stake in downtown. Google “David Hale” and dozens of results pop up lauding his work cleaning up an old laundry, restoring the building and creating a vibrant neighborhood that has become a destination and primary venue for a growing annual music festival.

“There was a market that was not being served in this town before 2000,” said Hale. “Locally owned businesses were important.”

Using DEQ brownfields funds made the project possible in many ways and helped foster the mix of funky, local businesses that have given the area its character including a boutique hotel, bustling coffee shop and used building materials store that doubles as a training program for people in drug and alcohol rehabilitation.

First, the brownfields program gave Hale a comfort level with the liability and cleanup costs he’d be taking on, but it was slow — it took three years for him to close on the building, more time than large, out of state interests may be willing to invest. Making the project a brownfield encouraged a certain type of development — Hale thinks national retailers stayed away both because of the lack of existing foot traffic but also because of the brownfield process and potential liability.

“No bank is going to finance a contaminated project,” Hale said, in part due to the risk implied by the existence of environmental problems.

A large body of research credits brownfield redevelopment with more environmentally friendly building practices, including recent studies from the EPA itself. A 2011 EPA study of brownfield sites in five large cities found that 95 percent of the resultant developments were more environmentally friendly than their conventional or “greenfield” counterparts in terms of CO2 emissions, automobile use and runoff.

Brownfields are also increasingly tied to sustainability measures. University of Aberdeen (U.K.) urbanist Samer Ghaleb Bagaeen suggests that while we do not have broad agreement over what constitutes sustainability, “the recycling of urban land as a measure to curtail urban sprawl and generate jobs has gained a great deal of ground in the past few years.”

Other measures of sustainability, according to Bagaeen, revolve around brownfield sites, including: new forms of citizen participation, sustainable transportation and mobility concepts, environmentally sound and healthy building measures, ecologically sound energy supply and minimal energy consumption, socially oriented living spheres with a mix of high-density living and working space on brownfield sites, and accessibility for different social groups.

For Hale, perhaps the biggest boon of going brownfield, however, was all the positive press the project received. Several smart growth and green building groups wrote up the Linen District, the Boise Weekly ran a fawning profile of Hale — “the trendy clothes, the oversized shades, the meticulously messy hair” — and Idaho Sen. Mike Crapo continues to cite the project in his support of the EPA’s brownfields program, including at a Senate hearing earlier this year.
The City of Boise has an in-depth planning document in place for the 30th Street area, a new urban renewal district in place and new leadership at the city’s redevelopment agency. The city has hired a point person on the 30th Street project who plans to set up shop in the area. But in a state loathe to interfere with private sector investments, in a city crippled by some of the nation’s tightest restrictions on municipal power, city officials are reluctant to articulate a broad vision for brownfield infill. Even where the City of Boise owns vacant lots of contaminated acreage, comprehensive planning eludes disinvested land.

“I’m a firm believer that you do not try to pick the catalyst,” said Boise City Councilor David Eberle, a Ph.D. economist and director of the Environmental Finance Center at Boise State. “You do not try to pick who you want; that is truly a market decision. It is rare that a government gets that right.”

Eberle feels that further brownfield designations would not encourage developers. Fellow City Councilor Lauren McLean, who also worked at the EFC a decade ago and in the conservation movement for many years, said that if the area qualifies for brownfield funds the city should pursue them and look into an area-wide brownfield designation if it fits. In the city’s comprehensive plan, a map identifies at least 30 brownfield sites in the 30th Street area — the city is aware that the district is rife with brownfields — but the 30th Street redevelopment plan fails to examine brownfields in any detail and even gets the name of the Goodman site wrong. The Capital City Development Corp., the city’s urban renewal agency, mentions brownfields in a PowerPoint and displays a similar map, but has not attached any funds to West End brownfield initiatives.

The EPA and state environmental regulators — not to mention Idaho Sen. Mike Crapo, a conservative Republican and former state legislator — consider brownfields funds to be primarily economic development funds, particularly as applied in small, rural communities. Critics caution that the EPA’s root concern is the threat of contamination, and that economic development, as Crapo defines it, may not be the most important criteria for the staffers who administer grants. Defenders say the bipartisan legislation would broaden the EPA’s focus. Called The Brownfields Utilization, Investment, and Local Development Act, or the BUILD Act, the legislation would streamline pollution abatement and provide more economic development grants to clean up contaminated sites. Small communities would be first in line.

“The BUILD Act is a win for everyone,” said Geoff Anderson, President and CEO of Smart Growth America,
an unlikely Crapo ally. “Brownfields restoration drives economic growth while giving local governments the flexibility to pursue the projects they need the most. Transforming a community’s financial sinkhole into a new business or residential building is a no-brainer.” But BUILD remains stalled in Congress despite Crapo’s support.

The BUILD Act might support a comprehensive approach to revitalization well suited to cities like Boise. If managed at the municipal level, rather than parcel by parcel, brownfields might be leveraged with public investment to compliment the rising demand for high-density commercial-residential nodes. A 2004 Wisconsin study stressed the importance of brownfields big enough to spread development cost and promote high-density green innovation. Professor Kris Wernstedt of Virginia Tech, who coauthored the Wisconsin report, downplayed the fear of contamination as a deterrent to brownfield renewal. Wernstedt, in a recent telephone interview, confirmed that the brownfield stigma was yesterday’s news. “Ten years ago I might have told you something different.”

As Sen. Crapo put it in an op-ed earlier this year: “Even when brownfields do not pose a threat to human health, the mere perception of contamination can discourage redevelopment ... The best way to grow jobs on these properties is by working together in a timely manner to clean up and redevelop the properties.”

Though a full brownfield assessment has not been completed on the 30th Street area and a preliminary inventory that has been completed is not available to the public, it is clear that many of the properties slated for new development are potentially contaminated in some way. If the Linen District is any indication of the way that the brownfields program can spur redevelopment, that history of contamination along the Boise River and into town may be a condition the city and potential West End developers would do well to embrace.

Wernstedt said that about a third of applicants for brownfield funds receive grants and was surprised that the City of Boise did not win one for 30th Street. If the BUILD Act passes, those requirements may change again, but the opening up of more area-wide brownfield funding could benefit Boise’s chances for funding.

Stringtudt, who also worked on the Boise grants, added that the EPA requirements seemed to change from year to year, to the point that the city was, “chasing changing visions.”

The EPA increasingly wants brownfield funds to support sites that do have some demonstrable level of contamination as well. Cece Gassner, until recently a representative of Boise’s economic development office, said that they were frustrated after the EPA rejected three brownfield assessment grants in a row. The agency wanted health benchmarks to demonstrate that the 30th Street area represented an environmental hazard, but the city could not find adequate health data or demonstrate health issues. “It’s hard to compete with those dollars sometimes when I can’t say there are children dying.” Gassner said. CCDC, the city’s redevelopment agency, did win EPA brownfield assessment grants in 2004 and 2006 for parcels in its existing urban renewal districts at the time.

Gravel mining once cratered the Boise River, pooling containments. Today those ponds are the jewels of West End urban renewal. Pictured: Gravel mining near the Boise River.
Reversing the trend

Aging empty nesters — up to 24 percent of people over 55, according to one national study — increasingly prefer a $150,000 downtown condo over similarly priced single-family suburban home.

If the brown can be greened, then grey can be leveraged as well. The culprit in both cases has been government with its subsidies for highways and auto-dependent zoning. Tax-subsidized sprawl continues to distance housing from schools and centers of employment. But sprawl’s demographics are changing. Baby-boomers nationwide now retreat from the outer suburbs. Generations X and Y, lured by bars and nightlife, follow the reverse migration from the burbs to the urban core.

Boise’s CCDC understands that the most successful revitalization projects are dense and urban with multifamily buildings and walkable streets. CCDC has estimated that 9 percent of Boise’s renters and 17 percent of its homeowners would prefer, if they could, to walk to the Saturday market or Alive after Five in the Grove. Boiseans, says CCDC, are spending more time at work. Their commutes are growing longer. And aging empty nesters — up to 24 percent of people over 55, according to one national study — increasingly prefer a $150,000 downtown condo over similarly priced single-family suburban home.

Commercial real-estate trends bode well for close-in living. From 1990 to 2005, according to Idaho Smart Growth, U.S. retail space more than doubled while personal income lagged. Big-boxers like Home Depot and K-Mart competed for market share with more retail footage than consumers could support.

The future looks different, however. Where only one out of 10 American households were childless in 1960, one out of three homes are expected to be childless by 2040. More than 80 percent of the growth in the next three decades is expected to be households without children. In Boise and elsewhere, as the size of families decline, so does the demand for suburban McMansions. Cities are looking inward toward a more compact pattern of growth. Boise’s latest master plan cites mixed-use infill as the principle means of achieving that goal. “In Boise,” say the planners, “these [infill] opportunities will be concentrated in the Downtown, along existing and future transit corridors, and within designated activity centers.” City council hopes to prioritize parks, auditoriums and other capital projects that compliment infill. Incentives for developers might include reduced impact fees.

West downtown now figures large in that infill effort. Brownfields and grey in their corridors of disinvestment remain empty of commerce but golden with commercial potential. Neighborhoods once drained by suburbanization might become the downtown buffer to reverse the pattern of sprawl.
### Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1867</td>
<td>Peter Bell Boise City survey including lands in Section 4, T3N, R2E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>Nicholas Lamberson Cash Entry #39. Full payment made for the west half of the southeast quarter and the northeast quarter of the southwest quarter of section four in township three north of range two east in the district of lands subject to sale at Boise City Idaho Territory containing one hundred and twenty acres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1874</td>
<td>Martin McHendry homesteads 64 acres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1875</td>
<td>Idaho Agricultural Park Association incorporated. Purchased 120 acres of land ½ mile from city plat and sold 150 shares of stock. (<em>Statesman</em>, September 11, 1875)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>Spur line, Oregon Short Line depot at Tenth and Front Street.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>Boise Flour Mill constructed by D.M. Steen, George Steen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>The Idaho Agricultural Park Association deeds to J.E. Chambard a tract of land in the southwest quarter of the southeast quarter, section 4, township 3 north, range 2 east, containing 2 acres, consideration, $836. An “interesting deed” conveyed: “A deed was filed with the county recorder yesterday conveying a small tract of land containing a trifle over two acres along the road to the new bridge from the Idaho Agricultural Park association to J.E. Chambard. The land is a quadrangular piece of ground just opposite the flouring mills in the western part of the city. It measures about 228 by 362 by 275 by 365 feet on its four sides. The consideration for the two acres is $836.” (<em>Statesman</em>, September 29, 1901)</td>
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<td>1902</td>
<td>Ada County Commissioners requests that Road Overseer notify Mrs. Martha E. McCarty, Mrs. James Bush, J.E. Chambard, G.W. Gess and W.H. Ridenbaugh to remove the fence along the road from the west end of Main Street in Boise City to the new bridge across the Boise River. (<em>Statesman</em>, February 17, 1902)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>Mention of new road “Thoroughbred Peking Duck eggs 50c dozen for setting, one new road next to Idaho Flour Mill, Mrs. J.E. Chambard.” (<em>Statesman</em>, April 6, 1902)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>Fairview Investment Company forms to handle the new addition to the city. The directors for the first year are Ellen L. Bush, Horace E. Neal, Kate A. Perrault, E.H. Eggs and James H. Hawley. “The company will soon put a new addition to Boise on the market, which has recently been platted west of town adjoining McCarty's addition.” (<em>Statesman</em>, August 10, 1902)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>“Dissolution. An action entitled “the voluntary dissolution of The Idaho Agricultural Park association” was filed in the office of the clerk of the district court yesterday. The association owned the old fair grounds west of town.” (<em>Statesman</em>, August 10, 1902)</td>
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</table>
1903  Bids received to remove all buildings located on the property of the old fairgrounds. *(Statesman, August 6, 1903)*

1903  Fairview Addition platted. “The Fairview Investment Company yesterday filed a plat of Fairview addition to this city. The addition embraces the former state fairgrounds west of the city.” *(Statesman, October 21, 1903)*

1903  Lots in Fairview addition advertised for sale. “For sale-Lots in Fairview addition, all 50 foot, for $150, one quarter cash, one-quarter six, one-quarter 12, one-quarter 18 months; nicest lots in Boise. Good & Robert. *(Statesman, October 13, 1903)*

1903  Fairview Addition graded. *(Statesman, November 19, 1903)*

1903  “J.E. Chambard and wife to the Fairview Investment company, 2.09 acres in the southeast quarter of section 4, township 3 north, range 2 east, consideration, $1.(Statesman, December 20, 1903)

1904  W.H. Ridenbaugh and wife and G.W. Gess and wife to Joseph B. Robertson. 4.19 acres in the SW1/4, Section 4, T3N, R2E; consideration, $984. W.H. Ridenbaugh and wife and G. W. Gess and wife to Joseph B. Robertson, 6.10 acres in the SW ¼, Section 4 T3N, R2E; consideration, $365. Joseph B. Robertson and wife to Eugene Fischer, 4.19 acres in the SW1/4, Section 4, T3N, R2E; consideration, $984. Joseph B. Robertson and wife to Eugene Fischer, 6.10 acres in the SW ¼, Section 4 T3N, R2E; consideration, $365. *(Statesman, March 3, 1904)* Fischer was butcher at Capital Meat Market.

1904  April 12. First notice in *Idaho Daily Statesman* naming Fairview avenue on a report on sewers: “It was further recommended that the main sewers from the East and South side systems be so constructed as to empty into the North side main at Twenty-sixth street and the size of the main from Twenty-sixth street to the river be increased from 27 inches to 36 inches as recommended by the city engineer, and on Twenty-fourth street from Fairview avenue to Washington street from 10 to 24 inches.” *(Statesman, April 12, 1904)*

1905  West Side Addition platted by W.H. Ridenbaugh and G.H. Gess.

1905  Fairview paved. “Filed for Record,” Idaho Agricultural Park association to the Boise Distilling company, a lot 147 by 300 feet on the south side of section 4, township 3 north, range 2 east; consideration, $400. *(Statesman, January 17, 1905)*

1906  Coast Lumber Company mill built on lot south of Fairview and east of riverbank.

1912  Fairview and West Side additions annexed to city.

1912  Slaughterhouses operated on the riverbank at western edge of West Side Addition.

1914  Bureau of Highways designated Fairview as a state highway. 1930s, designated as a national highway. R. L. Rice Oldsmobile, 2400 Fairview Avenue.

1922  Harry H. Bryant (the Bryant Motor Company) opens Bryant Commercial Body Co. at the corner of 24th and Fairview. The company was a Ford assembly plant and truck body manufacturing plant. It was one of the few Ford assembly plants in the West at the time of its construction. The plant covered two acres of ground. It started with an average of 10 Ford cars a day. *(Statesman, March 12, 1922)*
Goodman Oil Company (2850 West Fletcher Street) incorporated by Roy W. and Edward Goodman as a petroleum distribution company.

Koppel Tract platted in SW 1/4 Section 4 T3n, R2E by Eugene Fischer May 10. Fischer, a German immigrant, arrived in the United States between 1884 and 1889. He was in Boise by 1900, living at several rooming houses and working as a butcher.

Plat of Fisher’s Subdivision in Lot 7, Section 4, T3N, R2E platted July 24th by Eugene Fischer.

Koppel’s tract amended by Eugene Fischer and Anna Koppel.

Union Pacific razes Tenth Street Station. End of downtown rail service.

Mission Inn, 2800 Fairview Avenue, incorporated by J. Lloyd Jones, Helen W. Jones and Robert Jones.

Interstate 184, The Boise Connector, diverts downtown’s commuter traffic.

EPA issues $736,000 in fines for 35 Goodman site storage tank violations.

Former Bob Rice Ford dealership showroom demolished at 30th and Main.

Boise’s wave-surfing river park dedicated. Goodman offices raised, preparing the site for development.

Groundbreaking for Whitewater Park Boulevard off the 30th Street Extension.

Whitewater tumbles a kayak and seeds urban renewal at the new Boise River Park.
Further Reading


