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### **FROM BUS GARAGE TO SENIOR HOUSING**

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As with fishing, so with brownfields redevelopment: You always regret the one that got away, but you also appreciate the keepers. Jonathan Greene, economic development and housing coordinator for rural Eaton County, Michigan, has experience with both types of projects.

One success is a three-year effort involving Greene and a team of community members, environmental consultants, and a community-minded housing developer in transforming an aging school bus garage complex into a 40-unit affordable housing project for seniors. Rents will range from \$301 to \$775 per month when the first tenants move into the apartments this month.

Eaton Rapids, the county seat of Eaton County (pop. 103,655), is going through the hard times being experienced by most rural towns in beleaguered Michigan. Problems include loss of its manufacturing base, the downsizing of the auto industry, a lack of housing for senior citizens, and environmental contamination.

To evaluate the local redevelopment potential, the county's economic development department in 2005 applied for and received \$400,000 in brownfield assessment funding through the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency brownfields program grant. Some \$45,000 of the total grant monies were used to assess an abandoned school bus garage in Eaton Rapids. The assessment included phases one and two of environmental site assessments, creation of a brownfield redevelopment plan, and marketing of the project to the community. Study recommendations included removing underground storage tanks and hydraulic lifts from the garage.

Tucked into a downtown single-family residential neighborhood, the garage had been used for 50 years to maintain and park school buses. The structure stood on a lot of about 100,000 square feet, close to a small stream called Spring Brook, a tributary of the Grand River. The school district moved its operations elsewhere in 2005 and the site was left with an above-ground storage tank, an underground storage tank, a hydraulic lift bay, underground piping, and an asbestos-laden building. The parcel and building were for sale.

Greene's department took a practical approach to the project. "Early on we defined a brownfield as a real estate transaction with an environmental component [as opposed to an intractable environmental problem]. We didn't set aside the planning and regulatory elements, but we really tried to look at things from a different perspective" than a standard planning project in order to expedite the redevelopment, Greene says. In the end, "the seller and the buyer agreed that we would perform our assessment work before they would sign on the line."



Dave Van Haaren, director of operations at AKT Peerless in Lansing, Michigan, and the environmental consultant to the county, agrees with Greene. Van Haaren says his office does scores of brownfield plans, but “this project took collaboration between the buyer and seller.” Additionally, the Michigan State Housing Development Authority helped with redevelopment incentives, including State of Michigan Brownfield Redevelopment Single Business Tax Credits.

Not all brownfield projects run so smoothly, but Eaton Rapids was ready to go, and so was the developer, Hovey Companies of DeWitt, Michigan, which specializes in affordable rental housing for seniors. Tim Hunnicutt, who took the lead in developing the new housing for DeWitt, says he was excited to work with a government team that valued “partnership and cooperation.”

The environmental cleanup process took around a year to complete. While the plan always called for the bus garage to be demolished, a crucial first task was removing the hoist located inside the building, according to Van Haaren. But “as contaminated projects go, this was a smooth process,” says Greene.

Some time this month, Kingston Place Apartments will be move-in ready in a setting where the buses are gone and the new residents can walk into town or hit the nearby walking trails. The two-story building will have a total of 40,000 square feet and cost around \$4.2 million. And, in recognition of the county’s “Outstanding Leadership and Commitment to Excellence,” on July 17, 2007, the project received a special commendation from the EPA’s Region 5 brownfields program office.