

Reclaiming Ground: Turning Contaminated Sites into Housing Solutions

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Florida's housing challenges are intensifying. With limited developable land, shifting flood maps, and increasingly stringent environmental regulations, every acre of usable land matters. Developers and municipalities are being pushed to think differently about how—and where—new housing can take shape. The future of affordable housing may depend not on finding untouched land, but on reclaiming and repurposing what already exists.

Unlocking New Land Through Policy Change

The **Live Local Act**, first approved in Florida in 2023, set out to address the affordable housing crisis by clarifying provisions related to land use, zoning, and tax benefits for developers and is transforming the land development landscape. It allows affordable housing to be built on parcels zoned for commercial, industrial, or mixed-use development, including properties owned by religious institutions. The Live Local Act allows qualifying projects to build to the highest allowable height and density within a defined area.

The **Brownfields Redevelopment Act** aims to reduce health and environmental hazards and create financial and regulatory incentives to encourage voluntary cleanup and redevelopment of designated brownfield areas – abandoned, idled, or underused industrial and commercial properties with real or perceived environmental contamination. Through this program, annual tax credit certificates towards the Florida Corporate Income Tax are awarded to incentivize voluntary cleanup and redevelopment of underutilized land.

In land-constrained areas like South Florida, this legislation opens the door to redeveloping underutilized properties such as strip malls, industrial sites, and vacant commercial lots. While these properties may present environmental challenges, modern remediation and reuse strategies can make redevelopment feasible and sustainable.

Adaptive reuse is becoming a practical way to breathe new life into the existing infrastructure while reducing the need for new construction.

Converting Offices into Opportunity

The shift toward remote and hybrid work has left many office buildings vacant. Converting these structures into housing or mixed-use developments is a growing trend.

While such conversions come with challenges—zoning changes, structural redesigns, and safety considerations—they also offer significant potential to revitalize downtown districts and bring residents closer to employment and amenities.

With population growth and land scarcity, density is becoming an essential part of the housing solution. By optimizing existing infrastructure and limiting urban sprawl, higher-density housing can help reduce development costs, support transit-oriented growth, and make projects more financially viable.

Smarter Soil Strategies

Traditional approaches to site closures, such as excavating contaminated soil and hauling it away, are becoming less viable. Costs are rising, landfill space is limited, and environmental impacts from trucking and disposal are substantial.

Newer, more strategic approaches are emerging that prioritize reuse, safety, and long-term sustainability. Today, the conversation is less about removal and more about management and redevelopment.

In some cases, complete removal and disposal of impacted soil isn't the most effective path forward. Soil blending, for example, allows impacted and clean soils to be combined to meet safe exposure standards. This method can reduce costs, minimize waste, and lessen a project's environmental footprint when conditions are right.

When blending isn't feasible, engineering controls—such as asphalt paving, concrete pads, or a soil cap—can provide safe barriers to limit public exposure. These measures not only manage contamination but also often serve dual purposes, like parking lots, roadways, or building foundations.

These methods often require importation of clean fill to backfill excavations, blend, or construct soil caps. Depending on project needs, importing clean fill can be costly and logistically challenging, but one emerging solution is on-site soil mining. Reusing clean portions of site material rather than importing or disposing of soil elsewhere is a great approach that can reduce both costs and the carbon footprint while meeting environmental and elevation requirements.

The Path Forward

Florida's housing shortage will not be solved by conventional development patterns. The solutions lie in unlocking constrained land, adopting innovative remediation methods, and maximizing developments through policy change and financial incentives. By reimagining how we use our existing sites, whether formerly industrial, commercial, or even

contaminated, we can expand access to affordable housing while protecting the environment and the public.

The ground beneath us holds challenges, but also opportunities. With the right mix of policy, innovation, and commitment, we can turn yesterday's industrial footprints into tomorrow's communities.

(Sidebar) Key Takeaways

Unlock New Land

Recent legislation opens commercial, industrial, and religiously owned parcels for housing, expanding development potential.

Build Strategically

Density and mixed-use zoning help make housing projects financially viable and environmentally responsible.

Reuse and Revitalize

Office and commercial conversions can revitalize underused urban areas.