OP-ED: BROWNFIELDS ARE A KEY PART OF THE PUZZLE FOR SOLVING CALIFORNIA'S HOUSING CRISIS

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Big kudos to the California legislature for passing SB 158 in July. This bill, among other things, brings remarkable cleanup funding for brownfields in California totaling $500 million. Of the $500 million, approximately $270 million is targeted for grants. For context, the US EPA has a similar program, with typical funding for the entire country of less than $100 million.

California's housing crisis is going to require creative approaches to building more housing as we run out of available land. Urban infill is one logical alternative that also makes a lot of sense from the perspective of reducing commute times and related greenhouse gases. But, as we all know, available urban land is a rarity. Brownfields, if cleaned up properly, represent a viable source of developable land for infill. There are an estimated 200,000 brownfields currently identified in California.

By giving the highest priority to disadvantaged communities with significant housing needs, the CA Department of Toxic Substance Control (DTSC), the agency in charge of distributing grants under SB 158, can directly address some of our state's most pressing needs.

While $270 million is a significant investment, that money won't last forever. Time is of the essence and nonprofits, public agencies, municipalities, tribes and private developers must act quickly as the prequalification application round is scheduled for fall of this year. The Pre-Qualifying Application Round **opens November 1st and will close on December 7, 2021.** Watch for the initial launch of the Full Application in early January, which will be open for about 8 weeks.

According to the DTSC website, eligible entities may apply for ECRG grants for properties they own or control, which are in high poverty areas with the highest pollution burdens (CalEnviroScreen score of 75%+) and are slated for reuse. DTSC will also accept applications outside of the CalEnviroScreen score of 75%+ if the proposed reuse provides significant community benefit.

Over the last several years, the science and technology for cleaning up brownfields has evolved to the point that we can successfully and safely build housing on formerly contaminated properties. Safety is of course the number one priority and we can say, with confidence, that we are fully capable of achieving the highest standards for human habitation.

A great example of such a project is Comm 22 in San Diego.

COMM22, developed by BRIDGE-Housing Corporation (BRIDGE), is an award-winning mixed-use, mixed-income, transit-oriented development located at Commercial and 22nd streets in San Diego. The environmental remediation of the property successfully protected human health and the environment and advanced both the social and business goals of the community, according to BRIDGE. The development includes multi-family residential housing with below grade parking.

The site was a former San Diego Unified School District vehicle maintenance and general maintenance facility. The site included leaking underground storage tanks and fill soils containing various metals, including lead, according to BRIDGE. Successful cleanup, in collaboration with the San Diego County Department of Environmental Health, allowed redevelopment of the site.

COMM22 contains 211 units of affordable housing consisting of one, two, and three-bedroom apartments for low-income family households; studios, as well as one and two-bedroom apartments for low-income seniors (including HUD-subsidized units); supportive housing for youth transitioning out of the foster care system; and eleven for-sale townhomes for low and moderate-income families developed by Habitat for Humanity.

COMM22 is part of a transit-oriented, master-planned community that also features plaza areas for public gatherings, pedestrian connectivity throughout the site, and easy access to public transportation. As part of the development process, BRIDGE also included area infrastructure upgrades, such as streetscape improvements, storm drains, water and sewer lines, and undergrounding of power lines.

Many more badly needed projects, like COMM22, could become a reality thanks to SB 158. However, funding must be balanced with reasonable oversight. Currently, proposed vapor intrusion guidance related to brownfield redevelopment places limits at a standard that will knock many brownfield properties out of contention for housing development.

According to Matt Winefield of Winefield & Associates, Inc., a brownfields developer, these draft standards are based on factors that were not intended as a cleanup standard and are 30 times more stringent than the previous California limits.

Winefield goes on to say that while more stringent standards are appropriate if they are based on appropriate science, the higher standard being used in California comes largely from East Coast and Midwest data, which is not applicable to California. Ventilation is a particular problem in the winter in those regions and homes are shut for the winter with little air circulation. The homes often have basements, which California housing stock does not. The real shame is that DTSC used some of the best scientists in California to develop an accurate study of vapor factors to support brownfields redevelopment and housing production, but that peer-reviewed DTSC study is not being allowed to inform the vapor intrusion guidance.

SB 158 is a big step in the right direction toward solving California's housing crisis and cleaning up contaminated properties in communities that have suffered for too long from environmental racism. With the right standards and oversight, the legislation and grants represent a historic opportunity that eligible organizations and local governments need to jump on immediately, before the window shuts.