

Two polluted Atlanta sites get boost from federal money, EPA recognition

Chattahoochee Brick, Westside face intense cleanup operations.



The Chattahoochee Brick Co. participated in a state-run convict leasing program, which forced people incarcerated at Georgia's prisons, mostly African American men, to perform backbreaking work. The city wants to transform the area into a park and memorial. PHOTOS BY SEEGER GRAY/AJC



Donna Stephens (second from left), founder and chair of Descendants of Chattahoochee Brick Company Coalition, attends the EPA news conference Wednesday. She said she is optimistic a park on the site can deliver the hope the area needs.



Rosario Hernandez, founder of Historic Westside Gardens — which runs community gardens and a market — was awarded the Citizen Excellence in Community Involvement Award by the EPA on Wednesday. She has been a liaison between the agency and the community.



An aerial view shows a community garden run by Historic Westside Gardens in Atlanta. Community groups are working to identify and clean up lead contamination as part of the Westside Lead Superfund Site redevelopment.

BY DREW KANN DREW.KANN@AJC.COM

Members of President Joe Biden’s administration were in Atlanta on Wednesday to share updates on the cleanup and redevelopment of two of Atlanta’s most notorious sites tied to past racial and environmental injustices, as well as to recognize community members instrumental in the ongoing transformations.

The day of events included ceremonies at the Chattahoochee Brick Co. site on the city’s western edge and the Westside Lead Superfund Site where community groups are working to identify and clean up lead contamination in the historically Black neighborhoods of English Avenue and Vine City.

On Wednesday morning, several Environmental Protection Agency officials —

including the department's deputy administrator, Janet McCabe — first joined state, city and community leaders on the former Chattahoochee Brick site, about 10 miles northwest of downtown Atlanta.

Located on 77 acres wedged between the Chattahoochee River and Proctor Creek, the property once belonged to the Chattahoochee Brick Co. From the 1870s until the early 1900s, the company — which was founded by former Atlanta Mayor James English — participated in a state run convict leasing program, which forced people incarcerated at Georgia's prisons, mostly African American men, to perform backbreaking work. Those impelled to work there suffered brutal conditions, and some even died on the job from abuse and a lack of care.

After plans to develop the site into a fuel terminal were abandoned, the city acquired the property in 2022 with the help of The Conservation Fund and other nonprofits.

The city wants to transform the land into a riverfront green space, park and memorial.

But for the property to be redeveloped, the pollution on the site must first be cleaned up.

Brickmaking and other industrial activity contaminated the land with heavy metals, oil and other hazardous substances, the EPA says. The land has been labeled a brownfield, an EPA classification for properties that have had potential redevelopment impeded by pollution.

While early in the site revamp, the project was bolstered by a \$2 million Brownfield Cleanup Grant funded by the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

A site cleanup plan is underway and remediation work should start in about 18 months, said Jessica Lavandier, an assistant director of planning with the city who manages Atlanta's brownfields program.

An 11-member advisory board has held several meetings on site redevelopment, said board Chair David Getachew-Smith.

“At a time where there is an effort to ignore truth and sanitize or erase history based on alleged permissiveness and discomfort, the board is committed to commemorating factual past injustices and the documented use of forced labor

for the purpose of personal financial gain,” he said.

Donna Stephens, the founder and chair of Descendants of Chattahoochee Brick Company Coalition, said the surrounding area — which is still largely industrial — needs hope. She is optimistic a park on the site can deliver it.

“To be able to sit on the banks of the Chattahoochee River, to be able to take a walk on the path and to take your children out ... it means a lot to this community,” Stephens said.

Westside soil cleanup continues

EPA officials on Wednesday also visited the Westside Lead Superfund Site to present an award to a leader in the cleanup effort.

The Westside Lead Superfund Site includes nearly 2,100 properties west of downtown Atlanta, which may have dangerous levels of lead in the soil.

Rosario Hernandez, a resident of the area and the founder of Historic Westside Gardens — which runs community gardens and a market — was awarded the Citizen Excellence in Community Involvement Award by the EPA.

The national award is given to “recognize an individual or a community group working with the Agency to address hazardous waste issues.”

The contamination in the neighborhoods’ soil was discovered in 2018 by Emory professor Eri Saikawa and her students.

Hernandez was among the first residents whose soil was analyzed and determined to contain potentially hazardous levels of lead.

Lead is a potent neurotoxin that can cause severe damage to the brain and the nervous system, particularly in children, and the EPA’s Superfund label is reserved for the most toxic sites in the country.

Experts say the exact source of the lead contamination is unclear, but it is likely waste that was produced by metal foundries once common on Atlanta’s Westside.

The toxic material, known as slag, was often used to fill in low-lying areas.

The EPA began testing properties on the site in March 2019 and began removing

contaminated soil in January 2020. Over the years, the boundaries of the site have expanded several times as high lead levels were discovered on more properties.

Hernandez has been a critical liaison between the federal agency and the community, helping environmental officials obtain access to properties to test soil and build trust, the EPA's deputy administrator, Janet McCabe, said Wednesday as she presented the award.

"You stand out across the country as somebody who is so committed to this work," McCabe said.

Hernandez said it was hard at first to convince residents to allow the EPA on to their properties to test. Though distrust and redevelopment fears still linger, the EPA has now tested about 1,400 properties and fully remediated 300 of those, and Hernandez said the situation has improved.

"Now that they see (properties cleaned up and replanted), they're calling me like, 'Do you think my soil could get fixed?'" Hernandez joked.

In 2022, the Westside Lead site was also added to the EPA's National Priorities List, a designation for locations the agency has found pose serious health threats and require long-term cleanups.

Last year, cleanup efforts in the area received another boost, when the EPA announced the site would receive a portion of \$1 billion from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law carved out to support Superfund remediation.

Still, the agency estimates it will take until the end of the decade or longer to remove and replace all the contaminated soil in the area, which is about 28 times larger than Centennial Olympic Park.