

Written testimony of
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On behalf of The National Brownfields Coalition

To the House Energy and Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Environment,
Manufacturing, and Critical Materials

Hearing on "Revitalizing America Through the Reauthorization of the Brownfields
Program"

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Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Tonko and members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to testify today on the important role the brownfields program plays in revitalizing American communities.

I am appearing as the Executive Director of Groundwork Lawrence and representing the National Brownfields Coalition and Groundwork USA.

Groundwork USA is a network of place-based, people-centered environmental justice organizations working in urban communities across the country to undo the legacy of environmental harm and create green, healthy, just, and resilient urban neighborhoods. Groundwork USA has a track record of community development and land revitalization spanning nearly 30 years.

Groundwork Lawrence is a nonprofit organization located in Lawrence, Massachusetts that is part of the larger Groundwork USA network. Groundwork Lawrence works to bring about the sustained regeneration, improvement, and management of the physical environment by developing community-based partnerships which empower people, businesses, and organizations to promote environmental, economic, and social well-being.

The National Brownfields Coalition is a unique, non-partisan alliance that advocates for policy change and funding to responsibly clean up and reuse underutilized or environmentally-impacted land. The coalition, which is convened by Smart Growth America and the Center for Creative Land Recycling, educates, advocates, and convenes stakeholders nationally to advance brownfields redevelopment and thriving communities.

Addressing the Legacy of Environmental Justice

Brownfield sites are stark visual evidence of the unresolved environmental justice issues that continue to have a direct impact on many under-resourced communities today. Brownfields, especially those in resource constrained neighborhoods, pose additional barriers that impede redevelopment efforts, create public health risks, and perpetuate a cycle of disinvestment.

Since the 1980s, the environmental justice movement has tackled the disproportionate concentration of brownfield sites in low-income communities and communities of color. But the lack of positive environmental assets that help make a neighborhood a safe,

enjoyable, healthy place to live - such as parks and play spaces, walking and biking infrastructure, tree cover and gardens - has often been overlooked. These items, which many wealthier communities take for granted, have generally been treated as nice-to-have amenities rather than essential components of a healthy community.

Utilization of the Brownfields Program

Reclaiming and reusing brownfields provides a significant opportunity to deliver multiple correlated health, economic, and social benefits to a community. A successful brownfields project can transform forgotten, contaminated, and hazardous spaces into community assets such as parks and open spaces where residents can come together for recreation and community-building. This process creates a sense of shared stewardship among residents, businesses, and local governments and increases incentives for continued investment in the area. Projects also provide opportunities to engage youth - and youth of color in particular - in job readiness, outdoors-focused job training, conservation, and recreation opportunities.

At Groundwork Lawrence, we understand that a neighborhood's environmental conditions are inextricably linked to its economic and physical wellbeing. Lawrence is a densely populated city in northern Massachusetts. Located at the intersection of three powerful rivers, Lawrence holds a prominent role at the heart of manufacturing history in the United States. While the majority of the mills have closed, the legacy is still visible in vacant lots and polluted waterways. Our brownfields work, rooted in a partnership with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the National Park Service (NPS), focuses on projects within marginalized neighborhoods to transform neglected brownfields properties into community assets that address the impact of generations of environmental harm. Groundwork Lawrence's programming, which spans environmental and open space projects, fresh food access initiatives, youth and adult enrichment opportunities, and community programming and events, maintains brownfield land reuse as a central pillar to uplift the organization's mission.

As part of this work, we create opportunities to reclaim local brownfields, engage environmental justice communities in brownfield redevelopment prioritization and planning, and center the needs of local residents to transform contaminated land into community assets. Working hand-in-hand with local residents through an inclusive, community-driven process, Groundwork Lawrence plans and implements high-impact brownfield transformations in long-overlooked neighborhoods.

Where abandoned buildings once stood, we create parks, playgrounds, community gardens, urban farms, greenways, and - in the process - restore habitats for animals and clean waterways for fishing. These are the kinds of nature-based assets that

underserved communities need and want and that Groundwork Lawrence helps create through a process of engagement with local residents.

Community-Centered Economic Development

As a Lawrence kid myself, growing up with more reasons to leave than to stay, the environment and its many benefits was not something I knew about or had any interest in. But I did notice the vacant lots, the disinvestment in parks and open spaces, the lack of pride in the way the city looked or even smelled. I remember that our rivers weren't the attractive recreational destinations they are today.

In fact, the area that GWL first focused on was the neighborhood I grew up in. For many outside of the City, it was considered the "Dresden of Lawrence". Most of the large mill buildings were vacant and in disrepair. This was a time in Lawrence where the disinvestment across the city was never more evident.

In 2004, I joined the fledgling Groundwork Lawrence. This small organization began to change the way I saw my home, the way I thought about how things could change for the better, and provided me a new way to see how I could fit into that change.

Groundwork Lawrence believes that brownfield redevelopment is a long-term economic development strategy for underserved communities. Community-driven brownfield projects offer opportunities to counter disinvestment and build community wealth by creating jobs, educational opportunities for youth, and multiple entry points for residents to become long-term stewards of their shared environment. We pursue brownfields redevelopment projects as place-based investments that yield a significant triple bottom line of equity, health, and economic opportunity for communities that would otherwise be left behind.

My first large project with the organization was a 2.7 acre brownfield site nestled in one of the densest neighborhoods in the city: picture a lot, long-fenced off and forgotten by its owners. The neighborhood didn't want more housing and, along with Lawrence Community Works, a local CDC, instead advocated for open space. That is when GWL joined the team and began to work with the neighbors on designing a space to call their own – one they would be proud to preserve and steward for decades to come.

The design process took place in a neighbor's living room and included the GWL team, a landscape architect, and a group of neighbors who had invested their time and energy to fight for what was right. Despite some roadblocks, we persevered and cut the ribbon on Dr. Nina Scarito Park in 2007. I share this with you because, had it not been for the support of the Brownfields Program at the organizational level and for supporting site assessment and cleanup, Lawrence wouldn't have one of the most beautiful

greenspaces we now celebrate along the Spicket River Greenway. The Spicket River Greenway is a 3.1 mile greenway in the heart of Lawrence that connects 10 parks, 4 of which are former brownfields-turned-green spaces. These restored sites give residents a place to recreate, a place to socialize and, most importantly, a place to feel proud of.

Although we have always known the importance of greenspaces, it became even more evident during COVID when people were stuck at home with no place to go. The parks along the greenway provided a sanctuary for the residents of Lawrence: a place to walk and socialize, a place to heal and find some sense of normalcy, a place that supported their mental health. In short, Lawrence's brownfields-to-greenspace sites offered Lawrence residents a place where they felt like they belonged.

Groundwork Lawrence is proud of our brownfields accomplishments. With over \$25 million dollars in investment, including EPA Brownfields funding, we have been able to redevelop and create over 25 parks, four of those being brownfields-to-greenspace projects that have helped to increase property values, provide Lawrence residents much needed greenspace, and holistically change the way people view greenspace and community development in the City.

I hope that what I have shared with you today makes it clear that it is critical to continue to invest in Brownfields Programs. Doing so ensures that places like Lawrence, Massachusetts can continue to access the transformative funds that allow us to convert previously hazardous spaces into thriving community assets, decreasing exposure to harmful contaminants in the process. This revitalization work also creates opportunity for the entire city to benefit from the investment in terms of longer-term economic development opportunities. Prioritizing the creation of greenspaces in historically disinvested and marginalized communities provides residents not only the opportunity to support in the redevelopment of their neighborhoods, but also encourages them to become the long-time stewards of their communities and of their futures.