

Cities in Transition - Interview

Vacant Property Research Initiative



Charlie Bartsch Washington, D.C.

Profile

Charlie Bartsch is the Senior Advisor for Economic Development to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Assistant Administrator Mathy Stanislaus, charged with promoting inter-agency and public-private financing partnerships to spur land revitalization and site reuse. Charlie also works closely with the EPA, Department of Transportation and Housing and Urban Development partnership for Sustainable Communities, advises on community green infrastructure financing approaches, and is taking a leading role in developing the agency's environmental justice strategy to address equitable development concerns in environmental justice communities. He also has been an EPA point person on the White House "Strong Cities/Strong Communities" recovery initiative.

Prior to his appointment at EPA, he was Senior Fellow at ICF International, where he served as ICF's brownfields and smart growth policy expert. He was also Director of Brownfield Studies at the Northeast-Midwest Institute in Washington DC. Over the past twenty years, his focus has been on brownfield and community redevelopment/reuse strategies and financing, and he is recognized as one of the nation's leading authorities on these issues.

Prior to his appointment at the EPA, Charlie was chair of the National Brownfield Association's Advisory Board, chair of GroundworksUSA, and on the editorial board for the Bureau of National Affairs. In 2001, he received the International Economic Development Council's Chairman's Award for Outstanding Service for ten years of work on brownfield policies and legislation. Charlie received his Master's in Urban Policy and Planning from the University of Illinois-Chicago, and his B.A. in political science from North Central College in Naperville, Illinois.

Combining Strategies to Meet Pragmatic Goals

By Joe Schilling, PhD and Natalie Borecki, AICP

Over the past twenty years, Charlie Bartsch has earned a reputation as an expert and pioneer in forging connections between economic development and environmental quality. His focus has been on community redevelopment/reuse strategies, including those for vacant sites and brownfields. Beginning at the Northeast-Midwest Institute (a Washington, D.C. public policy center affiliated with the bipartisan Northeast-Midwest Congressional and Senate Coalitions), Bartsch then served as a senior fellow at ICF International. He is currently a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Bartsch offers an array of approaches that Cities in Transition (CITs) might adapt for local use.

Broadening the View

Cities in Transition (CITs), Legacy cities, stressed Sunbelt cities—to Charlie Bartsch, the name and initial categories for a community should never loom larger than the goal for its future. “The last thing you want to do is eliminate any potential opportunities or discount certain places or properties due to limited or stereotyped type of thinking,” he says. Instead, Bartsch believes, it is to a community's advantage to think of sites in terms of end use and desired outcomes, rather than pigeon-holing it by its history as a brownfield, greyfield, vacant property, or Superfund site.

Bartsch recommends that planners take a broad view and consider multiple programs that might align with the goals for a property. For example, if a brownfield could be redeveloped into a shopping area, “if you only look for brownfield grants you are pretty much dooming yourself to failure, because you may or may not get one, and then it only deals with the very beginning piece of that redevelopment strategy/project/implementation. You need to look at range of options.”

“De-holistifying” Projects

By looking for a range of redevelopment strategies, funding mechanisms, and means of implementation, planners and developers can better assure a project's success. Pinning all hope for a project to one source of funding is unwise and unworkable, especially at a time when resources are constrained. Bartsch refers to his recommended approach as “de-holistifying”: Breaking a project into components that fit within the framework set by the desired result, then pursuing funding

from a variety of sources that may not initially have seemed compatible.

Coralville, Iowa River Landing offers one example of a community that successfully used this approach. Located on the Iowa River, Coralville rebuilt its riverfront and downtown in stages that involved an ambitious environmental clean-up and a variety of revitalization components within the context of a larger redevelopment plan. In March 2012, the city unveiled its new riverfront master plan, offering an array of redevelopment concepts that address transportation, landscape, public space, “attraction districts,” and community events.

Expanding this Approach to Area Wide
U.S. EPA’s Brownfields Office recently initiated the Area Wide Planning Pilot program to encourage broad community solutions for locations where many former and potential uses overlap: abandoned rail and other transportation infrastructure, underused or abandoned industrial areas, retail areas with high vacancies, and residential neighborhoods where population has dropped. So far, EPA has funded 23 grantees in this category.

“Area-wide approaches actually make projects more viable in the long run,” Bartsch says. Thinking beyond an individual site also enables a community to envision a range of activities that lead to a more balanced community, more efficient reuse of infrastructure, and reduced redevelopment costs because of the advantage in various institutional controls.

Because many of the agency’s pilot area-wide planning approach projects are just getting underway, empirical evidence is still forthcoming. Several smaller projects—such as Kalispell, Montana’s downtown storefront redevelopment plan—are starting to show promise.

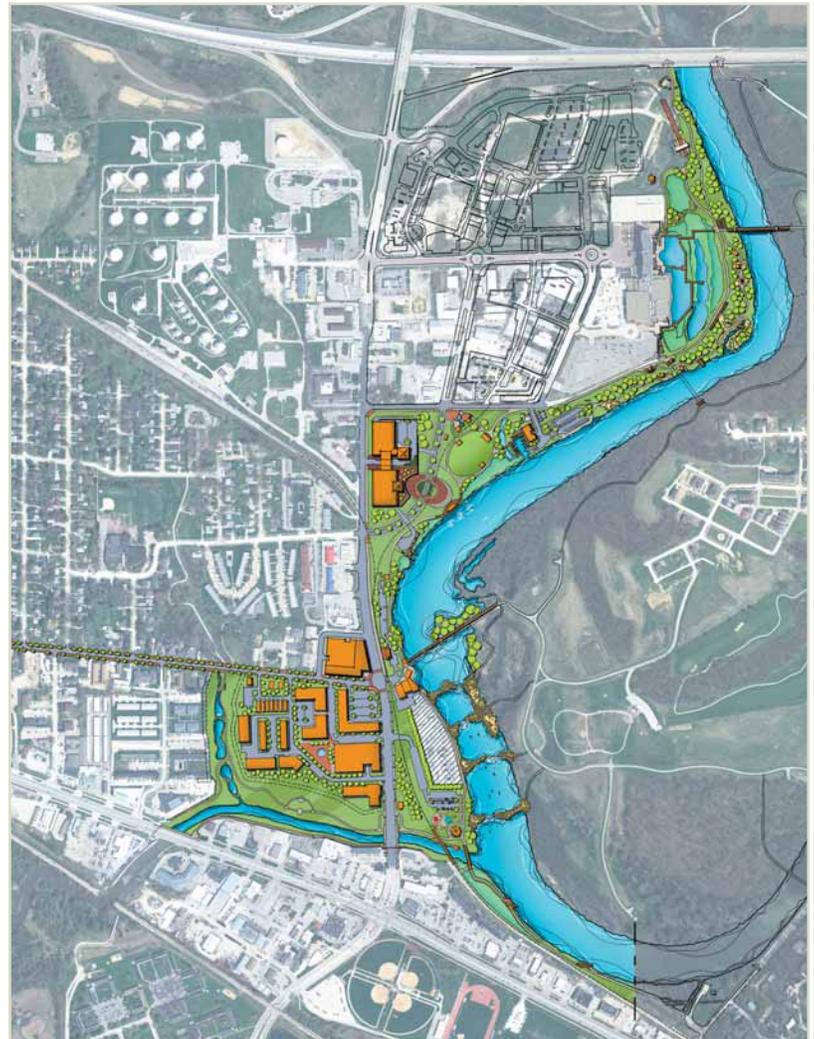


Photo above courtesy of <http://www.coralville.org> and photo from previous page courtesy of <http://iowariverlanding.com>

Place Building—Inviting Economic Development

CiTs cannot afford to consider planning without a strong economic development component, Bartsch believes. “It’s pure dollar sense,” he says. Not only do CiTs need jobs and investment right away, they need to pay for the implementation of their vision itself. “State support is shrinking, federal support is shrinking. So plans are going to have to be supported with more local resources.”

CiT planners must also concern themselves with pragmatic moves to make an area attractive to private investment, improving investment climate, and conducting a methodical and realistic analysis of who to engage and how to reduce the risk for the private sector: “If the private sector views your community as too risky to open, expand, or relocate a business there, you’re going to need to work hard to overcome this perception,” Bartsch says. Everything from reconfiguring streetscapes to improving visual appeal might be necessary. Other incentives could include a local revolving fund that guarantees small business loans, or enhanced police presence

in a certain area. Bartsch believes these are key planning activities, asserting, “Economic development really is a planning function.”

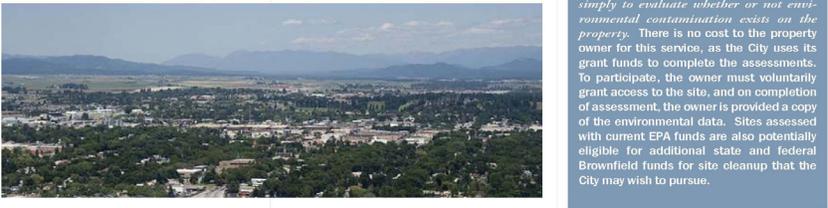
Overriding Challenges with Civic Engagement and Partnerships

Although a CiT may encounter more challenges in implementing an Area Wide Approach, owing to more broad-scale needs across a city or even a region, Bartsch believes a community can work through those challenges if it has a detailed, clear kick-off strategy in place to make an area-wide project work. This means more time up front, mapping out and conceptualizing all the pieces of a project. With federal resources reduced for the foreseeable future, Bartsch believes that local planning will become much more critical, especially during the initial conception. Finding leadership is important, too, whether in a strong mayor, a purposeful city council, a dominant chamber of commerce, or some other agency or institution. Planners in CiTs, al-

ready operating with very limited resources, may need to seek out partnerships with regional boards or planning schools to support their efforts

Collecting and analyzing data for this process is also vital, along with a realistic, responsive public participation process. Community outreach, charettes, and other avenues should be used to engage residents and businesses. “In an age of shrinking resources, redevelopment proponents really need to reach out to people living in the target neighborhoods,” says Bartsch, “and to the businesses, and other key local organizations you may want to enlist to help you with various components of the effort.”

Bartsch recognizes that there is no one-stop solution to economic development at any scale and in any type of community: “It will work when folks in individual places figure out how best to make it work in their own commonsense way, figuring out how to work together and why they should.” An important way to inspire and ensure communities to come together and make the process work their way is to build tangible, attainable goals into long-term, comprehensive plans. CiTs need near-term and interim plans and benchmarks to show progress and inspire hope. Bartsch recommends that planners “focus on the fast pace of change” and anticipate being nimble and ready to respond to new opportunities.

 <p>In 2009, the EPA awarded the City of Kalispell a Brownfield Community-Wide Assessment Grant in the amount of \$400,000 to revitalize the core of Kalispell. At no cost to the property owner, the City may conduct Phase I and Phase II environmental site assessments and develop cleanup plans on sites potentially contaminated with petroleum or hazardous substances. Any site where the redevelopment or reuse is complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance may be eligible for funding. Typical sites include former gas stations, auto repair shops, dry cleaning facilities, refineries, or buildings containing asbestos and/or lead-based paint.</p>	<p>GOALS OF KALISPELL'S BROWNFIELD PROGRAM</p> <p>The goals of Kalispell's Brownfield Program are to conduct site assessments to remove environmental uncertainty and to facilitate revitalization of properties in the City. Assessments may be done throughout the City with a focus on Kalispell's Core Revitalization Area adjacent to the historic BNSF railroad tracks that once carried the Galloping Goose. Prior to completing assessments, the City with its economic development partners and the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, will inventory and generally rank sites in the Revitalization Area. Assessments will be completed on properties having the greatest potential for revitalization and community support. The City hopes to complete up to sixteen Phase I and six Phase II assessments by November 2012.</p>	 <p>BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN THE BROWNFIELD ASSESSMENT PROGRAM</p> <p>There are numerous benefits to participating in Kalispell's Brownfield Program. The information generated may be used by the property owner to satisfy purchaser concerns, regulatory agency requirements, or simply to evaluate whether or not environmental contamination exists on the property. There is no cost to the property owner for this service, as the City uses its grant funds to complete the assessments. To participate, the owner must voluntarily grant access to the site, and on completion of assessment, the owner is provided a copy of the environmental data. Sites assessed with current EPA funds are also potentially eligible for additional state and federal Brownfield funds for site cleanup that the City may wish to pursue.</p>
		

Courtesy of <http://kalispell.com>

This is Research Project by the
Metroplan Institute
 College of Architecture and Urban Studiesm Virginia Tech
 1021 Prince St, Ste. 100, Alexanria, VA 22314
 Email: mivt@vt.edu
www.mi.vt.edu