

Brownfield Management

County improves its tax base by better managing brownfields.

For Indiana's Elkhart County—known primarily for its large Amish population and for manufacturing roughly half of the world's recreational vehicles—brownfield sites have long posed a challenge.

"A brownfield site is an abandoned industrial property with an environmental or safety stigma attached to it," says John Hulewicz, environmental health supervisor in the Elkhart County health department. "Maybe people think there's hazardous material onsite that's leaching into the water supply, or maybe they believe that the property is a gathering place for vandals and gangs. Whether these beliefs are based in fact or fiction, brownfields decrease the county's tax base. Our goal is to encourage revitalization and redevelopment wherever and whenever we can."

Brownfield sites are a particular concern in Elkhart County for two reasons: 1) sandy soil, high water levels, and a reliance on wells make residents espe-

cially susceptible to getting ill from consuming polluted groundwater, and 2) close proximity of residential and industrial zones means that residential property values are often adversely affected by the presence of brownfield sites.

To help combat the problems associated with brownfields, Elkhart County was awarded a federal grant as part of the EPA Brownfield Assessment Grant program. One of the main objectives of the grant was to create an inventory of all 5,000 of the county's brownfield sites, along with an easy-to-use tool for finding and managing information about them.

Such a tool—which would come to be called e-Atlas—would ultimately enable the county to better prioritize these sites for Phase I and II Site Investigations, which include visual inspections, records review, and/or the analysis of soil, groundwater, and/or building materials. These investigations provide potential buyers with informa-

tion that can help them determine clean-up and redevelopment costs, increasing the likelihood of selling and rehabilitating the land.

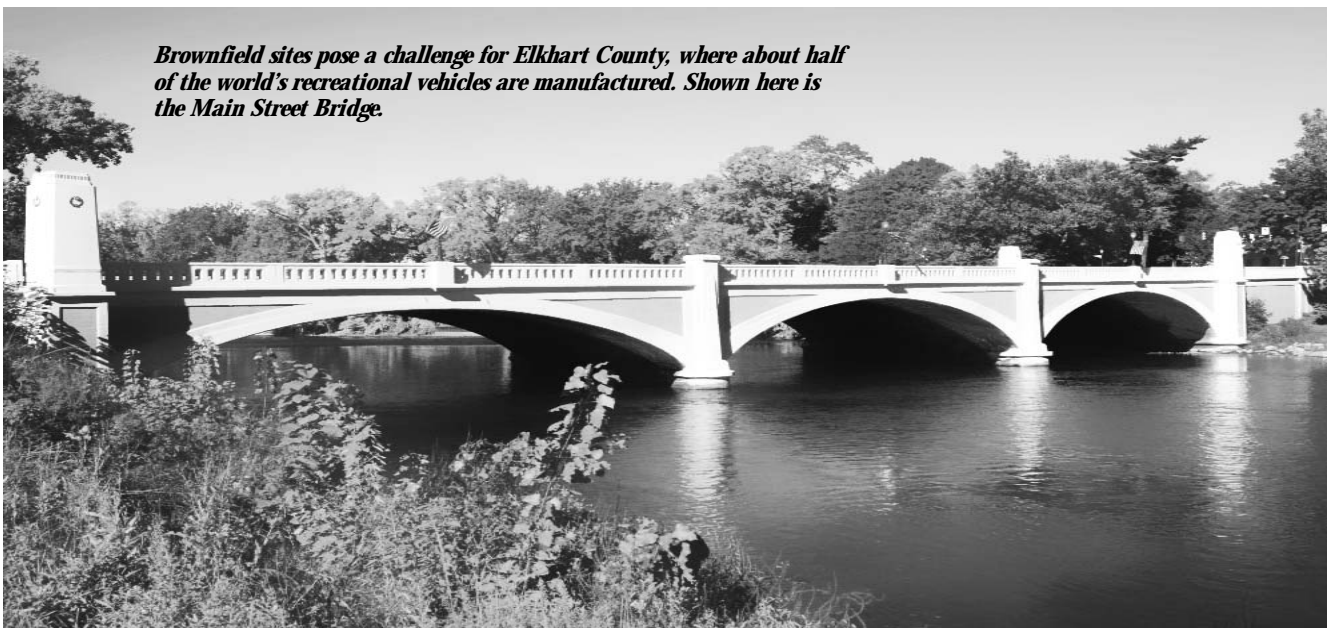
Information Overload

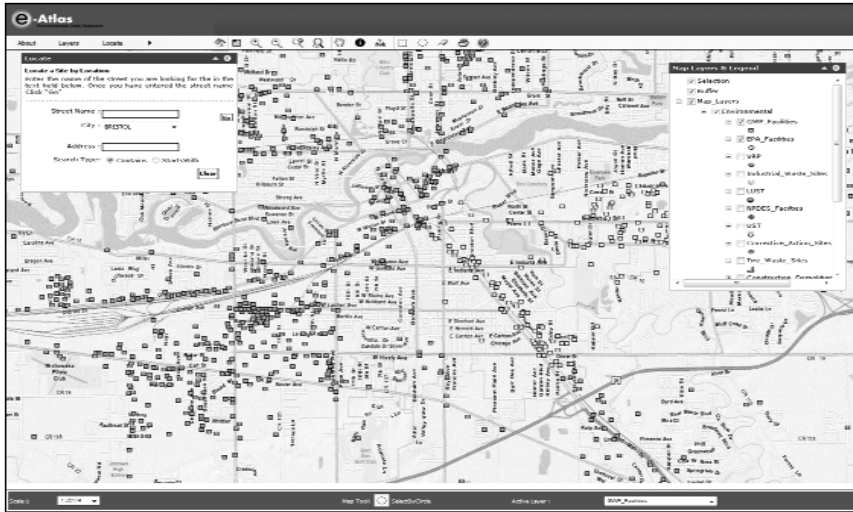
According to Hulewicz, the county had plenty of information about the brownfield sites, but much of it was crammed into 44 file cabinet drawers. "The paperwork was available, but it was difficult to wade through," he says.

"Managing the information and responding to requests from the public had become an increasingly time-consuming task," he adds. "Our resources were stretched thin and work performance was suffering. Field staff was spending more time in the office than conducting inspections. To remedy the situation, we needed to create a tool that would combine GIS capabilities with enterprise content management [ECM]."

Hulewicz says he "dreamed of the

Brownfield sites pose a challenge for Elkhart County, where about half of the world's recreational vehicles are manufactured. Shown here is the Main Street Bridge.





e-Atlas enabled Elkhart county to standardize information relevant to brownfields.

day” when Elkhart County employees would be able to click on a parcel of land within the county’s ESRI ArcGIS (www.esri.com) application and gain instant access to information relevant to that site, including historical site records, county-wide environmental scoring, groundwater protection records, pollution reports, and the county’s parcel information portal.

With such a tool, the environmental health department would be able to have a complete inventory of brownfield sites and associated records at their fingertips, enabling faster site assessments and knowledge sharing. Ultimately, the tool would help the department achieve its mission of “preventing disease, preserving the environment and improving the quality of life in Elkhart County through education, assessment, and assurance.”

e-Atlas Is Born

To create the e-Atlas tool, however, it was necessary to standardize the information relevant to the brownfields in the county. Elkhart turned to Symbiont, an environmental engineering firm based in Wisconsin, to collect and analyze the data, and then to map the sites to Elkhart’s ArcGIS system. The resulting database provided a table of primary reference coordinates for linking information.

Next, the e-Atlas project team needed to select a content management system that could store, index, and link digital copies of relevant reports and records to specific GIS coordinates. A couple of

ECM solutions—including Laserfiche—were actually already in use in different county departments. In the end, the team chose Laserfiche (www.laserfiche.com) as the information management anchor of its new assessment tool for two main reasons.

Ease of integration. “The integration between ArcGIS and Laserfiche was quick and simple,” explains Ryan Eckdale-Dudley, GIS coordinator at Symbiont and the e-Atlas project lead. “People query sites in the GIS application, and Laserfiche WebLink provides a hyperlink to associated records and reports. It works exactly as intended.”

Ease of use. “Laserfiche is useful and easy to use,” says Hulewicz. “You don’t need a Ph. D. to understand it. We can train someone to retrieve documents with Laserfiche in ten minutes flat.”

The team purchased its new system from BOLT Document Management, a local Laserfiche reseller. BOLT scanned and indexed thousands of pages of county brownfield records, loaded them into Laserfiche, and then assisted Symbiont with the integration of Laserfiche and ArcGIS. According to Eckdale-Dudley, BOLT delivered all of this on time and under budget.

e-Atlas Shrugs

Just as the team was putting the finishing touches on e-Atlas, Elkhart County acted on the advice of a consultant to standardize the county on a different document management system. This meant that all of the content stored and indexed in Laserfiche had to

be converted to the new system before e-Atlas could go live.

The e-Atlas project was on hold for over a year before Elkhart County realized that the conversion promised by the new vendor wasn’t going to be easy, fast, or cost-effective. When the county’s new IT director came on board, Hulewicz and his team asked to switch back to Laserfiche. After giving the new vendor a last chance to perform the conversion, the IT director agreed. Within three days of the decision, BOLT had restored Laserfiche and e-Atlas was back online.

The Elkhart environmental health department is extremely pleased to have e-Atlas up and running again. The tool has been essential in identifying, analyzing, and managing potential and existing brownfield sites throughout the county, and it has saved the department “time, storage space and paper cuts,” Hulewicz says.

In fact, the e-Atlas project has been so successful that it received recognition outside of Elkhart County: At the EPA Brownfields 2008 Conference, the county was awarded Best New Technology Paper for its use of EPA assessment and cleanup grants.

The success of e-Atlas has also inspired a public-facing tool called What’s in My Back Yard (WIMBY). Accessible through Elkhart County’s website, WIMBY leverages Laserfiche and ArcGIS to show brownfields and other community threats such as sexual offenders’ residences and former meth lab sites. The long-term goal of WIMBY is to provide the citizens of Elkhart County with easy access to publicly-available information on the health and quality of life factors that affect the communities in which they live.

“As a government organization, we strive for transparency,” explains Hulewicz. “Through WIMBY, Laserfiche provides our citizens with access to the information they need to make a difference in the community.”

