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By RICH WEISS

Staff Reporter

CLEVELAND -- The EPA is turning the cleanup and redevelopment of brownfields into unmatchable 21st Century job training—and even sustainable, neighborhood economies—in neighborhoods just like yours.

Mathy Stanislaus, Assistant Administrator of EPA's Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response, called area government officials, experts and activists in the areas of brownfield redevelopment and environmental sustainability to a round table discussion at Green City Blue Lake last Wednesday.

According to the EPA website, "brownfields are real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant. Cleaning up and reinvesting in these properties protects the environment, reduces blight, and takes development pressures off greenspaces and working lands."

Stanislaus, appointed to EPA assistant administrator in 2009, came to Cleveland to find out—directly from those on the frontlines in our region and state—what obstacles stand in between the EPA administrator and his vision of bringing green micro-economies to Cleveland and other urban areas throughout Ohio.

If Stanislaus is looking for obstacles, he came to the right place.

David Beach, Director of the GreenCityBlueLake Institute, and the host of the round table, used Cleveland's Combined Sewer Overflow Program as an example of our local attitudes toward adoption of sustainable practices: "Our sewer district has a consent agreement with the EPA, and though there are some good elements to it, giving our district some flexibility to do something on the green infrastructure side, we think that it's not nearly enough for what they're planning to do. The current program on green infrastructure is way too modest. We could be doing a lot more."

Beside our local challenges to large-scale sustainable practice adoption, obstacles to redeveloping brownfields exist in the form of EPA red tape. This is where Stanislaus hopes to

have the most immediate impact.

Jim Rokakis, Director, Thriving Communities Institute, and champion of the Cuyahoga County Land Bank from his former county treasurer office, is familiar with local obstacles to brownfield cleanup and redevelopment.

He said, “The problem is demolition money is very hard to come by…but the cost of the interpretation of one of the (EPA) rules is driving demolition costs up by between 20 to 25 percent, not to mention time delays—time delays, when you have boarded up houses in an inner city area—time is money.”

Tracy Nichols, Cleveland’s Economic Development Director, has been a driving force for countywide brownfield redevelopment, earning Cuyahoga County a reputation as a national leader in the field.

Nichols stated, “There are two major issues that affect us greatly. The first is on-site assessments: We have companies who want to expand next door, but they say ‘I remember the manufacturer who used to be here, and he used to dump stuff in the back,’ or there is some story in the neighborhood, and they want to expand but they’re afraid of that uncertainty. When they find out how much it may take to abate—phase one and phase two could be a couple hundred thousand—they frequently will say, ‘We’re going to just move to Medina.’ This is sprawl. They are going to go to a greenfield site and put up a factory there, they will shudder the factory they have, which will be another problem for us. We need that site assessment money.”

Stanislaus responded, “The rules are not built around the issues that people are dealing with.” In a separate interview with the Call & Post, he gave his perspective on the bureaucratic frustrations of the round table attendees: “I think we need to be flexible enough to accommodate the local circumstances. I’m going to go back and take a look at that, talk to the administrators—and if I need to take it to the White House, I will—and figure it out.”

Another form of frustration expressed at the EPA round table came from Johnie Reed, of J Reed Services, an organization specializing in workshops increasing individual, business unit and organizational productivity (and individual educational plans for pursuit of higher education).

He said, “When I see urban area redevelopment, the people from the area are not part of that redevelopment. When you talk about the people that actually come in to do the jobs, they’re not people from the area. When we look at this money that we’re doling out for these projects,” he asked, “is there any component tied to that money that says a certain number of future employees or certain number of people who are on the projects need to come from that urban area? Because it’s great to build up the area, but if people in that blighted area still aren’t getting employed, what is it doing for the area?”

Stanislaus responded, “We completely agree that the local community that has been burdened by the site should partake in the recovery of those communities, and we’ve added those additional criteria to our grant program. One of the factors in the Area-Wide Planning Program is precisely what you’ve articulated—we want to insure that the reuse of a particular site is based on community engagement. The community partakes in that. This is not going to resolve all of your issues, but those are some of the steps we’re taking to try to achieve some of what you articulated.”

In his separate interview with the Call & Post, Stanislaus elaborated, “I’ve always viewed brownfields as a community rebuilding, community revitalization effort. People say it’s just contamination—Sure, you do the clean-up—to me it’s an opportunity to lift up communities, to provide opportunities to meet their needs with things like affordable housing, and jobs from the neighborhood…to me, that is brownfield [redevelopment] at its essence.”

Matt Bogoshian, Senior Policy Council, EPA Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention, who also spoke with the Call & Post, added, “In our nation, 600,000 STEM-oriented jobs are going unfilled.”

Mathy Stanislaus connected these open positions to his brownfield work, saying, “One of the key prongs of this administration is job training. One of my programs is a job-training program, and it is based on the principle that if you have communities that have been burdened by these sites, they need to partake in the recovery of that. So we have a job training program—I think it’s the most successful job training program in the country, just speaking for myself—we have a 71% hiring rate from this program! You know why it’s so high? We pushed grantees to establish partnerships with local businesses—develop your curriculum around the skill set that the local businesses demand—so we give them flexibility. It’s a multi-certificate, multi-skills training program,” he boasted, “You will find different curricula if you go to Ohio as opposed to New England.”

Stanislaus said the EPA grantees are now required to do an upfront market survey with local businesses: “We require businesses to partner with the grantees, and then theses grantees are there at the kickoff, they’re there at the graduation—they’re mentally transitioned—there’s a job fair the week after graduation with all these employers in the room.”

Stanislaus reflected on his brownfield redevelopment job training program with pride, “To me, it’s a tremendous win-win-win, because, frankly, these are lots of individuals who have a challenge to employment. Some are formerly incarcerated, some are single moms, you know? It is providing the skill set so that you can be hired from the very neighborhood that you did the cleanup and redevelopment! ...sorry if I get a little excited about it.”