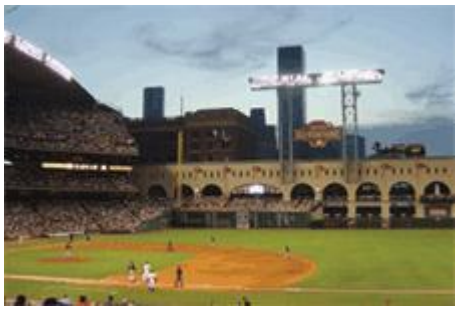
City of Houston Launches New Brownfields Inventory System

Fast access to current information is essential for identifying potential brownfield redevelopment sites and moving brownfields projects toward realization.

The City of Houston has long been recognized by the U.S. EPA for its leadership in redeveloping brownfields properties. In recent years, the city's brownfields program has turned abandoned and idle properties into a major league baseball park that is now home to the Houston Astros, a 450-acre golf course, a performing arts center, an aquarium and entertainment complex, and nearly 1,000 new housing units.



Minute Maid Field is built on a former brownfield. Learn how EDR is helping Houston build its brownfield inventory

Known for its progressive brownfields reuse, Houston was looking for a better way to continually manage and update complex information relating to environmental contamination and remediation at hundreds of properties.

The work of the city's Brownfields Redevelopment Program was impacted by the time-consuming, labor-intensive tasks relating to information retrieval and updates. Adding to the difficulty, environmental data was typically stored by separate departments and outside partners, with some information stored in the form of hard copy and others residing on computers.

The Solution

To meet this challenge, Houston deployed a Web-based environmental information system customized for the city by Environmental Data Resources Inc. (EDR). The new system gives the city's brownfields professionals the ability to swiftly access

information about a brownfields property,
including current government records and
historical-use records such as historical aerial photographs and Certified Sanborn fire insurance maps from EDR. The EDR system also enables Houston's brownfields team to research specific properties or screen an area for properties that might meet criteria to be included in the brownfields program.
“The platform that EDR created enables significant improvements in process,” said Houston's Brownfields Manager, Shannon Teasley. “This tool is essential in our day-to-day operations and helps us make informed business decisions on which properties should and should not be included in our brownfields program. A single piece of information delivered at the right time can mean the difference between a smart brownfield investment and a poor one.”

The EDR system implemented by Houston enables the city to quickly research and continually monitor a property for existing or new hazardous releases or violations. The system also monitors the environmental risks associated with neighboring sites that may impact the property. Environmental data is mapped and linked to complete detail about each piece of data. The user can select a street-map view, aerial-photo view, or hybrid view that combines the street-map information and visual detail from the aerial photography. Because the system is Web-based, it can be accessed easily from multiple locations and by multiple authorized users and departments. Additionally, project-related documents can be archived within the system.

By implementing EDR’s environmental information system, Houston’s brownfields team has been able to improve its efficiency. Significant benefits were experienced from the start, including reduced time in replying to information requests about brownfields properties from government leaders and developers. This has helped free up time for staff to conduct more impactful activities to advance brownfields programs and thereby hasten the pace of economic development and urban revitalization efforts. Furthermore, Houston benefits from EDR’s environmental research platform because it provides a depository where all documentation about a site can be stored and uploaded in one easy-to-access location.