



# Went Field Brings New Hope to Impoverished Community

## Bridgeport, Connecticut

**I**mpoverished residents of the West End area in Bridgeport, Connecticut, can finally enjoy safe greenspace following the restoration and expansion of the 10-acre Went Field. An area that was once crime ridden has been transformed, through the cleanup of two brownfields, into a multi-use community recreation park adjacent to the local elementary and high schools. The entire community helped to make this project a success.

Bridgeport began suffering severe economic decline in the 1960s, brought on in part by the departure of vital industry and the abandonment and perceived contamination of former industrial sites. With a relatively small population of 130,000, Bridgeport was estimated to contain as many as 400 brownfields. Coming close to bankruptcy in 1990 due to its continued financial deterioration, Bridgeport had become one of the poorest yet most highly taxed cities in the nation. The 39,000 residents of the West End area were among the poorest in the city, with an average annual income of \$15,000 and a 70 percent minority rate. Since the 1990's, a turnaround has been stimulated in the area by creating reinvestment in new industrial sites and rebuilding its neighborhoods.

Located within the West End area, Went Field was once the site of Barnum Circus' winter quarters, housing a variety of circus animals. It was later used by smaller businesses, including Exmet, a former metal extrusion company, and Swan Engraving, a former printing company. Funding from EPA's \$200,000 Assessment Demonstration Pilot was used to assess the sites, with an additional \$75,000 from EPA's Targeted Brownfields Assessment Program used on the Swan Engraving property. Toluene and chlorinated solvents were found in the groundwater; they are still being monitored to ensure that degradation continues and there is no exposure. The entire project cost \$4.4 million for cleanup and redevelopment, with additional funding leveraged from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the National Park Service, the State of Connecticut's Departments of Environmental Protection and Community Development, city bond funds, and community fundraising.

Before the project began, Went Field was considered an extremely dangerous area, with abandoned buildings for drug dealers to hide in and minimal police protection. Although the park was the only available open space in the neighborhood, residents were too fearful to let their children play there. It became evident at the first community meeting that crime



*A view of Went Field, prior to cleanup and redevelopment*

## JUST THE FACTS:

- Located within Bridgeport's West End area, Went Field was once the site of Barnum Circus' winter quarters, housing a variety of circus animals. It was later home to a printing and engraving company and a metal extrusion facility.
- Funding from EPA's \$200,000 Assessment Demonstration Pilot and \$75,000 from EPA's Targeted Brownfields Assessment Program were used to assess Went Field, revealing Toluene and chlorinated solvents in the groundwater.
- Funding for the \$4.4 million cleanup and redevelopment of Went Field was leveraged from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the National Park Service, the state, city bond funds, and community fundraising.

*Went Field was once considered an extremely dangerous area, with abandoned buildings for drug dealers to hide in and minimal police protection. Although the park was the only available open space in the neighborhood, residents were too fearful to let their children play there. Today, Went Field is a 10-acre, multi-use recreational park used by the community and nearby schools.*

prevention was the priority issue for residents and would need to be resolved before progressing with the site's restoration. The community held several public safety meetings within the first year that led to a significantly decreased local crime problem; trust between the police and residents was rebuilt as a police substation was established in the West End and block watches began. Abandoned buildings were demolished and the former Barnum firehouse was converted into a maintenance facility for the Parks department.

The community support generated by the Went Field project is one of its greatest successes. Local residents, representatives from adjacent Elias Howe Elementary School and Bassick High School, municipal planning, police, and park departments, and non-profits like ASPIRA (an organization that supports Latino youth) and Groundwork Bridgeport (an organization that supports local redevelopment projects) were among the stakeholders involved. The process included public safety and update meetings, publicity events, design charettes, and the development of a consensus plan. The community's dedication continued beyond the Went Field project with the creation of the Park City Brownfields Redevelopment Partnership, a group that works on other difficult brownfield projects throughout the city. Tito Molino, of the West End Community Development Council, expressed the importance of community involvement. "It is a sense of community pride," Molino said. "If people feel they have some input and control on a project like this, that is planting a seed for ownership in the future."

Through the dedication of the community and funding partners, Went Field has been transformed into a 10-acre, multi-use recreational park. It contains four basketball courts, three softball fields, practice fields for football and soccer, track and field elements, a volleyball court, a fenced playground, a pavilion, and an amphitheater. Elias Howe Elementary School now has a recreation area and Bassick High School has athletic practice fields for the first time. The park is always bustling with residents, and is often the location for community events.

The Went Field project has brought new hope to the West End area by significantly decreasing crime, providing recreation space, and engaging the community in revitalization projects. The project also represents a broader effort to transform the entire area into renewed neighborhood and industrial uses. Through the support of the City of Bridgeport, the West End Community Development Council, and local businesses, local brownfields continue to be redeveloped for neighborhood revitalization and manufacturing reuse, providing jobs and revenue for the area.

## CONTACTS:

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Visit the EPA Brownfields web site at:

<http://www.epa.gov/brownfields/>



*The new playground area of the cleaned and redeveloped Went Field*