# Brownfields Redevelopment Provides Improved Social Services to Immigrant Hmong Community of St. Paul, Minnesota

## St. Paul, Minnesota

When the Saint Paul Port Authority (SPPA) and the non-profit Vang Pao Foundation applied for an EPA Brownfields Cleanup grant in 2004, they did so with a very specific project in mind. The City of Saint Paul, Minnesota, already designated as an EPA Showcase Community for its brownfields restoration successes, is home to a burgeoning community of Hmong refugees who immigrated to the United States to escape persecution in Southeast Asia. Thousands of Hmong have relocated to this Midwestern city, making it the largest Hmong community in the country. The Hmong have integrated themselves into the larger St. Paul community while working to maintain and celebrate their unique cultural identity and traditions.

One of the most sacred traditional rites in the Hmong culture is that of the funeral, which involves extensive preparations, feasting, and mourning, and can often be a costly, weekend-long affair. A traditional funeral often requires an entire community of mourners preparing food, eating, performing music, celebrating and sleeping near the deceased, all of which takes place at the funeral home. Playing host to funerals of this scale regularly overwhelmed St. Paul's already established funeral homes, forcing Hmong to spend months on waiting lists before being able to pay homage to deceased relatives. Because of this, a Hmong non-profit named the Vang Pao Foundation reached out to the Saint Paul Port Authority, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), and the EPA to form an innovative new partnership.

Recognizing the critical need for the Hmong community to establish their own funeral home, and acknowledging the lack of available land, this partnership turned its attention to a dormant brownfield owned by the SPPA. This 3.3-acre former waste dump, which operated from the 1920s through the 1950s, had already been closed for ten years when it was purchased by the SPPA. In 2004, the Port Authority performed an assessment that revealed higher than normal levels of petroleum, asbestos, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), lead, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), and other metals in the soil and groundwater.

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*New friends braved a cold November day to participate in the groundbreaking for the new facility (above); the completed funeral home (below).*

## JUST THE FACTS:

- Used $400,000 in EPA Brownfields Cleanup grants to prepare the property for redevelopment.
- Leveraged more than $200,000 from state and local funding sources.
- Provides the Hmong community two new and much needed buildings where funerals can be held.

*"Most people think that a new funeral home is not something to celebrate, but to the Hmong community, culturally, it's very significant."*

***– Keary Cragan***

Together, the Port Authority and the Vang Pao Foundation applied for and received EPA Brownfields Cleanup grants totaling $400,000, in the form of a Hazardous Cleanup grant and a Petroleum Cleanup grant, to be used on this parcel of land. The planned redevelopment of the property into a Hmong funeral home was intended to advance a larger, surrounding redevelopment initiative, also sponsored by the SPPA and funded by EPA grants, to renovate one of the city's industrial corridors. Locating the planned funeral home within this redeveloping industrial area was suggested by the SPPA and agreed to by all of the project's partners, as the property is ideally located outside of St. Paul's bustling downtown in an area where parking is abundant and neighbors would not be affected by gathering mourners. According to Keary Cragan, EPA Brownfields Project Manager for Region 5, "The fact that this Hmong funeral home is in a commercial-industrial area on the west side of the city provides them privacy and great parking. Most people think that a new funeral home is not something to celebrate, but to the Hmong community, culturally, it's very significant."

## CONTACTS:

For more information on this award, or on EPA's Brownfields Program, contact EPA Region 5 at (312) 353-5669

Visit the EPA Brownfields Web site at: www.epa.gov/brownfields/

The Port Authority began work on the property under the leadership of the MPCA Voluntary Investigation and Cleanup Program (VIC), in October of 2004. EPA and the MPCA have a unique partnership in Minnesota in which the Pollution Control Agency plays a significant role. EPA-funded cleanups are overseen by the VIC Program, the state program that regulates and guides Minnesota's brownfields cleanup activities. According to Cragan, this relationship has led to several highly successful projects. "MPCA has been very innovative in assisting private developers and communities to voluntarily clean up properties." It was these kinds of creative local, state, and federal partnerships, empowered by EPA grant dollars, which led to the cleanup of the Hmong funeral home property.

In addition to EPA's Cleanup grants for this project, the SPPA leveraged $187,500 from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development Contamination Cleanup and Investigation Grant Program, received a $62,500 Metropolitan Council grant, and committed $2,048 from their own budget. Cleanup was completed on December 15, 2004, clearing the way for redevelopment, which began in March and wrapped up in August of 2005. The property now features not one but two buildings where Hmong funerals can be held, enabling more than one funeral to take place without interfering with the cultural customs embraced by the Hmong community.

Since its opening during the summer of 2005, the Hmong Funeral Home has been in nearly constant demand, and has greatly decreased the waiting period and stress for the Hmong community of St. Paul. The innovative partnerships, creative resource leveraging, and expertise of EPA, the MPCA, the SPPA, the Vang Pao Foundation, and the Hmong community itself all came together to resolve the unique cultural challenges on this unconventional brownfields project. As explained by Keary Cragan, "I think most people look at brownfields and say, `Well, you've got a large industrial site, so you need large industry.' People need to think of new uses for old sites and think of what is needed by the community now. [This project] was community driven. It wasn't the city or the Port Authority trying to dictate what the Hmong community needed; it was the community stating what they needed and working collaboratively to meet the need. [The project] was driven by the Hmong community and it made everyone happy. This is a really positive thing."