Investing in Wisconsin’s Waterfront

While Wisconsin was once a manufacturing hub, the economy is evolving toward service industries and start-ups. As a result, many sites that once housed industrial and manufacturing facilities now lie idle or abandoned, and efforts to redevelop them are complicated by contamination and uncertain costs of remediation and redevelopment.

New and emerging challenges to redevelopment offer a unique opportunity to reinvest in Wisconsin’s waterfront brownfields in a more purposeful way: simultaneously remediating the contamination on these sites, developing a welcoming space for new business investments, and stimulating job creation.

Numerous communities in Wisconsin have begun the process of planning new waterfront projects, and approximately 12 communities have received grants to redesign portions of their waterfront acreage. However, only a few of these projects have come to fruition. Many efforts have encountered challenges that have delayed the process or even put the project on hold.

This report was commissioned to identify both the untapped potential in waterfront redevelopment and the barriers preventing such projects from successful fruition.

Development potential is limited by five challenges. First, redevelopment is an economically risky process because of unknown contamination levels and costs. Second, public funds are limited and declining. Third, the public must balance growth and public health in redevelopment programs. Fourth, waterfronts amplify challenges with their scale and added regulations. Fifth, institutional coordination and current regulatory context constrains policy innovation.

We find three best practices for overcoming these barriers. Studying eight Wisconsin cases and four from other states, we find: (1) comprehensive and clear state support matters; (2) public-private partnership organizations are crucial to success; and (3) local leadership is vital.

In order to incentivize attainment of these best practices, we recommend: the State Legislature draft and pass the necessary enabling legislation for the DNR to create a waterfront-specific brownfields program within the agency’s Remediation and Redevelopment program.

Once this program is created, we recommend four initial tasks: (1) Create a toolkit of best practices for communities interested in waterfront redevelopment; (2) Implement creative funding solutions to provide “seed” money for waterfront projects; (3) Generate a database of Wisconsin waterfront redevelopment projects; and (4) begin collecting data to perform a more precise analysis of waterfront redevelopment.