

“Take A Stand, Own the Land”

Scenario:

When your family moved to this country you didn't have much money. To pay the bills, your father worked at a gas station and was a loyal worker for the owner. When the owner retired he sold the gas station to your father. You grew up helping out at the station, selling snacks, pumping gas, and working on cars in the shop. After school you helped run the gas station and every night you returned home to your apartment.

As time passed your father would get more and more stressed out. He was in some money trouble due to increased competition and higher taxes. To make matters worse, your father was having a lot of trouble getting business loans from the nearby banks. Your father cut back on services at the gas station to save money. Eventually the business failed and he had to declare bankruptcy. To make matters worse, the land was now contaminated and needed an expensive cleanup

The gas station closed just around the time you went away to college. It was tough to leave all the memories, but it was good to know your father was doing well at his new job at an auto repair shop.

Eight years later you are walking down your street. You walk past the old lot where your family gas station once stood. A chain link fence now sits in front of the property and you peer through it to see that tall weeds and grass have emerged from the old crumbling pavement. It appears someone is using the lot for a dumping ground because you see a pile of old car parts building up against the corner of the fence.

The lot has become a brownfield, which is an abandoned lot that is contaminated with hazardous substances such as Petroleum, Lead, and Mercury. You remember the underground gasoline storage tank was leaking, and that it could be petroleum that is contaminating the soil. It must be cleaned before the land can be used.

After speaking with your father you learn that the city is still trying to get him to pay for repairing the soil. It is even harder because no investors want to buy land that will require an expensive cleanup before they can develop the land. The result is that land just sits there for years.

Later on you meet up with an old friend you grew up with who has been working with the community association. His group is looking to build a new youth recreation center and considering the old gas station as a site. That would be a good use for it. But your friend's smile turns to a frown as he confirms your suspicion. “Not only is the site a brownfield now, but a private trash management company is using it as a dumping ground,” he says, “the city seems to just be turning away from all this, it is hard to get them to respond, they are only interested if we can pay for the cleanup.”

That night you make a decision to help you friend. You know it's going to take some learning but you are determined to make a difference and reclaim the land your family once owned.

In many urban areas there are efforts to reclaim vacant lots for the good of the community. Like the story you read above there are many complicated processes that are required to turn vacant lots into functioning properties. The process often requires local politicians and the community to take a stand. The **Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI)**, a community based organization dedicated to rebuilding vacant lots into housing, took on such a case in the 1980's.

In the DSNI story, the problem started when community members noticed illegal dumping in lots near their homes. The group called a community meeting and residents shared numerous stories about illegal dumping and the poor state of their environment. Even the Mayor Ray Flynn showed up and pledged support for the rebuilding of the vacant lots.

After they got the Mayor to clean up the major items of trash and the abandoned cars, the DSNI set out to further assess the human source of pollution in the neighborhood. They targeted waste transfer stations that operated illegally by dumping in the vacant lots.

The operations of the waste stations were so foul, nearby residents couldn't open their windows. Kids were getting sick from the odor and one child was hospitalized with an infection after playing near the waste lots. DSNI identified the AFL disposal company, which was owned by a man who lived outside the city.

DSNI learned that the city had known about the illegal operations and charged him with fines. Still, the company was making a profit so they paid the fines and kept dumping.

In a direct action, the DSNI members decided to block the company gates until police ordered them to move. They then planned to march to the AFL site, spreading the word and calling for an end to the dumping. The event rallied over a hundred people and got major press coverage. People again took the microphone to share their horror stories of the trash. They carried signs reading "Don't Bury Us Alive," and "We Want a Healthy Community."

A few days later Mayor Flynn went to the gates of the company where he put a padlock on them. Flynn said he would stand behind the community in stopping further dumping. When the padlock was cut, the mayor ordered police guards, and the offending company was forced to stop illegal dumping.

For community members, fighting to redevelop vacant lots can lead to conflict. People feared that the properties would be bought by investors, who would sell the land at unaffordable prices. Instead, the community built fair housing properties on the lots. By keeping the decisions and contracting mostly local, they helped minimize the price. By 1993, DSNI had redeveloped numerous vacant lots into gardens, small parks, and a large housing area.

When thinking the beginning of the Dudley Square Neighborhood Initiative, consider how they chose what sites to defend, where they wanted to demonstrate and who they targeted with their campaigns. The community group had:

- Identified the problem : vacant lots and dumping lots
- Figured out responsible parties: AFL and other companies
- Diagnosed the potential health impacts: Odors, vermin, and a hospitalized child
- Gathered community partners to take action: Worked with community members, government officials and other non-profits.
- They also made sure to get attention from the press.

The effort required more than money, organizing and education skills to inform the community and bring people to meetings. By coming together, they could enact their power. Today, DSNI still works to promote the community and protect against new environmental threats.