

Abandoned gas stations increasingly get new life

New funding helps draw developers' interest after years of being disregarded

By Haya El Nasser
USA TODAY

The buildings occupy choice sites on corner lots at major intersections or along busy highways. Yet they've remained vacant for years.

They're the estimated 200,000 abandoned gas stations that dot urban neighborhoods and highways across the USA. Despite their prime locations, developers have largely ignored them. Many builders don't want to be responsible for costly environmental cleanups of often-contaminated sites, known as "brownfields," before they can be redeveloped.

But the old filling stations are increasingly appealing to developers and business owners. The federal government and states are freeing up money to clean and redevelop them. Now, banks in Hackensack, N.J., stores and parks in Indianapolis and apartments in Oakland occupy land where boarded-up stations once stood.

States and cities see the trend as a way to encourage development in urban areas at a time when they're trying to revitalize neighborhoods and slow sprawl in outlying areas. It's also a chance to get tax revenue from land that hasn't generated much in years.

"Every municipality in the country has an abandoned gas station," says Chris Bollwage, mayor of Elizabeth, N.J., and chairman of the brownfields task force of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. "It's not only an eyesore but it presents health and vandalism problems."

Many gas stations went out of business in the 1990s, when federal environmental laws began requiring expensive upgrades that mom and pop owners could not afford. Underground storage tanks must



By Leo Sorell for USA TODAY

Boarded up: Hackensack, N.J., Mayor Jack Zisa stands near an abandoned gas station.



Following fuel: Peggy Poore, owner of Uncommon Gardens flower shop, holds a hibiscus plant outside her building, a converted gas station. She bought it with loans and neighborhood grants.



Uncommon Gardens

Before flowers: Prior to Peggy Poore's purchase in 2001, this abandoned gas station in Minneapolis got little notice from developers. Poore converted it into a garden store.

be removed before anything else is built on the land. Worse, petroleum, oil and other contaminants sometimes have leaked into underground drinking water supplies.

"Nobody wants to touch them," says Daniele Cervino, vice president of Environmental Waste Management Associates, a New Jersey company that helps clients acquire grants to redevelop contaminated sites. "But most of them are not even heavily contaminated."

In 2000, the Environmental Protection Agency began offering grants to clean up old gas stations. In 2002, the federal Brownfields Revitalization Act expanded the definition of brownfields to include land contaminated by petroleum. It provided \$50 million for clean-up and redevelopment of abandoned gas stations. Several states also offer such grants.

"It's a new emphasis not only on trying to clean up old gas stations but clean them up and

use them," says Cliff Rothenstein, director of EPA's Office of Underground Storage Tanks.

Going residential

Old gas stations also are sparking the interest of economic development and housing agencies.

"There's public money for the redevelopment of these properties," Cervino says. "The growing trend is residential because we need housing. And once you say the buzzword 'housing,' there's federal housing money to do it."

Projects are proceeding in:

► **Ogden, Utah.** A site containing underground storage tanks was cleaned, and the zoning was changed from commercial to residential. A single-family home now occupies the site, says Dale Urban, manager of the state's underground storage tank program. Two other sites were redeveloped into offices and condominiums.

► **Washington state.** The

Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department is using a \$230,000 state grant to identify former gas stations. It's using an additional \$200,000 from the federal government to look at ways to redevelop them.

The main concern is health because much of Pierce County's drinking water comes from underground. Only about half of the 200 sites in the county have been cleaned up. The county is working with economic development agencies to redevelop them.

"When you look at the realm of properties that may have contamination, gas stations are relatively easier to deal with than the larger industrial sites," says Ryan Kellogg, an environmental health specialist for the health department.

► **Hackensack, N.J.** Mariner's Bank has just agreed to redevelop an old gas station site. Another bank is looking at a site across the street.

"Gas station sites are generally at high-visibility corners

where there's a lot of traffic," Mayor Jack Zisa says. "Quite a number of banking organizations look for exactly those types of locations."

The city used state funding to investigate about a dozen sites. Four are still available.

► **Jackson, Miss.** An old station was turned into a parking lot in the entertainment district. Another is an office and retail complex in an upscale neighborhood. The federal funding, Mayor Harvey Johnson says, has made it easier to attract developers.

'The perfect profile'

Peggy Poore of Minneapolis tackled an abandoned gas station without federal or state help. She wanted to open a garden store. "I needed something that had a certain amount of land, and gas stations became the perfect profile," Poore says.

She bought one a half-mile from her house. She says people thought she was crazy.

Tests showed no major contamination. But the hydraulic lifts where cars had been serviced had to be removed and the site cleaned. She added a second floor. The work took almost a year.

When she opened Uncommon Gardens in 2001, "the neighborhood went crazy," Poore says. "They came streaming in to tell me what a nice job I did. . . . These buildings are great and in fabulous locations."

Just ask ice cream moguls Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield. They opened their first store in 1978 in a dilapidated gas station in Burlington, Vt.