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Revitalized mill earns Brewer prestigious honor

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BREWER, Maine — There are empty hulls of once prosperous paper making and textile mills all over Maine and New England that were abandoned decades ago and left to deteriorate with no hope of a future.

City leaders did not want that to happen with the Eastern Fine Paper Co. mill, which closed in January 2004, especially since half-buried hazardous waste, leaky oil tanks and other environmental dangers were left behind.

City officials took quick action and applied for state and federal cleanup funds to mitigate the hazards and now the site is home to Cianbro's Eastern Manufacturing Facility, which employs more than 500 skilled workers.

"The Brownfields program and the support of the EPA, as well as the DEP, were critical to getting this project off the ground," Tanya Pereira, economic development specialist, said Wednesday by phone from New Orleans.

Pereira and D'arcy Main-Boyington, Brewer's economic development director, and others involved in the city's massive cleanup project went to Louisiana to attend the Brownfields 2009 conference and accept The Phoenix Award, a prestigious honor given to individuals and groups that "solve critical environmental challenges of transforming blighted and contaminated areas into productive new uses," the Phoenix Award Web site states.

The city took over ownership of the mill property in May 2004 and formed South Brewer Redevelopment LLC to assume responsibility for owning and redeveloping the site.

SBR and the city then successfully applied for more than \$2 million in Brownfields cleanup funds from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and state funds that were used to mitigate the hazards.

Brownfields are abandoned, idled or underused industrial or commercial facilities where expansion or redevelopment is complicated by environmental contamination.

The goal of the Brownfields program is to make sure chemicals and other hazardous materials are cleaned up so the facility does not pose a threat to the environment or nearby homes.

The hazardous waste probably would have scared most developers away — including Pittsfield-based Cianbro Corp., which has changed the former mill into a module manufacturing facility — had it not been for the city's efforts to attain cleanup funds from state and federal agencies.

The South Brewer site's contamination "was by far the biggest obstacle we had, as it is with any mill site anywhere," Main-Boyington has said.

Brewer's undertaking also is one of the largest industrial cleanup projects ever done in Maine. It is the only Maine cleanup project ever to be selected for The Phoenix award.

Tom Ruksznis, Cianbro project manager for site development; Ken Grey of the Portland law firm Pierce Atwood; Andy Hamilton and Heather Parent from the Eaton Peabody law firm of Bangor; and Rip Patten, Theresa Patten, Jud Newcomb, and Rick Vandenburg from Portland environmental consulting firm Credere Associates attended the New Orleans event.

Region 1 EPA grant officer Jim Byrne also sat at the Brewer table, Pereira said.

"He fully deserves to be front and center," she said of Byrne, who provided valuable guidance during the application process. "The funding was a huge piece in why we were able to get the project done."

"The entire team worked well together," she said. "It's a huge success story."

The Brewer-area group returned to Maine on Wednesday afternoon.