

# Brownfields Success Story

## Thornton Heights Common *South Portland, Maine*

The site of a former church and school campus in South Portland has been cleaned of contamination and redeveloped as affordable housing. With regional housing costs spiraling upward, a local non-profit housing authority, South Portland Housing and Development Corporation (SPHDC), is focused on creating opportunities for families in this former industrial neighborhood.

The city of South Portland, located on the southern end of Portland Harbor, has a history of industry that drove jobs and railroad expansion in the area. Thornton Heights was one of many tightknit neighborhoods that grew out of this era. The St. John's Evangelist church and school campus in South Portland, built in the 1960s, enlivened the neighborhood for over 50 years. After years of declining attendance, the diocese left the property in 2013, leaving vacant and unmaintained buildings that posed a risk to neighbors as they deteriorated. The development corporation bought the property in July 2018 and, soon after, partnered with the Greater Portland Council of Governments to evaluate potential cleanup alternatives for reuse. Asbestos, lead paint, low levels of polychlorinated biphenyls, and other wastes were found in the buildings and surrounding property.

### Priming the Property for Redevelopment

For nonprofit organizations to move a project forward, they need to leverage funding and get support from the community and the city or town. The development corporation held three neighborhood meetings to discuss the project, gather input, and engage the community. It also held smaller meetings with individuals surrounding the property and municipal leaders. The nonprofit learned that affordable housing and new commercial businesses along Main Street were seen as higher community priorities than saving the church.

SPHDC received an EPA Brownfields cleanup grant for \$500,000 in June 2019. They worked closely with Cumberland County and the Maine State Housing Authority to get Community Development Block Grant funding to help pay for cleanup and demolition of the buildings. The development corporation worked closely with Cumberland County on historic preservation elements of the project and was able to save the church bell, large hanging light fixtures, and dozens of stained-glass windows from the church. The development corporation hired specialists from the Catholic Diocese of Portland to remove and preserve the windows, and several smaller stained-glass windows were fashioned into artwork for the lobby of the new building.



Thornton Heights Common  
*(photo credit: SPHDC)*

**EPA Grant Recipient:**  
South Portland Housing and  
Development Corporation

**Grant Types:**  
Cleanup

**Current Use:**  
Mixed Use Commercial and  
Affordable Housing

**Former Uses:**  
Church and School Campus



Stained glass windows from old church  
*(photo credit: SPHDC)*



Commercial space view of the housing complex  
(photo credit: SPHDC)

**“Quite simply, this important housing and revitalization project would not have happened, or been possible, without the Brownfields program.”**

Brooks More  
Director of Development  
South Portland Housing and Development Corporation

The development corporation and its contractor worked closely with Maine Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and EPA on cleanup plans. Once plans were approved, the cleanup and demolition was completed in the Spring of 2020. It included removing some 830 cubic yards of asbestos, 2,000 tons of lead paint and building materials containing PCBs, 230 cubic yards of soil, six fuel oil tanks, and other regulated wastes from inside the former buildings.

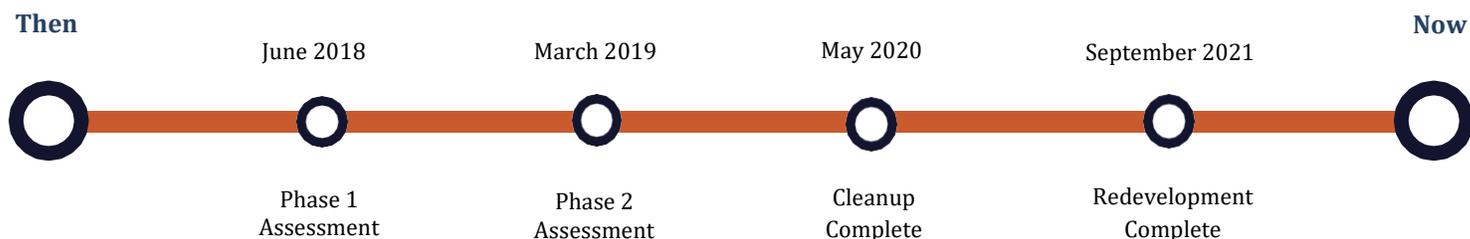
A tight timeline for the transfer and acquisition of the property required close coordination between the development corporation, its contractor, Maine DEP, and EPA to ensure the cleanup followed state regulations and grant money was spent by the time the EPA grant was closed. This coordinated effort led to the transfer of the property in June 2020, followed by groundbreaking in July.

**Funding Summary**

Greater Portland Council of Governments – Brownfields Assessment Grant	\$57,760
South Portland Housing Development Corporation – Brownfields Cleanup Grant	\$500,000
City of South Portland - Community Development Block Grant	\$300,000
South Portland Housing Development Corporation	\$15,000
Redevelopment Funds Leveraged by Brownfields Investment	\$11,580,000
<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$12,452,760</b>

**Today**

Thornton Heights Common is a mixed-use building with 42 new affordable apartments, 33 of which are subsidized and rent-restricted. The remaining nine apartments will be rented at below-market rates. The ground floor has 7,000 square feet of commercial space available for businesses, and the entire building has energy efficient utilities and fixtures and a rooftop solar array to provide clean energy. In addition, three lots will be used for single-family homes next to the existing older homes, creating a buffer for homeowners already living there. In 2022, the project was recognized as one of seven Notable Projects by the Maine Real Estate and Development Association.



**For more information:**

Visit the EPA Brownfields website at [www.epa.gov/brownfields](http://www.epa.gov/brownfields) or contact Jessica Dominguez at 617-918-1627 or [Dominguez.Jessica@epa.gov](mailto:Dominguez.Jessica@epa.gov)