City of Fairbury EPA Brownfields Grant
Former Fairbury Iron and Metal Site and Mill Dam Park
January 12, 2026
Meeting Summary
and
Response to Comments

The City of Fairbury hosted an Open House on the evening of January 12, 2026, to discuss the City's plans to submit an EPA Brownfields Cleanup Grant application and to share conceptual plans for cleanup and reuse of the former Fairbury Iron and Metal Site (FI&M or Site) locally known as "Beetley's". A meeting announcement was placed in the Fairbury Journal News on Wednesday, January 7, 2026, describing the meeting details and that copies of the draft grant application and draft Analysis of Brownfields Cleanup Alternatives (ABCA) were available for public viewing. Hard copies of the draft application and ABCA, along with a grant application fact sheet and conceptual redevelopment (Park) plans were made available at the meeting held at the City Council Chambers at 612 D Street at 5:30 PM.

A radio announcement on "Ol' Red and KBWE (regional radio stations) aired on Thursday, January 8th giving further information about the open house and the following story ran on News Channel Nebraska TV on Thursday, January 8th as well:

https://southeast.newschannelnebraska.com/story/53371635/fairbury-seeking-to-convert-contaminated-former-metalwork-site-into-public-park-property

Additional airtime was provided by radio stations referenced above on Friday, January 9, 2026 with social media postings on Saturday, January 10, 2026 and again on Monday, January 12, 2026 before the meeting.

A total of 13 attendees signed in for the meeting though a handful also came and went without signing in. Attendees included a mix of City representatives, residents and project partners. The Open House started with a brief overview of the grant opportunity, documented Site contamination, and conceptual plans for park development at the Site provided by Laura Bedlan, Fairbury Development Services Director and the City's consultant, Frank Uhlarik with Stantec. The meeting then continued with attendees reviewing park layout alternatives and amenities (both on handouts and poster boards), discussing pros/cons of alternatives and open informal questions and answers with City representatives and Stantec.

Aside from personal preferences on park alternatives, two overriding themes/concerns were expressed both by attendees and written comments/web postings regarding 1) whether and how safe park development could be given the site contamination and 2) what were the risks associated with development of a park in the flood plain and how would the City address contamination and the possibility of future flooding. Some direct verbal responses were provided in the Open House and through e-mail correspondence. The City's official response to the community's primary concerns is as follows:

1) Safe development associated with Site history and contamination.

While there are widespread and significant impacts related to metals, polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), the contamination appears largely restricted to shallow subsurface soils and groundwater along the perimeter of the site is only minimally impacted (not currently exceeding health-based standards). Given the site history of over a century of railroad operations, 70 years of scrap metal salvage operations and an adjoining former manufactured gas plant (FMGP) site, similar sites across the state and region have revealed much worse impacts. Safe development of the FI&M Site as a public park must, however, meet residential exposure standards so the approach to cleanup of the site ensures all pathways of exposure to contaminants are eliminated by complete removal of the hazard or constructing engineered barriers (clean soil covers and/or hard surface such as pavements) as an added precaution against exposure to residual soil contamination at the site. The City has proposed to remove all remaining debris and the most highly impacted soils or "hot spots" where the heaviest concentrations of soil contamination have been documented through two rounds of investigation at the site with oversight by the Nebraska Department of Water, Energy and Environment (NDWEE). As discussed in the draft ABCA, over-excavation and removal of the entirety of impacted soil at the Site is not warranted nor cost effective, and the selected option (Alternative C – consisting of limited "hot-spot" debris and soil removal, covering/capping residual soil impacts with a clean soil clay cap and pavement where required for park development) will address any remaining exposure scenarios.

Additional groundwater and soil investigation is underway through an EPA Brownfields grant administered by our project partner, Southeast Nebraska Development District (SENDD), to fill in minor data gaps including investigation of groundwater impacts in one isolated area of the site exhibiting high levels of soil contamination at depth, as well as to better quantify the amount of soil that will ultimately be required for removal. The grant application and cost estimates for the proposed cleanup plan fully address all likely costs anticipated for safe cleanup of the Site ahead of Park construction, including filing a deed restriction and environmental covenant for the site and preparation of a Material Management Plan (MMP). The MMP will guide future maintenance activities at the site to ensure City staff and contractors potentially doing work on or under the engineered barriers are properly informed of procedures associated with handling impacted soil potentially encountered below the barriers.

2) Development of a park in the floodplain.

Several comments (in person and through emails/web postings) questioned why a park would be developed in a site prone to flooding.

The 2015 flood event referenced by commentors was a 500-year event which is obviously a rarity but still remotely possible (one in 500 chance every year). Except for a restroom and picnic shelter, however, no other permanent structures are envisioned, and the bulk of the features will be inexpensive and easily replaced/replanted at minimal cost such as native meadows, pollinator strips, trails, “natural playground” equipment, etc. Other items such as picnic tables, bike racks, while likely secured, could be removed ahead of any flood warnings if there was even a concern that they would be impacted. To the point of the clay cap being affected, that is a viable concern under the right conditions, but with appropriate contouring and stabilizing agents (such as pozzolanic additives) the cap can be better protected, however, any topsoil/mulch, etc. could be vulnerable. Hard surfaces like the park access drive, parking and sidewalks will be able to largely withstand flooding.

The EPA Brownfields program recognizes the limitations of floodplain development, but in doing so, it acknowledges there is limited commercial development that makes sense in these areas and encourages consideration of open space and park amenities through the grant program. Historically – a lot of Brownfields were born in the flood plains where industrial sites were sited near water ways, railroads, etc. by necessity. So, the Fairbury Iron and Metal site certainly won’t be the first Brownfields site to be turned into open space. Here is an article that discusses this with examples of successful projects:
https://www.cclr.org/cclr-news/turning-brownfields-into-parks-nature-based-solutions-and-community-resilience.

There will be extensive coordination required with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) regarding both encroachment upon the Little Blue River Levee and development within the floodplain (in any fashion – even including low impact park operations with a limited footprint). While the City and consulting team are aware of restrictions and criteria for such development, public perceptions and concerns have led the City and Stantec to relook at the soil excavation and cap/fill conceptually discussed in the draft ABCA shared at the Open House. We have revised our approach to better focus on ensuring final grades optimize available space for flood capacity, elevate areas where permanent structures are to be installed and increase resiliency of the Site to flood hazards. This resulted in a slight increase in the ABCA cost estimate for Alternative C by roughly $170,000 but making for an improved grant application and project with increased resiliency to flood hazards.

The City of Fairbury will continue to seek public input on plans for the site, including, but not limited to additional park visioning sessions tentatively planned for the Spring of 2026 ahead of a hopeful successful EPA Brownfield Cleanup Grant award anticipated by June of 2026. Additional questions or comments may be directed to Laura Bedlan, Development Services Director at 402-729-5261, ext. 2, or email lbedland@fairburyne.org.