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From a dump to a driving range to a destination – if only

Half a century later, the MPCA stands in the way of an exciting redevelopment opportunity in Burnsville.

By Richard McGowan

APRIL 11, 2025 AT 5:29PM



Richard McGowan and his father, Michael, walk across their property in 2023. (Courtesy of Richard McGowan)

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One of my favorite memories of growing up is walking with my dad on our land in Burnsville, listening to him describe his vision for what the property could become. Even as a child, I understood that nothing could happen overnight; in decades past, the land had served as Freeway Landfill and Freeway Dump, and getting it ready for development would take some time.

But Dad took pride in our family’s stewardship of the property. He and his father before him had followed the environmental rules, stayed current on best practices and paid their taxes – all while delivering a vital public service. He had faith that we’d be able to see his

dreams for the reuse of the land become reality someday.

Now, despite the landfill and dump being closed for over 50 years, that someday has been pushed further and further into the future. Sometimes I think that if the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency has its way, “someday” will turn into “never” — at least as far as our family is concerned. The agency and its representatives have been so dismissive and uncooperative toward us, you’d think they held some kind of a grudge against us personally.

But the MPCA’s intransigence isn’t hurting just our family alone. It is standing in the way of a development proposal that would be a clear asset to our entire community and beyond. Burnsville’s mayor and City Council have gone on record supporting it. So have the Burnsville Chamber of Commerce and the city’s Convention and Visitors Bureau. The project design actually improves the site in terms of capping the dump, managing water and providing continuous monitoring.

On the parcel that once was the Freeway Dump and now serves as a driving range for a handful of golfers at a time, we propose to build a year-round Suite Shots golf and entertainment facility and an indoor-outdoor pickleball complex. Given the recent clamor in Burnsville for more pickleball courts, we could probably make a viable commercial enterprise just catering to that sport alone. But if you’ve ever been to a Suite Shots facility, you know the appeal of its all-weather golf, variety of sports simulators, family-friendly dining and large community gathering spaces — which Burnsville sorely needs.

This complex would greet traffic coming into Burnsville on southbound Interstate 35W. It would draw visitors from all over the Twin Cities metro and beyond. It would start contributing to the Burnsville tax base in our lifetime, which is much more than the golf driving range is doing now.

So why is the MPCA standing in the way of this project? The agency alleges that the waste stored in the dump more than half a century ago still poses a theoretical threat to groundwater. While there are countless studies from MPCA consultants and our current team of four engineering and environmental firms saying there is no risk to human health and the environment, the MPCA contends something could happen sometime down the road. Under that faulty rationale, CHS Field or the Upper Landing in St. Paul would never have become what they are today. Huntington Bank Stadium wouldn’t have, either, and neither would dozens and dozens of brownfield developments around the metro area.

To ease those concerns, our project includes plans to place a new cap on the waste, install vapor barriers, capture and treat runoff and monitor groundwater for any sign of contaminant spread — contaminants that have undergone a half century of dilution, essentially rendering them benign at this point. And we would do it at no cost to the public.

The MPCA, for its part, wants to dig up the entire site and move the waste — a process that would cost taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars and leave the property a giant, undevelopable hole.

Our family has commissioned studies from four different engineering firms with demonstrated expertise in brownfield development, and every one of them has endorsed our project as safe, doable and well within the scope of similar projects.

You don’t have to look very far to find examples of brownfields that have been approved for a return to public use and now serve beneficial and profitable functions as sports venues and retail establishments. Even as health clinics. That such projects are routinely approved while our land remains in limbo is the kind of injustice that earns regulators the contempt of business leaders, taxpayers and voters.

The MPCA is behaving as though its job is to punish a business trying to serve the public good by helping a growing community deal with its waste problem according to the best practices of the day. It’s been 56 years since the Freeway Dump stopped accepting waste. We have waited long enough.

Burnsville and the region could be benefiting from an attractive, profitable development to greet visitors entering the city. Not someday, but now.

Richard McGowan is the third-generation operator of Freeway Properties.

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