



Delta Redevelopment Institute

PRESS RELEASE

MEDIA CONTACT:

Delta REDI Media Coordinator Katie Coleman
312-554-0900 x18 or 847-828-0205
kcoleman@delta-institute.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Tuesday, May 17, 2011

ON-THE-GROUND PROGRAM CONTACT:

City of Elkhart Brownfield Coordinator Denny Correll
(574) 291-5471

**WAGNER STREET TREE FARM TO BOOST LOCAL INDUSTRY, HELP PRODUCE GREENER RVs
*Non-Profits, Government, and Business Work Together to Launch Project***

ELKHART, Ind. – Transforming a vacant former industrial site into a profitable green space isn't easy, but a team of committed representatives from non-profit, government and industry are working together to make it happen on the corner of Wagner and Sixth streets in the City of Elkhart. This week, volunteers will work there to plant approximately 3,300 poplar trees (and another 2,200 nursery trees on a second site in New Paris, which will eventually provide an affordable, sustainable source of wood for local manufacturers.

“Turning liabilities into assets is the goal of our brownfields assistance program,” says Chris Slattery, director of the Delta Redevelopment Institute (Delta REDI), whose program is funded by a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. “Our specialty is expanding the capacity of local sustainability champions to demonstrate reuse of vacant land that is both economically and environmentally beneficial.”

The Wagner Street tree farm project demonstrates this principle in action. The site, owned by the City of Elkhart, has been vacant for more than 50 years, is considered a local eyesore, and has soil that is only suitable for a commercial or industrial reuse. The poplar trees will eventually provide not only a scenic upgrade but also further remediation of the soil and a sustainable source of plywood supply. The idea came from Genesis Products, Inc., a local wood product manufacturer that specializes in lightweight cabinets and finishes for the recreational vehicle (RV) industry. Genesis is currently importing its higher-end hybrid poplar plywood from Italy and Asia. Purchasing locally cuts down on the carbon emissions related to transportation and creates other economic development benefits in the form of lower transportation costs.

Elkhart's new tree farm and hybrid poplar nursery will be planted May 17-19 on the 3.5-acre Wagner Street property. A 1.5-acre portion of a private farm in New Paris will be planted next

week. The planting will include 2,175 young trees as well as 4,356 nursery cuttings. Within three years, these farms will produce 69,000 new nursery cuttings – enough to seed 95 acres of additional tree farm property. According to Slattery, that presents an exciting opportunity to take this project to scale and jumpstart a new local industry. Currently, Elkhart County alone imports 20 million wood panels annually.

Poplar trees are desirable from both an industry and environmental perspective. First, they grow fast. Most trees take 20-30 years to become harvestable, but poplars are ready in just 10 years (or less depending on conditions). That means manufacturers get their product sooner, and the community receives more “ecosystem services” – prevention of soil erosion, removal of contaminants, and carbon sequestration. Second, poplar trees are lightweight. That makes them easier for manufacturers to harvest and process, and consumers can keep down fuel consumption with a lighter vehicle.

Laura Coyne, planner with Elkhart County’s Redevelopment Commission, says: “This was the perfect synergy of civic, business, and non-profit partners coming together. We didn’t spend a dime of City or County funds to get this project off the ground.”

Coyne explained that costs were shared among the partners:

- the Wagner Street property was already owned by the City and selected for the project by the City’s Brownfields Coordinator, Denny Correll;
- the trees were provided at no cost by Genesis Products, Inc., a local wood products manufacturer that supplies the RV industry;
- the initial site preparation and maintenance is being conducted by the City of Elkhart and Faith Mission, a local non-profit located near the Wagner site; and
- planning and technical assistance, including recruitment of a forestry consultant with expertise in domestic hybrid poplar cultivation, was coordinated by the Delta Redevelopment Institute with funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of Brownfields and Land Revitalization.

Media are welcome to visit the property and view the planting process on May 17, 18, or 19. Please coordinate your visit with City of Elkhart Brownfield Coordinator Denny Correll at (574) 291-5471 or contact Delta REDI’s media contact, Katie Coleman, at (312) 554-0900 x18.

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About the Delta Institute. Since 1998, the Delta Institute has successfully demonstrated that a healthy economy and a healthy environment can go hand in hand. Delta fills funding gaps and implements innovative programs that promote a healthy environment, a strong economy and thriving, vibrant communities – blazing a trail for the green economy so others can successfully follow. For more information, visit www.delta-institute.org or call (312) 554-0900.