Students present plans for use of brownfields

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A group of Lafayette students wants to protect the community from illness as well as offer places for young adults to go on the weekend.

They hope to do so through Our Town, a Purdue's Discovery Park Learning Center program sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency. The program, in its first year in Lafayette, is dedicated to teaching students nationwide about the effects of brownfields.

"Brownfields are essentially unused sites in a community that have the potential to contaminate, such as an old dry cleaning building," said Dan Somerville, program coordinator from Purdue.

Wednesday at Jefferson High School, student members of Our Town from Lafayette's Edgelea Elementary, Jefferson High School, Glen Acres Elementary, and Tecumseh Middle School presented their research on brownfields to parents, teachers and community leaders and proposed plans for the problem sites.

"We're here today because brownfields are a problem," said Somerville. "They can cause illness, they are eyesores in the community and they do not generate money."

Before the presentations, Lafayette Mayor Tony Roswariski praised the students for their research.

"Brownfields have been a problem for a long time," Roswariski said. "I am so glad that you all have taken time to do this, I feel good knowing that the future is in your hands."

The presentations began with fifth-graders from Glen Acres. They were responsible for finding the sites that the older students researched.

"We found many sites that we considered brownfields, including a vacant gas station on U.S. 52," said Courtney Chumley.

The students focused on several brownfields, including a site at 2450 Sagamore Parkway South.

"The building at this site was once used to make parts like breaker boxes and car parts," said Hope Floyd, a student at Jefferson High School.

Jefferson students identified contaminate such as lead, mercury and diesel in each of the brownfield sites.

Another group of Jeff students focused on 900 Ferry St., the site of an old gas station.

"At first I wasn't very excited about the project," said Amanda Melville. "But once we got to the site, we saw the possibilities of what this could be."

The students came to the conclusion that the site would make a safe and educational hangout spot for Lafayette youth. With the help of PowerPoint presentations and pictures, the students helped the audience visualize their plans.

"We decided to make a plan that would turn this site into an art and music venue. There could be live music as well a place for youth to display and show their art," said Nick Chamberlain, also a Jefferson student.

State Rep. Joe Micon, D-West Lafayette, gave the students encouraging words after their presentations.

"If I'd closed my eyes I would have thought I was in a council meeting," he said. "These are concerns that government officials have always had. I am very excited about the information we can now take into the future."

Overall, the consensus from students was that the sites are a problem and they would like to see a change.

"If we fix these sites," said Brian Hawn, a Jeff student, "it will offer more for the community to do, lower health risks and bring in more jobs."