

# Shovel-Ready Sites For The Speed Of Business

*Communities with pre-certified sites are prepared for companies to quickly relocate or expand to their region and begin building immediately.*

February 16, 2023



**By Donna Clapp**

*From the January / February 2023 Issue*

**W**hen it comes to doing business, you really can't overstate the importance of speed. Society sets the speed, so to stay relevant, business must follow suit or lose competitive advantage. This is true of all corporate decision-making, and site selection for expansion or relocation is no exception.

“Shovel-ready sites are becoming increasingly attractive to businesses that are seeking to expand into new areas,” says Jeff Pappas, Senior Managing Director, Newmark Group, Inc.

“Cities all across the country are in fierce competition to attract new businesses, expansions, and relocations because of the jobs and tax base that come with them. A bonus is that the site gives states what they need to provide; valuable savings to partners and providing job opportunities for local residents.”

While economic developers in different municipalities may call these sites shovel-ready, certified, or another moniker, most are referring to sites that fulfill some specific parameters making them perfect for corporations looking to hit the ground running the moment they sign off on a location. These commercial and industrial zoned sites typically have all of the permitting, environmental studies, surveying, title work, soil analysis, public utility infrastructure engineering, and logistics infrastructure completed. In addition, the location is classically under the legal control of the local municipality or economic development office.

The good news is that this precertification is an economic development practice that's becoming more common, so for site selectors looking to choose a site and begin building immediately, here are some locations where shovel-ready sites are available.

### **Tennessee's Rigorous Certification For Shovel-Ready Sites**

The Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development (TNECD) started precertifying sites more than a decade ago with its Select Tennessee Site Certification program, which targets certifying sites in rural communities.

“The Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development has been in partnership with Austin Consulting, a site selection consulting firm, since the beginning of the program to ensure that the program meets minimum standards for site selection,” says Kirby Lewis-Gill, Site Development Director, Community and Rural Development for TNECD, “and we have held firmly to that line while also ensuring that those standards are achievable for most rural Tennessee counties.”

Since the inception of the program, Tennessee has landed 33 projects on certified sites, amounting to over 9,000 jobs and more than \$3.5 billion in capital investment.

The introduction of the Property Evaluation Program in 2015, and the Site Development Grant program in 2016 have been instrumental to the certification program's success as these help meet community needs in terms of site identification and infrastructure development. By providing education, technical assistance, and funding, the state helps level the playing field so that rural communities can compete. Tennessee has awarded 143 Site Development Grants totaling more than \$56 million to help communities prepare industrial sites.

Tennessee's shovel-ready program looks at six categories: Ownership (landowner info, property deed, title search, etc.); Property (acreage, pricing, surrounding uses, topography, flood plain, zoning, etc.); Transportation (road, rail, air, etc.); Utility (electric, gas, water, wastewater, telecom); Community Information (permitting, tax structure, etc.); and Environmental (environmental site assessments, water features, endangered species, cultural resources, etc.).

“I think there’s a really important distinction to be made between a certified site program that is mainly a marketing program as opposed to a program that actually prepares property in a way that would be ready for investment,” says Kendrick Curtis, Assistant Executive Director of the Middle Tennessee Industrial Development Association, and one of the founders of the original certification program.

“One thing that makes our program unique is Select Tennessee Site Certification is not a checklist of items. Our consultants through Austin Consulting are the ones who make the ultimate decision on-site certification. Because they are active in the site selection marketplace, they know what their customers are looking for,” says Lewis-Gill.

The program’s success speaks for itself, as three rural certified sites landed large projects creating more than 400 jobs in the past six months: Electrolyte manufacturer, Duksan Electera chose Shelbyville, TN for its first North American manufacturing facility (100 jobs); Lithium hydroxide processor, Piedmont Lithium is locating a new processing, refining, and manufacturing facility in the North Etowah Industrial Park certified site (101 jobs); and Georgia-Pacific’s Dixie® manufacturing site will create 220 new jobs in Madison County.

“We are proud that Georgia-Pacific found its home in Jackson on one of our state’s Select Tennessee Certified Sites, and we thank our partners at CSX who helped to make this site ready for this significant economic development win,” said TNECD Commissioner Stuart McWhorter at the official announcement.

## **Iowa’s Certified Sites: Past \$1.3 Billion In Investments**

Iowa launched its Certified Sites Program in 2012 to address a lack of project-ready industrial sites. The program is led by an independent, third-party with certification through nationally recognized site selection firm Quest Site Solutions. From the beginning, economic developers in Iowa and the consultants at Quest developed a rigorous certification process, designed to consider national site location standards, as well as Iowa’s natural assets, and the needs of the state’s targeted industry sectors of advanced manufacturing, biosciences, and finance and insurance.

“We basically de-risk the process, which is important when you are trying to move at the speed of business,” says Debi Durham, Executive Director of the Iowa Economic Development Authority, and the Iowa Finance Authority. “You certainly don’t want any surprises during the process. So, when we launched our site certification program back in 2012, we were sending a message to new investors that Iowa could indeed move at the speed of business. We decided we were going to make sure we have a business climate in which our businesses can prosper, and our communities can be development ready. That’s been our value proposition from the beginning, and that’s not changed. It’s only been enhanced over the years.”

Over the years, Iowa has attracted more than \$1.3 billion in capital investment due to availability of shovel-ready sites.

One of this rural state's advantages are the huge tracks of undeveloped land available, providing the Iowa team with not one but two "mega sites." To qualify as a mega site the location must be comprised of at least 1,000 acres. Recently certified and developed in partnership with MidAmerican Energy, Mills Crossing is the second mega site in the state and it joins 28 other certified sites across Iowa.

"Having certified sites gives us a tremendous advantage in attracting new development opportunities," said Durham, at the unveiling of the site in August 2022. "The mega site is uniquely suited to companies requiring substantial infrastructure, such as automotive manufacturers and other large-scale industries, making Iowa an attractive location for these larger projects."

Speed to market is one of the reasons Amazon chose a certified site in the city of Bondurant for their 645,000-square foot robotic sorting center, bringing 1,000 new fulfillment jobs, and solidifying the region as a logistics hub in central Iowa.

"We are excited that Amazon is establishing a highly advanced robotic sortation center in Bondurant. Amazon's project in Iowa further demonstrates the region is a logistics and technology hub and adds to the presence of other major tech companies with operations here," said Jay Byers, CEO of the Greater Des Moines Partnership. "This project shows that Iowa continues to be recognized nationally as a top place for businesses to relocate or expand."

## **Virginia: Home To One Of The Largest East Coast Mega Sites**

Virginia is ready for business with its Business Ready Sites Program, which is characterized by two components. The first is site characterization, which assesses and designates a site's level of development, and the second is site development to ensure locations are shovel ready for business.

For 2023, Governor Glenn Youngkin announced \$90 million in Virginia Business Ready Sites Program development grants for 21 sites across the Commonwealth. The grants are administered by the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, to identify, assess, and improve the readiness of industrial sites with at least 100 contiguous, developable acres or 50 acres in the western part of the Commonwealth. Localities can apply for grants to assist with the costs associated with the initial assessment and the development required to increase a site's current designation level.

The Virginia Business Ready Sites Program was developed by a team of state, regional, and local stakeholders including the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, Virginia Department of

Environmental Quality, railroad representatives, utility representatives, civil engineers, and other government, business, and industry representatives.

“The Virginia Business Ready Sites Program is a powerful economic development tool that gives localities the resources they need to assess and develop sites for economic development opportunities,” former Secretary of Commerce and Trade Brian Ball has said, who served until January 2022. “These projects across the Commonwealth will strengthen Virginia’s business portfolio and our overall competitiveness.”

In particular, the state has put over \$200 million of investment in infrastructure development at one of the largest mega sites on the East Coast, Berry Hill, VA. This mega site’s infrastructure investments include rail, natural gas, terabyte speed broadband, electric, water, sewer, permitting, and zoning. The central Mid-Atlantic location is accessible to two-thirds of the U.S. industrial base within a one-day drive with direct access to international trade from Virginia’s port, the deepest on the East Coast.

[Check out all the latest shovel-ready sites news related to economic development, corporate relocation and expansion, and site selection.](#)

