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\$30 Million Stalled in Albany Heads to Brownfields Projects

By ANTHONY DePALMA

After a lengthy deadlock, Gov. George E. Pataki and the leaders of both houses of the State Legislature agreed yesterday in Albany to release \$30 million that had been set aside to clean up thousands of acres of brownfields, the polluted industrial land in New York State.

Mr. Pataki; Joseph Bruno, the majority leader of the Senate; and Sheldon Silver, the speaker of the Assembly, signed a memorandum of agreement that makes the \$30 million available for grants to communities and nonprofit groups in neighborhoods where brownfields are concentrated.

A total of 52 projects across the state were selected for an initial round of assistance totaling more than \$9 million. Among them were 10 projects in New York City totaling nearly \$2 million.

Groups that had been waiting for 18 months to find out whether their projects could move ahead were relieved to know that the funds would finally be available. Among them are Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, a group that is to receive \$394,000 to plan for the reuse of 800 acres of contaminated land along the Bronx River near Hunts Point. The director of the group, Ajamu Kitwana, said it would take a few months to draw up a redevelopment plan to show to local residents. The brownfields program was established in October 2003, when Mr. Pataki signed into law a bill that also put more money into the state's Superfund, which is used to clean up the state's worst toxic sites. The past two state budgets have each included \$15 million for brownfields cleanup, but none of the money could be released until the leaders signed the memorandum of understanding.

Officials involved in negotiating the agreement said the delay was caused by sharp differences over how the money should be allocated. The leaders of the Democratic-controlled Assembly wanted a free hand in distributing the grant money, while Mr. Pataki and Republicans in the Senate wanted a competitive process that would prevent the funds from being used as "a sort of slush fund" for legislators.

There were also disagreements over how much of the money set aside for brownfields cleanup should go to pay state employees running the program. The agreement allocates \$2 million a year for salaries.

An additional \$15 million for brownfields that the Senate had tried to delete from the governor's budget proposal is expected to be restored. But since the agreement signed yesterday covers only the existing \$30 million, another memorandum of understanding will have to be signed before additional funds can be released.

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