

Vacant Property:  
Strategies for Redevelopment in the Contemporary City  
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## What are vacant properties?

Vacant properties can be defined as any residential, commercial, or industrial buildings or lots that pose a threat to public safety and thus meet the definition of a public nuisance. The National Vacant Properties Campaign<sup>1</sup> defines vacant property as vacant residential, commercial, and industrial buildings and lots that pose a threat to public safety or that exhibit traits of neglect on the behalf of the property owner. Vacant properties can range from abandoned, boarded-up buildings to unused vacant lots that attract trash and debris. The land use of such properties can range from under-performing commercial properties known as greyfields (such as under-leased shopping malls and strip commercial properties) to contaminated industrial properties commonly referred to as brownfields.<sup>2</sup> Vacant properties are detrimental to cities and burden communities in a myriad of ways. Fundamentally, they are a costly and wasteful. The resources that compose the properties themselves, including the infrastructure, and in many cases, the abandoned buildings that occupy the lots, put a strain on both the systems and the community that surrounds them.

### Vacant Lot Types + Characteristics

- Gap - vacant lots are single gap lots that are commonly found in residential neighborhoods;
- Consecutive - vacant lots are two or more consecutive lots;
- Blocks - Vacant Blocks offer unique opportunities for large scale;
- Corridor[s] - are vacant lots that run along urban and suburban corridors.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Vacant Properties Campaign is a project of Smart Growth America (SGA), Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech, and the Genesee Institute.

<sup>2</sup> National Vacant Properties Campaign. (n.d.). *National Vacant Properties Campaign*. Retrieved March 18, 2011, from <http://www.vacantproperties.org>

## How Are Vacant Properties a Detriment to Communities?

Vacant and Abandoned properties pose a threat to the environmental health, potential housing and community development, fiscal and economic opportunities, and public safety within cities and communities. Declining property values, environmental degradation, and strain on public service departments, such as police and fire, places a burden on the city as a whole making it very difficult to attract private and public reinvestments and making revitalization strategies extraordinarily difficult to implement.<sup>3</sup> Maintaining these vacant and abandoned properties and surplus public infrastructure are substantial setbacks to an already volatile tax base in most cities.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, these conditions are contagious and without proper strategic intervention, may spread from block to block and even outward toward the city limits.<sup>5</sup> The most obvious victims of these property conditions are the neighboring property owners.

## What are the benefits to reclaiming vacant properties?

### Environmental + Health

Remediating contaminated brownfield sites may be the best-known environmental benefit to reclaiming vacant properties. While this may hold true at the scale of one parcel, the problem is much larger in scope. At the regional scale, reclaiming vacant properties can dramatically improve the overall air, water and land quality.

Reinvestment in communities that have been left behind for greenfield development and exhibit symptoms of vacancy and decline present the opportunity for reclamation. These places can potentially contribute to improving the environment and public health of a city. Additionally, the reuse abandoned buildings and public

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Rybczynski, Witold and Peter D. Linneman. 1999. "How to Save Our Shrinking Cities." *Public Interest*. Spring, pp. 30-44

<sup>4</sup> Shilling, Joseph, 2006. "Blueprint Buffalo - Using Green Infrastructure to Reclaim America's Shrinking Cities." Metropolitan Institute, Virginia Polytechnic University, Alexandria, pp. 149-159

<sup>5</sup> Spelman, William. 1993. "Abandoned Buildings: Magnets for Crime?" *Journal of Criminal Justice*. Vol. 21, pp 481-495.

infrastructure results in less investment in new infrastructure and new building footprints that would be constructed elsewhere, and in turn, reduce an increase in energy consumption. The reuse of abandoned buildings can also curb the amount of demolition waste incurred in new construction.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the construction of new roads, parking lots and other impervious surfaces would only exacerbate the myriad of issues surrounding water quality.

A reduction in auto-dependence is yet another environmental and public health benefit of reclaiming vacant properties. The reuse of existing vacant properties – especially if they are in close to proximity to urban cores – as opposed to new development can decrease a city's auto-dependence through infill housing.

### **Housing, Community Development + Economic Opportunity**

Existing vacant building and land inventory – both commercial and residential - within communities is an asset that can be used to meet demand for housing and commercial growth. If these efforts are strategically managed at the municipal level, the redevelopment of vacant properties can revitalize dormant neighborhoods. This type of large-scale strategy for redeveloping vacant properties is integral to community developers. The reclamation of vacant properties can also be a catalyst for new housing markets as well as a mixing of uses that can potentially provide opportunities to existing and future residents as well as business owners.

#### **i. Housing + Community Development**

1. Vacant properties are viral in nature. If there are only a few vacant properties or abandoned buildings, it is likely that they will catalyze disinvestment to surrounding blocks and neighborhoods.<sup>7</sup> Without intervention surrounding properties are more likely to become “blighted”.
2. Redeveloped vacant properties, whether permanent, temporary, or seasonal in use, preserve a neighborhood's existing resources and investments. Certain redevelopment strategies for vacant lots, which will be discussed in detail in the later sections of this

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<sup>6</sup> According to the National Vacant Properties Campaign, “demolition waste...contributes over 65 million tons of material to our nation's landfills and solid waste management facilities per year.

<sup>7</sup> Spelman, William. 1993. “Abandoned Buildings: Magnets for Crime?” *Journal of Criminal Justice*. Vol. 21, pp 481-495.

paper, can facilitate an interesting mix of uses and infrastructures that generate opportunity for communities.

3. Redeveloping vacant properties can support once vibrant core urban neighborhoods. Creative strategies for this type of redevelopment are especially relevant given the economic climate and housing market. We can begin to think of community redevelopment strategies as an effort to transition from the development of consumptive space to productive space.
4. The social fabric of cities and neighborhoods can be strengthened through collaborative efforts between political leaders and citizens. In following sections, civic engagement will be explored in greater detail with a focus on strategy and implementation.

### **Public Safety + Public Nuisance[s]**

George Kelling and James Q. Wilson posit the “The Broken Window Theory”. “The Broken Window Theory” holds that “If the first broken window in a building is not repaired, then people who like breaking windows will assume that no one cares about the building and more windows will be broken...The disorder escalates, possibly to serious crime.”<sup>8</sup>

Vacant properties can potentially become public safety hazards when city resources are overwhelmed and police and fire departments are unable to provide maintenance services. While the monetary costs associated with vacant properties is largely unknown, fire and police departments, along with building inspectors and code enforcement units, bear most of this responsibility. Unfortunately, the burden on municipal services can often lead to neglect that can result in crime, fire hazards, or illegal dumping all of which are a public safety hazard. Statistics correlating crime rates with vacant properties are convincing. For example, when the City of Richmond, VA conducted an analysis of city-wide crime data testing all the economic and demographic variables, vacant and abandoned properties returned the highest

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<sup>8</sup> DeLong, J. (n.d.). Dr. George Kelling's Broken Window Theory. *HR CLEAN :: Litter Prevention, Recycling, and Beautification*. Retrieved March 19, 2011, from <http://www.hrclean.org/brokenwindow.shtml>

correlation to crime.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, a survey conducted by the City of Austin, Tx found that the crime rates were higher on blocks with open buildings than on those with locked buildings. The survey also found that “41 percent of abandoned buildings could be entered without the use of force; of these buildings, 83 percent showed evidence of illegal use by prostitutes, drug dealers, property criminals and others.”<sup>10</sup> Given these findings, it is evident that securing vacant properties is a means of crime prevention.<sup>11</sup>

Another major public safety concern surrounding vacant properties is related to arson and accidental fires. Although arson and accidental fires pertain mainly to vacant and abandoned structures, not vacant lots, it is worth noting the cost to municipal fire departments. The US Fire Administration reports that “over 12,000 fires in vacant structures are reported each year, resulting in approximately \$73 million in property damage annually.”<sup>12</sup> Additionally, “more than 70% of fires in vacant or abandoned buildings are the result of arson or suspected arson.”<sup>13</sup> These buildings are primarily the target of arsonists but occasionally fall victim to accidental fires. Furthermore, due to the condition of many of these buildings, firefighters themselves are confronted with extraordinarily dangerous fire-fighting conditions. “The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) estimates that 6,000 firefighters are injured every year in a vacant or abandoned building fire.”<sup>14</sup>

In addition to crime and fire, cities must allocate a disproportionate amount of funds - tax payer funds - to maintaining vacant properties. Cleaning vacant properties can range from simple, inexpensive tasks such as trash removal or rodent prevention to

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<sup>9</sup> National Vacant Properties Campaign. (n.d.). *National Vacant Properties Campaign*. Retrieved March 18, 2011, from <http://www.vacantproperties.org>

<sup>10</sup> National Vacant Properties Campaign. (n.d.). *National Vacant Properties Campaign*. Retrieved March 18, 2011, from <http://www.vacantproperties.org>

<sup>11</sup> The National Vacant Property Campaign notes, “Even if 90 percent of the crimes prevented are merely displaced to the surrounding area, securing abandoned buildings appears to be a highly cost-effective crime control tactic for distressed neighborhoods.”

<sup>12</sup> Housing. (n.d.). *Cleveland City Planning Commission*. Retrieved March 19, 2011, from [http://planning.city.cleveland.oh.us/cwp/hous\\_chall.php](http://planning.city.cleveland.oh.us/cwp/hous_chall.php)

<sup>13</sup> Housing. (n.d.). *Cleveland City Planning Commission*. Retrieved March 19, 2011, from [http://planning.city.cleveland.oh.us/cwp/hous\\_chall.php](http://planning.city.cleveland.oh.us/cwp/hous_chall.php)

<sup>14</sup> National Vacant Properties Campaign. (n.d.). *National Vacant Properties Campaign*. Retrieved March 18, 2011, from <http://www.vacantproperties.org>

burdensome remediation of toxic sites - often associated with former industrial sites. The cost of maintenance can become unmanageable. For example, “in Trenton, NJ during the 1990s, the amount of funds ranged from \$500,000 to over \$1 million per year.”<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Detroit spends an astonishing \$800,000 annually merely to clean vacant lots.<sup>16</sup> also incur the high cost of demolition that could be avoided by preserving the structures on site.

### **Smart Growth**

Above all else the 10 principles of Smart Growth aim to curb suburban sprawl and encouraging investment in places we already inhabit. Vacant properties fall into this category of already inhabited and can be used to encourage growth while limiting Greenfield development. The Brookings Institute notes that vacant properties vacant properties occupy about 15 percent of the area of the typical large city, more than 12,000 acres on average.<sup>17</sup> That is 12,000 acres of land that is already utilizing existing infrastructure (such as power infrastructure). Rather than investing in new, impractically expensive infrastructure that stretches into the countryside, cities should seize the opportunity to use this large reservoir of land and systems to focus growth.

### **Vacant Properties in the Context of the Contemporary City**

“America’s urban, suburban and rural communities have struggled for decades with vacant, abandoned, and problem properties. Today’s environment is unique, however, as powerful forces – most notably the foreclosure and economic crisis – threaten to undo decades of growth, development, and reinvestment in our communities.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> National Vacant Properties Campaign. (n.d.). *National Vacant Properties Campaign*. Retrieved March 18, 2011, from <http://www.vacantproperties.org>

<sup>16</sup> Wit, J. d. (n.d.). Land Banks. *University of Michigan*. Retrieved March 19, 2011, from <http://www.umich.edu/~econdev/landbank/>

<sup>17</sup> Pagano, Michael A. & Ann O’M Bowman. “Vacant Land in Cities: An Urban Resource.” Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy. p. 3, December 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Restoring Properties, Rebuilding Communities: Transforming Vacant Properties in Today’s America

## Urban Shrinkage + The Planning Perspective

The concept of “shrinking cities” is relatively new within urban planning and development circles in the United States. The Shrinking Cities International Research Network (SCiRN) defines a shrinking city “as a densely populated urban area with a minimum population of 10,000 residents that has faced population losses in large parts for more than two years and is undergoing economic transformations with some symptoms of a structural crisis.”<sup>19</sup> Urban shrinkage is a phenomenon. It occurs in regions and cities that are experiencing significant economic and social decline. Some might argue that this phenomenon can be attributed to forces of globalization while others speculate that it is a “cyclical process embedded in a broader context of growing and shrinking.”<sup>20</sup> In the United States “shrinkage” is most often a result of manufacturing transformations or “post industrial transformations of a second generation” which refers to the introduction of the hi-tech industry.<sup>21</sup>

There is a dilemma in terms of dealing with shrinking cities from a planning perspective as well. The planning profession is largely interlinked with growth and tends to focus on new development through the use of traditional tools such as comprehensive planning, zoning, subdivision regulations, and urban growth boundaries. Joseph Schilling notes that economic development strategies are built on this same growth model.<sup>22</sup> Cristina Martinez-Fernandez and Tong Wu challenge this notion by asking “whether shrinkage is a problem to be solved or an opportunity to be missed.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Rugare, S., & Schwarz, T. (2008). *Cities growing smaller*. Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, College of Architecture and Environmental Design, Kent State University.

<sup>20</sup> Rugare, S., & Schwarz, T. (2008). *Cities growing smaller*. Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, College of Architecture and Environmental Design, Kent State University.

<sup>21</sup> Rugare, S., & Schwarz, T. (2008). *Cities growing smaller*. Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, College of Architecture and Environmental Design, Kent State University.

<sup>22</sup> Schilling, J. (2006). *Blueprint Buffalo – Using Green Infrastructure to Reclaim America’s Shrinking Cities*. Metropolitan Institute, Virginia Polytechnic University, Alexandria.

<sup>23</sup> Rugare, S., & Schwarz, T. (2008). *Cities growing smaller*. Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, College of Architecture and Environmental Design, Kent State University.

The landscape has been dramatically changed and people are beginning to recognize that traditional strategies of the past will not continue to work. It is no longer viable to go project-by-project or deal-by-deal.<sup>24</sup>

## A Snapshot [data]

It is not easy to access the exact number of vacant properties in any city or region much less for the entire United States. However, there are a couple sources that register the contemporary climate surrounding vacant properties. Data from the National Bureau of Economic Research, inc. indicates that vacancy rates have risen steadily for over 40 years.<sup>25</sup> Recently, vacancy has been increasing dramatically, particularly since 2000, which is likely correlated with the increase in homeowner and vacancy rates.

The U.S. Census Bureau identifies *other vacant properties* as those “properties that are neither being offered for sale or rent, held for occupancy, or used for seasonal or migrant housing.”<sup>26</sup> The properties categorized as *other vacant* by U.S. Census count are the closest surrogate for abandoned vacant properties and corroborate this assumed correlation. Between 1970 and 2000 the number of *other vacant* properties increased from one million to 2.3 million making up one out of every 50 dwellings in the United States. A 2008 survey by American Community revealed that the number of *other vacant properties* doubled once again from 2000 to 2008 totaling 4.7 million in the United States.

The United States Postal Service (USPS) is another valuable source that can be used to register the contemporary condition of vacant properties in the United States.

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<sup>24</sup> Restoring Properties, Rebuilding Communities: Transforming Vacant Properties in Today’s America

<sup>25</sup> Annual rental and homeowner vacancy rates for the United States: 1968-2009. This data includes properties being actively marketed for sale or rent.

<sup>26</sup> Center for Community Progress: Turning Vacant Spaces into Vibrant Places. (2010).

<http://www.communityprogress.net/resources-pages-95.php>. (J. R. mallach, Ed.) Retrieved from Center for Community Progress: <http://www.communityprogress.net/>

USPS data paints a rather bleak picture for cities in the Midwest and Northeast such as Detroit, Buffalo, Flint, and Youngstown, for example, where one out of every five addresses are determined to be “vacant” or “no-stat”. This data is a fairly good indication that properties are vacant, uninhabitable or potentially demolished and can be analyzed more frequently than the U.S. Census.<sup>27</sup>

Historically, cities and communities most affected by vacant properties were found mainly in these older industrial cities, but recent data collected by the USPS between 2006-2010 in Sunbelt cities such as Miami, Tampa, Phoenix, Fort Myers, and Las Vegas reveal a similar contemporary trend.<sup>28</sup>

### **Understanding the Problem**

The general conditions and issues surrounding vacant properties have been discussed in the previous section of this paper. However, the problem is much more complex and unique. The landscape has been dramatically changed and people are beginning to recognize that traditional strategies of the past will not continue to work and that it is no longer viable to go project-by-project or deal-by-deal.<sup>29</sup>

In this section, vacant properties will be discussed in the context of the contemporary situation. It is important to explain why strategies to address vacant lots are arguably more important now than ever before in the face of an economic recession and burgeoning energy and environmental crisis.

Historically, cities and communities most affected by vacant properties were found predominantly in the older industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest. However, regional market forces, the foreclosure crisis and subsequent economic recession, municipal fiscal woes, and existing ineffective legal systems and policymaking have spread the problem across the country.

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<sup>27</sup> Center for Community Progress: Turning Vacant Spaces into Vibrant Places. (2010). <http://www.communityprogress.net/resources-pages-95.php>. (J. R. mallach, Ed.) Retrieved from Center for Community Progress: <http://www.communityprogress.net/>

<sup>28</sup> Center for Community Progress: Turning Vacant Spaces into Vibrant Places. (2010). <http://www.communityprogress.net/resources-pages-95.php>. (J. R. mallach, Ed.) Retrieved from Center for Community Progress: <http://www.communityprogress.net/>

<sup>29</sup> Restoring Properties, Rebuilding Communities: Transforming Vacant Properties in Today’s America

## Weak Market Economies + The Foreclosure Crisis

“It’s the economy stupid.”<sup>30</sup>

Determining the cause of vacancy and abandonment in cities and communities is difficult. It is the results of many complex factors that are hard to separate from one another. However, one of the most powerful of these factors in determining the outcomes of vacant properties is undoubtedly market and economic forces. Market forces largely determine the geography of vacant properties and often determine their potential revitalization as well. For example, cities like Boston or New York where the market has returned the amount of vacant properties has also decreased with the revitalization of existing housing stock. However, cities such as Buffalo or Pittsburgh where the market has declined since the 1970s continue to show significant signs of vacancy.

Weak market economies can lead to high unemployment rates and have a significant impact of the severity of vacant properties. That said, even though economic growth is slowly resuming nationwide and unemployment rates are 9.3 percent nationally, it is 15 percent in some cities and 25 percent in the city of Detroit.<sup>31</sup> These high numbers of unemployment coupled with the destabilization of the housing market is likely to continue to slow recovery. Federal Reserve Chair Ben Bernanke noted in June 2010 that housing market activity continues to be “weighed down, in part, by a large inventory of distressed or vacant existing houses”<sup>32</sup> which can lead to even further destabilization of vacant properties.

Most recently, the foreclosure crisis has compounded this condition with indicators pointing to continued stress in the housing market and continued elevated rates of

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<sup>30</sup> James Carville

<sup>31</sup> Detroit unemployment rate

<sup>32</sup> Testimony to the Committee on Budget, US House of Representatives, June 9, 2010 available at <http://www.federalreserve.gov/newsevents/testimony/bernanke20100609.htm>.

foreclosure and vacancy in the immediate future. Foreclosures have resulted in a shift in the geography of vacant property as well as an increase in the scale of the problem. Subsequently, cities with formerly strong as well as those historically weak markets will struggle to stabilize neighborhoods. The mortgage crisis is most likely what has triggered the increase in vacant property and shift in geography throughout the country. “Underwater mortgages” are a looming challenge for cities as well. “Underwater mortgages” refer to those homeowners who owe more on their mortgages than their homes are worth and are likely to default – leading to further destabilization and vacancy. On March 9, 2011 data released by CoreLogic Inc. stated that “nearly 23.1% or 11.1 million of all U.S. residential mortgage properties were underwater in the October-December quarter. The fourth quarter figures stood even higher than the 22.5% or 10.8 million households’ loans that were underwater in the preceding quarter.”<sup>33</sup>

(need more on foreclosure crisis as it relates to vacant properties)

## **Municipal Fiscal Health**

The municipal fiscal health crisis has come at a very difficult time in terms of vacant properties. As the data indicates, the number of vacant properties is growing and cities need funds available to address these issues in order to stabilize and rebuild once-vital neighborhoods. Essentially, the municipal crisis is a result of a dramatic decrease in sources of public revenue; i.e., income tax, sales tax, and property tax. The burst in the real estate bubble and subsequent economic recession has triggering considerable budgetary deficits at the state level and less funding for local governments. A survey by the National League of Cities (NLC) reports corroborates the assumption that the recession has dramatically affected municipal income; “7 in 10 city officials indicated they are responding to the economic crisis by making

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<sup>33</sup> Underwater Mortgage Crisis Lingers - Zacks.com. (n.d.). *Zacks Investment Research - Proven Stock Ratings Research Recommendations*. Retrieved March 20, 2011, from <http://www.zacks.com/stock/news/48751/Unerwater+Mortgage+Crisis+Lingers>

personnel cuts, including layoffs, hiring freezes and furloughs.”<sup>34</sup> The NLC notes “city budget shortfalls are predicted to become more severe as tax collections, which lag the overall economy, catch up with economic conditions.”<sup>35</sup>

## **Public Policy + Legal Systems**

In order to properly address the unique challenges and scale that vacant properties pose in the contemporary city, we must take a close look at the governing political and legal systems and understand the tools available to deal with them. States and local governments have different systems in place. Redevelopment laws, local ordinances such as zoning and building codes, as well as procedure for foreclosed properties, define most legal systems as they pertain to vacant property. However, it can be argued that these systems are antiquated and often contribute to exacerbating the problem of vacant properties.

Often times it is unclear who is responsible for decision-making regarding vacant properties. Communication between agencies can be very difficult. Code enforcement, policing, demolition, planning, acquisition, tax collection, and project financing are often dispersed across multiple agencies making a coordinated effort to deal with vacant properties very inefficient. For example, “the responsibility for vacant property in Philadelphia is divided among 15 separate agencies.”<sup>36</sup>

The current condition of legal systems is also a burden to reuse efforts. Both zoning and building codes have not been adjusted to the conditions of the contemporary city. The procedures for rezoning are antiquated and lead to expensive and time consuming processes for changing land use. Land use laws tend to favor development occurring in exurban conditions that can lead to further degradation of core neighborhoods where vacant property is already an issue.

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<sup>34</sup> National League of Cities, “Significant Budget Shortfalls Could Mean More Job Losses,” Press Release, May 24, 2010, available at <http://www.nlc.org/PRESSROOM/PRESSRELEASEITEMS/SoACJobsEcon5.10.aspx>

<sup>35</sup> National League of Cities, “Significant Budget Shortfalls Could Mean More Job Losses,” Press Release, May 24, 2010, available at <http://www.nlc.org/PRESSROOM/PRESSRELEASEITEMS/SoACJobsEcon5.10.aspx>

<sup>36</sup> *dirt into dollars: Converting Vacant Land Into Valuable Development*. Brookings Review, 18 no.3, Summer 2000.

Additionally, state foreclosure laws can be problematic because they are designed to maximize short-term revenues but disregard the long-term fiscal or social equity of a neighborhood. Federal programs and policies can also facilitate vacant properties and abandonment. For example, the Low Income Housing Tax Credit program can often encourage the construction of new affordable housing where there is already a surplus of rental – thus increasing the amount of potential properties that may become vacant or abandoned.<sup>37</sup>

### 3. The problem Cont'd?

#### i. Introduction

1. Successful initiatives in the field and the way perceptions are changing suggest that this moment in an opportunity that should be seized. (which will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper)
2. The landscape has been dramatically changed and people are beginning to recognize that traditional strategies of the past will not continue to work. It is no longer viable to go project-by-project or deal-by-deal.<sup>38</sup>
3. This contemporary landscape of abandonment will require every sector – public, private, and “third” (nonprofit and philanthropy) sectors – to play a strategic and intentional role in how we reshape methods for dealing with properties, acquire land, manage it, and dispose of it for reuse.
4. Indicators point to continued stress in the housing market and continued elevated rates of foreclosure and vacancy in the immediate future.<sup>39</sup>
5. There is an opportunity for true systematic reform given the unique moment of opportunity that we have today.
6. Until recently, the communities most visibly affected by vacant properties were found mainly in the older cities of the Midwest and Northeast, the combination of the foreclosure crisis and the recession has spread the problem across the country.

#### b. Cultural + Political misconceptions

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<sup>37</sup> Center for Community Progress: Turning Vacant Spaces into Vibrant Places. (2010). <http://www.communityprogress.net/resources-pages-95.php>. (J. R. mallach, Ed.) Retrieved from Center for Community Progress: <http://www.communityprogress.net/>

<sup>38</sup> Restoring Properties, Rebuilding Communities: Transforming Vacant Properties in Today's America

<sup>39</sup> Restoring Properties, Rebuilding Communities: Transforming Vacant Properties in Today's America

- i. Fear that espousing shrinking city policy would result in voter disapproval and political suicide.
  - c. Vacant Lot Characteristics and Green Strategies<sup>40</sup>
    - i. Gap
      - 1. Single gap lots are commonly found in residential neighborhoods, where temporary reuse adds social and economic value
    - ii. Consecutive
      - 1. 2 or more consecutive lots are flexible for a variety of greening strategies
    - iii. Block
      - 1. Vacant Blocks offer unique opportunities for large scale community greening strategies
    - iv. Corridor
      - 1. Vacant Lots along urban corridors share common uses and potential future programming
  - d. Temporary vs. Permanent Intervention
    - i. Pop-Up City
    - ii. Green infrastructure

## Inventory | Progress Across the US

### The Federal Policy Climate<sup>41</sup>

- The Obama administration is showing a readiness to address the systemic barriers associated with vacant property revitalization.
- In the summer of 2008, Congress enacted the Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP) to help communities address the effects of foreclosed and abandoned properties in their neighborhoods.
- The Partnership for Sustainable Communities, launched in June 2009 by HUD, EPA, and DOT, represents a major change in the federal policy, by linking housing, transportation, and environmental protection with the goal of creating more livable, equitable, and sustainable communities. This marks a significant advance toward cross-agency collaboration and

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<sup>40</sup> Policy Recommendations: Greening Vacant Lots for Pittsburgh's Sustainable Neighborhood Revitalization

<sup>41</sup> Center for Community Progress: Turning Vacant Spaces into Vibrant Places. (2010). <http://www.communityprogress.net/resources-pages-95.php>. (J. R. mallach, Ed.) Retrieved from Center for Community Progress: <http://www.communityprogress.net/>

funding. HUD \$150 million in sustainable communities planning grants was awarded in late 2010.<sup>42</sup>

## State Legislation: Property Acquisition and Disposition

### Michigan

- In 2003 Michigan enacted pioneering legislation authorizing counties to create land bank authorities and giving those authorities strong tools to acquire, maintain, and transfer ownership of tax foreclosed, vacant properties. Today, following the lead of Genesee county, there are over 30 county land banks in Michigan, as well as a statewide land bank and a municipal land bank in the City of Detroit.<sup>43</sup>

### Ohio

- 2009: Ohio authorized the establishment of a land bank authority in Cuyahoga County – the county that is home to Cleveland, Oh.
- 2010: the state expanded this legislation authorizing counties with more than 60,000 residents to create land banks.

### Texas

- 2009: Texas enacted a new law allowing community groups to file receivership actions against dangerous properties and to revitalize dangerous properties by developing them into affordable housing.
- The law also helps communities obtain clear title to the properties.

### Pennsylvania

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<sup>42</sup> Center for Community Progress: Turning Vacant Spaces into Vibrant Places. (2010). <http://www.communityprogress.net/resources-pages-95.php>. (J. R. mallach, Ed.) Retrieved from Center for Community Progress: <http://www.communityprogress.net/>

<sup>43</sup> Center for Community Progress: Turning Vacant Spaces into Vibrant Places. (2010). <http://www.communityprogress.net/resources-pages-95.php>. (J. R. mallach, Ed.) Retrieved from Center for Community Progress: <http://www.communityprogress.net/>

- 2009: Pennsylvania enacted a state conservatorship law, giving local governments and non-profits a powerful tool to gain control of neglected, vacant properties.

## **New Jersey**

- 2009: New Jersey passed state legislation to hold lenders who initiate foreclosure actions legally responsible for maintaining the properties from the beginning of the foreclosure process.

## **Revitalization efforts in America's older Industrial Cities**

### **Rochester, New York**

- Announced *Project Green*, “a bold plan that would change the look and feel of Rochester by replacing vacant properties with vast swaths of green space.”

### **Cleveland, Oh**

- Re-Imagining a More Sustainable Cleveland is a partnership of government, foundations, universities, and non-profit organizations that has come together to foster new ways of using Cleveland's vacant land.

### **Detroit, Mi**

- The City of Detroit under mayor Dave Bing has formed a partnership with local foundations and others to develop a new strategy for the city,

integrating land use, economic development, transportation, and schools, based on the smaller-city paradigm

## **New Information Technologies [data management]**

### **NEO CANDO,**

- A property information system for Northeastern Ohio developed at Case Western Reserve University enables organizations in Cleveland to target their foreclosure prevention and stabilization efforts

### **PolicyMap**

- Developed by The Reinvestment Fund, provides a wide range of data and maps through a user-friendly interface to support local planning and research efforts.

### **Community Central**

- Mercy Portfolio Services developed Community Central, a system to manage Chicago's Neighborhood Stabilization Program. It is a web-based tool used to run a reuse program involving thousands of vacant and foreclosed properties.

## **Nuisance Abatement and Code Enforcement**

### **Chula Vista, California**

- Enacted a local ordinance requiring lenders to take care of vacant properties during foreclosure. Florida and Connecticut have also adopted this ordinance.

### **Cleveland, Oh**

- Initiated an innovative program that makes the city's community development corporations (CDCs) its code enforcement partners to leverage municipal resources.

### **Baltimore, MD**

- The Healthy Neighborhood Initiative focuses on confidence building strategies for "middle market" neighborhoods.
- Public / private partnerships between the Code Enforcement Division and private developers.

### **Kansas City, Mi**

- *The Green Impact Zone* focuses public funding – federal, state, and local – to rehabilitate, weatherize, and police a 150-block area.

### **Indianapolis, IN**

- The *Smart Growth Redevelopment District* is a comprehensive planning initiative that aims to coordinate remediation efforts, housing projects, and transit improvements to revitalize a 540-acre area of the city.

### **San Diego, Ca**

- The city created a position for a vacant property coordinator who assists property owners in addressing nuisance issues

## **Minnesota**

- The *Family Housing Fund* looks to create public-private partnerships within the Minnesota Foreclosure Partners Council.
- Since 2007, the Minnesota Foreclosure Partners Council looks to foster a coordinated approach to the foreclosure crisis.

## **Detroit, Mi**

- *Community Legal Resources* created the *Detroit Vacant Properties Campaign*, which has helped to solidify the city's efforts to address vacant properties.

## **Other Case Studies Identified as Valuable Benchmarks**

### **Chicago, IL**

- The Chicago City Department of the Environment is dedicated to “developing and maintaining the City's infrastructure corridor and open spaces in ways that apply and promote healthy environmental practices.

### **Portland, OR**

- Portland Sustainable Development Commission merged the solid waste and recycling division (Bureau of Environmental Services) with the energy office to create the Sustainable Development Office in 2000.

### **Austin, TX**

- The City has created a Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI) embedded in the City's Transportation, Planning and Sustainability

Department that provides expertise on sustainable practices and creates tools for.

## CASE STUDY: CLEVELAND, OH

### Background:

#### Goals<sup>44</sup>

- Identify ways to benefit from the increasing number of vacant property
- Support redevelopment in the city of Cleveland by promoting the strategic reuse of vacant property
- Link natural and built systems within the city in ways that improve the quality of life and the long-term health of residents and the environment
- Increase community self reliance for food and energy production

#### Strategies:

- **Neighborhood stabilization and holding strategies:**

“Neighborhood stabilization and holding strategies are low-cost and low maintenance strategies that can be used to manage vacant and abandoned properties and establish a sense of stewardship and care in transitional neighborhoods. They are most effective in neighborhoods where development is likely in the near-future.”<sup>45</sup>

- Implementation criteria
  - Short-term development potential

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<sup>44</sup> Re-imagining a more sustainable Cleveland

<sup>45</sup> Re-imagining a more sustainable Cleveland

- Property owner or community organization is able to fund and maintain landscape intervention

- **Green infrastructure strategies:**

Green infrastructure strategies for Cleveland include“ expansion of the city’s green space network, restoration of the city’s ecosystems, and the remediation of contaminated sites.”<sup>46</sup>

The *Re-Imagining a More Sustainable Cleveland Report* notes that determining which vacant sites should be used for ecosystem remediation is difficult and requires a detailed environmental analysis before recommendations can be made. Cleveland’s complex hydrological systems provide the opportunity to reestablish that existed prior to urbanization. As vacancy increases in the city, the opportunity to analyze and potentially reconnect these systems emerges. Cleveland’s strategy for implementing green infrastructure utilizes the land bank as a mediating device to select properties. The Cleveland Planning Commission uses a flow chart to set up a framework that can be used to determine the status of properties as they become available.

- Implementation Criteria: City Parks + Green Space

- Site adjacent to or near an existing Cleveland Metroparks property or City of Cleveland park.
- Site within an area designated as future green space in the 2020 Cleveland Citywide Plan or part of a greenway connection.
- Site contains forest that can be linked to other forested areas to provide habitat for migration or other natural habitats.

- Community organization has the capacity to install and maintain a public green space on the site.
  - Neighborhood has insufficient amount of existing green space.
- Implementation Criteria: Ecosystem/Stormwater Restoration
  - Site is in a floodplain, an established riparian setback, or other flood-prone areas.
  - Site is within an identified riparian area and can either be restored or conserved as open space or developed under conservation ordinances.
  - Site is within a headwaters area and can either be re-vegetated as open space or developed using conservation development strategies.
  - Site is identified in the Cuyahoga Soil and Water Conservation District's general wetland inventory of the County
  - Site can provide a connection to other areas and maintain habitat migration patterns and fish and aquatic habitats.
- Implementation Criteria: Remediation
  - Sites with lower levels of pollutants, contaminant, hazardous substances, petroleum products, or other wastes and debris
  - Sites that do not pose an immediate and significant hazard to adjacent residents
  - Sites that have limited short or long term development potential
  - Can be an interim or permanent solution.
- Implementation Criteria: Productive Landscapes - Community Garden
  - Approximately 4,000 square foot level site
  - 8 hrs of full sun a day
  - Water hook-up on the same side of the street
  - Free of gravel and asphalt
  - Lead levels of less than 400-500 ppm

- In a residential neighborhood
  - Community support/local partner; 8-10 gardeners per garden
  - Site must have limited development potential
  - On community garden within ½ or ¼ mile of each city resident
  - Priority strategy: implement in neighborhoods with residential density of greater than 20 households per acre, and in identified food deserts as identified in the Cuyahoga County Planning Commission's recent (2008) mapping of food availability.
- Implementation Criteria: Productive Landscapes – Market Gardens
    - Site must be at least 1 acre.
    - Site must have access to irrigation system.
    - Site must receive 8 hours of full sun per day.
    - Soil tests that assess potential contamination based on location and previous use.
    - Proximity to other agriculture sites to facilitate cooperative production, including shipping and marketing.
    - Site with limited development potential (long-term use)
    - Must perform adequate due diligence to assess potential contamination.
- Implementation Criteria: Productive Landscapes – Commercial Ag
    - Site must have at least 1 acre for a native plant micro-nursery; at least 20 acres for a tree nursery.
    - Large Trees or buildings on the north side of the property.
    - Site must have limited development potential.
    - Soil conditions must be conducive to the types of plants and trees that will be grown on the site.
- Implementation Criteria: Energy Generation – Geothermal
    - Avoid underground utilities
    - Site must be 30 acres for commercial geothermal energy production. Smaller neighborhood-scale installations may be feasible for certain locations.

- A “gap” vacancy can provide energy for the two adjacent houses.
- Wind Turbines
  - Site must be a minimum of one acre for a residential-scale turbine installation.
  - Average wind speed must be at least 11-13 mph.
  - The amount of new transmission infrastructure must be minimized and proximity to existing infrastructure must be considered.
  - Land must available for long-term use
  - How will the community respond to the noise and aesthetics of the installation?
  - Will the turbines obstruct in local flight paths?
- Ethanol Production
  - 50 + acres is needed for commercial scale farms .
  - Multiple smaller sites at the neighborhood scale are also feasible.
  - Residential scale farms are also feasible with a home-based processor.
  - Industrial hemp can be used for biomass energy. An acre of hemp yields 10 tons of biomass in four months.
  - Switchgrass plots can produce 15 tons of dry biomass per acre, and five year yields average 11.5 tons – enough to make 1,150 gallons of ethanol per acre each year.
- Solar Field
  - A rule of thumb is that a solar array that covers 3 acres can generate approximately enough power for 200 homes.
  - Interim use option – arrays can be easily moved to other vacant sites when the site is redeveloped.
  - Photovoltaic arrays are compatible with various uses and do not require any remediation before installation.
  - PV arrays can be sited in or near residential areas.

## Policy Recommendations for the Reuse of Vacant Properties:

- **Land Use**

- Establish a task force to address barriers to vacant land reutilization strategies. [*Cleveland City Planning Commission, Building and Housing Department, Public Service Department, Water Department, Economic Development Department*]
- Adopt a process for making decisions for the future use of properties in Cleveland's land bank. [*Cleveland City Planning Commission, Community Development Department, Economic Development Department, City Council, Mayor's Office*]
- Streamline the disposition of properties in the city's landbank – 2-3 month process from the time property comes into the land bank until final disposition. [*Cleveland City Planning Commission, Community Development Department, City Council, Mayor's Office*]
- Determine future land-use based hydrological and soil data. [*Cleveland City Planning Commission*]

- **Data**

- Develop new ways to classify and geo-code vacant land in the city's GIS system to identify sites that have the strongest potential for each strategy. [*Cleveland City Planning Commission, Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative*]

- Include a parcel-based mapping of environmental contamination in the city's GIS database that quantifies the level of contamination on sites. [Cleveland City Planning Commission, City and County Brownfield Staff]
  - Develop parcel-level mapping of sites where children have tested positive for elevated blood-lead levels and factor this information into decision making on building demolition. [Cleveland Health Department, Building and Housing Department, Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative]
  - Map and document wetland criteria. [Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, Cuyahoga Soil and Water Conservation District]
  - Map and document soil properties. [Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, Cuyahoga Soil and Water Conservation District]
- **Green Infrastructure**
  - Expand the area of conserved green space in the 2020 future land use plan; promote the use of Green Overlay Zoning. [Cleveland City Planning Commission, Cuyahoga County Planning Commission]
  - Establish a task force to explore one or two city-wide green infrastructure initiatives.
  - Adopt design guidelines and review processes to establish minimum areas of ecosystem preservation.
  - Mandate the use of bio-swales and pervious paving for all new off street parking. [Cleveland City Planning Commission, Department of Engineering and Construction, Community Development Department, Economic Development Department]
  - Encourage rain garden construction on residential properties. [Cleveland City Planning Commission, Building and Housing Department, Community Development Department]

- Connect green infrastructure projects to the *Cleveland Carbon Fund*.<sup>47</sup> [Cleveland Carbon Fund]
- **Urban Agriculture**
  - Create a new land use category for urban agriculture. [Cleveland City Planning Commission]
  - Establish a goal that every Cleveland resident be within a ½ mile or ¼ mile radius of a community garden. [Cleveland City Planning Commission, Ohio State University Extension, Cleveland Botanical Garden, Community Development Corporation]
  - Establish new strategies for holding and controlling land. [Cleveland City Planning Commission, Community Development Dept., Cleveland Land Bank, Community Development Corporations]
  - Develop policies within the Cleveland Water Department that allow farmers access to water – incentivize with lower water rates. [Cleveland Water Department, Community Development Department, Economic Development Department]
  - Explore potential municipal composting facility and community composting projects. [Community Development Department, Cleveland Office of Sustainability, Department of Parks, Recreation and Properties]
- **Energy Generation**
  - Support legislation that will establish a the Ohio Renewable Energy Portfolio and incentivize the generation and use of renewable energy at the local level. [Cleveland Office of Sustainability, Cuyahoga County Office of Sustainability, Green Energy Ohio]

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<sup>47</sup> As the first community-based, open-access carbon reduction fund in the United States, the Cleveland Carbon Fund invests in local community projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and spark economic development in Cleveland. The Fund provides an easy, highly transparent option for anyone wishing to play a role in reducing carbon emissions. By investing in the Cleveland Carbon Fund, donors can be assured their worthy contributions are making sustainable, positive change in local Cleveland neighborhoods.

## CASE STUDY: PHILADELPHIA, PA

### Background

The vacant land crisis in Philadelphia is much like that of other cities in the Rust Belt. Over the last 50 years business and employment has significantly decreased resulting in mass depopulation. More than 30,000 vacant properties as well as boarded up buildings drove many working-class communities into decline. The Philadelphia Horticulture Society (PHS) and city government have partnered with the New Kensington Community Development Corporation to refurbish and maintain neglected lots in that particular neighborhood. Subsequently, New Kensington has experienced resurgence in economic growth.<sup>48</sup>

### Goals

- Develop a comprehensive systems approach that takes an assets management approach to vacant land rather than an “abating public nuisances approach.”<sup>49</sup>
- Develop one Centralized authority, to acquire, distribute, and oversee the maintenance and cleaning of all unmanaged vacant lots in City Neighborhoods
- Provide incentives to encourage reuse, redevelopment, and stewardship of vacant land
- Streamline mechanisms to transfer unmanaged vacant lots to private owners that will agree to maintain or reuse them.

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<sup>48</sup> The Philadelphia Horticulture Society. (2008). *Philadelphia Horticulture Society.org*. Retrieved from <http://www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org/phlgreen/vacant3.09.pdf>

<sup>49</sup> Fairmount Ventures, Inc. (2000, March). *Managing Vacant Land in Philadelphia: A Key Step Toward Neighborhood Revitalization*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

- Resources sufficient to address the needs of all vacant land in City neighborhoods.

## Strategies

- Create the Office of Vacant Land Management (OVLM) within the Redevelopment Authority (RDA).<sup>50</sup> The purpose of the OVLM will be to assist in stabilizing the physical condition of vacant lots and facilitate their reuse.
- Green City Strategy: A strategy proposed by the Philadelphia Horticulture Society in 2004 for a reinvestment in Philadelphia's green infrastructure. The Green City Strategy considers greening as a fundamental strategy for reclaiming vacant land, greening communities, and managing the landscape. This strategy is rooted in the premise that "open spaces are essential to the viability of the city."<sup>51</sup>
- Vacant Land Stabilization: Philadelphia has embarked on a hardcore land stabilization effort. Land stabilization begins with the city clearing debris from the site. Once this is complete, contractors are hired to re-engineer the property with topsoil, grass, and trees. A fence may also be built around the lot to indicate that it is being cared for and to deter illegal dumping. Philadelphia's land stabilization program has secured over 5,000 parcels using this process – more than 7 million square feet – with an additional 700 parcels each year. These are not meant to be permanent installations; rather they are placeholders until a future use is determined for the site. In time, each lot will eventually be turned over to private development but could be converted to a community garden or a park.

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<sup>50</sup> This will allow the new office to use the existing operational infrastructure of the RDA, its experience with land acquisition and disposition processes, and its legal authority to acquire land through condemnation.

<sup>51</sup> The Philadelphia Horticulture Society, 2008, *Philadelphia green project profile*

- **Target Neighborhoods:** Stabilizing land in 6 target neighborhoods will immediately improve their appearance, discourage further deterioration, and build momentum for other enhancements.
- **Community-Based Vacant Land Maintenance:** This bottom-up strategy aims to give residents the opportunity to invest directly in the revitalization of their neighborhoods by hiring communities to maintain 1,760 vacant parcels. The community organizations are charged with maintaining the vacant parcels and encouraging citizen stewardship.
- **Community LandCare<sup>52</sup>:** Philadelphia Green also runs a program called Community LandCare provides a platform for community based organizations and transition-to-work programs an opportunity to improve their communities. Community LandCare maintains over 100 acres of vacant properties in 17 of Philadelphia's neighborhoods. In addition to the aesthetic improvements that Community LandCare initiates, they also create close to 100 jobs wherein Philadelphians gain and improve upon skill sets that can then carry over into future careers. An organization by the name of Ready, Willing & Able (RWA), employs homeless individuals, providing them with an opportunity to work towards self-sufficiency and eventually get back on their feet.

## **Policy Recommendations**

- City undertakes an aggressive acquisition campaign to facilitate the speedy transfer of lots for later reuse and development.
- City facilitates the use of sheriff sale as its acquisition tool by establishing that the goal of the sheriff sale, contrary to current practice, will be to acquire the lot, rather than to capture revenue.
- OVLM is given authority over all dispositions of vacant lots.

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<sup>52</sup> Philadelphia Green created the Community-Based Vacant Land Management Program in 2003. Later renamed Community LandCare, this program employs community service organizations to clean and mow hundreds of lots in 16 Philadelphia neighborhoods on a monthly basis.

- Licenses and inspections revises demolition specifications such that they meet basic cleaning standards.
- Licenses and inspections begins aggressive code enforcement.
- Licenses and inspections conducts scheduled inventory and inspection of vacant lots

### **Administrative Changes:**

- Mayor creates the Office of Vacant Land Management OVLM.
- Lots Owned by City agencies that are not slated for short term redevelopment transferred to OVLM where they will be made available for private use.
- The Department of Licenses and Inspections conducts an initial inspection of all lots on a programmed basis to determine their physical condition.
- All unmanaged lots certified as blighted to ensure City's authority to clean lots.
- Delinquency status of all vacant lots determined by Board of Revision of Taxes.
- All vacant lots inventoried and entered into a Vacant Land Database that is linked to and shares information with the neighborhood information system.<sup>53</sup>

## **Case Study: Pittsburgh**

### **Background**

“Vacant lots are an underutilized resource in the City of Pittsburgh. Despite tireless efforts from the Mayor’s office, non-profit organizations, neighborhood associations, community development corporations, environmental groups and dedicated community members around the city; more than 14,000 lots were vacant in 2005.”<sup>54</sup>

### **Goal**

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<sup>53</sup> Fairmount Ventures, Inc. (2000, March). Managing Vacant Land in Philadelphia: A Key Step Toward Neighborhood Revitalization. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

<sup>54</sup> University, Carnegie Mellon. (2006, Fall). Greening Vacant Lots for Pittsburgh's Sustainable Neighborhood Revitalization. *Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide for Revitalizing Vacant Lots in your Neighborhood*. Pittsburgh, PA.

- The Vacant to Vibrant Publication was produced with the consent of the Mayor's office by a team of graduate students from the H. John Heinz III School of Public Policy and Management at Carnegie Mellon University with the primary goal of developing guidelines for Pittsburgh residents and community groups to stop vacant parcels from destabilizing their neighborhoods. The primary objective is to enable community organizations or individuals to take action themselves rather than solely relying on systemic changes. In this way, *Vacant to Vibrant* functions as a handbook. It is meant to assist individuals interested in implementing green strategies for vacant lots by providing a guide.

## Strategies

- **Ownership**
  - Due Dilligence
  - Evaluate your lot
  - Resource Assessment
  - Assess ownership options
  - City leasing options and the *Side Yard Sale Program*<sup>55</sup>
- **City Processes**
  - Acquisition Process: Three different types of entities purchase vacant lots in Pittsburgh: private individuals or groups, community development corporations (CDC) and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). Ownership is the most important component of redeveloping vacant land.
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- **Short Term Initiatives**
  - Stabilization of Vacant Land
    - Clear and dispose of debris including trash, overgrowth and large objects

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<sup>55</sup> If your house borders an overgrown, publicly owned, vacant lot, you no longer have to look out your window and cringe. The City of Pittsburgh, in cooperation with City Source Associates, is introducing a low-cost minimum way for you to buy that lot and make it your own.

- Grade the soil for proper slope and drainage
    - Administer soil test for toxins and contaminants and prepare for planting
    - Plant grass, trees and flowers.
    -
  - Community Gardens
  - Community Expression
- **Long Term Initiatives**
  - Green Enterprise refers to local programs, organizations, groups or enterprises committed to a healthy environment through a vibrant, flourishing, locally-based economy utilizing vacant lots by maximizing resources. In Pittsburgh, these types of enterprises include Composting, Urban Farms, Bio-remediation, and Job Training.
  - Recreational Sites simply designated for recreational use and include playgrounds, ballparks, or walking and hiking trails. These do require rezoning.
  - Green Infrastructure is defined as greenway or park infrastructure that conserves natural ecosystems or can be aggregated into existing park infrastructure.
  - GTECH<sup>56</sup> is an organization based in Pittsburgh that transforms vacant or blighted properties into viable economic development opportunities by reclaiming sites and employing green redevelopment strategies to revive and recover the land.

## Policy Recommendations

- Initiate pilot program using low-cost stabilization program to reclaim and prepare vacant lots
- Fully implement efforts to hire *Clean and Green Coordinator*

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<sup>56</sup> GTECH Strategies | Home. (n.d.). *GTECH Strategies | Home*. Retrieved March 21, 2011, from <http://gtechstrategies.org/>

- Market and utilize *Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide for Revitalizing Vacant Lots in your Neighborhood*.<sup>57</sup>
- Coordinate City's Data Collection inventories to create consistencies in data and definitions for vacant lots
- Expedite process for finding solution to Capital Assets Research Corporation (CARC)<sup>58</sup> – held liens.
  - iii. Looking Forward: Pittsburgh is increasingly prioritizing green strategies at the public policy, private enterprise, and community levels. The Greening Vacant Lots for Pittsburgh's Sustainable Neighborhood Revitalization team urges decision makers across the city to implement the recommendations found on the preceding pages. Greening vacant lots makes sense economically, socially, and environmentally.

## CASE STUDY: BUFFALO, NY

### Background

1. Buffalo as the Nation's First Living Laboratory for Reclaiming Vacant Properties: Vacant Properties in the Buffalo-Niagra region, like other post-industrial cities, is a result of deindustrialization as well as out-migration and has resulted in nearly 40,000 empty homes and vacant properties.<sup>59</sup>
2. The 2005 U.S. Interim Census resulted in only 279,745 residents that officially live in the city limits of Buffalo. That number is nearly half of the peak population of 580,132 in 1950. Additionally, there has been a 4.2 percent reduction in population since 2000. Given this steep decline in Buffalo's population and no economic or demographic projections that would suggest an influx of growth, the relationship of infrastructure and property is gravely disproportionate to its population. Given that Buffalo's population is nearly half what it once was it still has roughly the same footprint of buildings, roads, and other forms of infrastructure.

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<sup>57</sup> University, Carnegie Mellon. (2006, Fall). Greening Vacant Lots for Pittsburgh's Sustainable Neighborhood Revitalization. *Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide for Revitalizing Vacant Lots in your Neighborhood*. Pittsburgh, PA.

<sup>58</sup> CARC, a private for-profit corporation, purchased the City's delinquent tax, water and sewer liens in 1996.

<sup>59</sup> Schilling, Joseph, 2008. *Buffalo as the Nation's First Living Laboratory for Reclaiming Vacant Properties*. *Cities Growing Smaller*, Vol .1:, pp. 33-43.

3. Number of Vacant Properties: Even relative to its rust-belt peers, Buffalo appears to be in dismal condition. Data from the 2000 U.S. Census revealed that it has more vacant properties than Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. In that census year, 15.7 percent of all housing units were vacant and of that 15.7 percent, the U.S. Census categorized 43.7 percent as “other” – meaning that they are chronic vacancies.<sup>60</sup>
  4. Cost of Vacant Properties to the City: A study done by Cornell University in 2004 estimated 13,000 vacant parcels and 4,000 vacant structures. At a cost of nearly \$12,000 per property, over a five year period.<sup>61</sup>
  5. As mentioned in section 1 of this paper, the U.S. Census data is not refined enough to distinguish between chronic and temporary vacancies. However, it does have an “other” category that assists in indicating the chronic vacancy problem.
  - 6.
- iv. Goals + Strategy
1. Right-Sizing Buffalo’s footprint through land banking and green infrastructure.
  2. Blueprint Basics: The problem in the Buffalo-Niagra is regional in nature. Blueprint Buffalo is an effort to revitalize at a regional level by bringing together city and suburban governments to form a cohesive approach to vacant property reclamation. “Given the complexity and longevity of Buffalo-Niagra’s vacant property problems, vacant property reclamation could easily serve as a catalyst for collaboration among regional leaders through implementation of the comprehensive set of leadership actions and revitalization strategies set forth in the Blueprint (Schilling, p.36).”
  3. Four Essential Leadership Actions<sup>62</sup>: (1) citywide vacant properties initiative led by Buffalo’s Mayor Byron Brown and his office of strategic planning and economic development. (2) Develop first-tier suburban vacant property agenda, spearheaded by local elected officials and civic/business leaders from first-tier suburban communities. (3) Create a regional Erie-Buffalo Vacant Properties Coordinating Council as a vehicle for ongoing communication and information sharing among city, county and suburban jurisdictions and to develop

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<sup>60</sup> Id

<sup>61</sup> Cornell Cooperative Extension Association of Erie County (CCEEC). 2004. *Vacant Land, Buildings, and Facilities Asset Management Project Report*.

<sup>62</sup> Schilling, Joseph, 2008. *Buffalo as the Nation’s First Living Laboratory for Reclaiming Vacant Properties*. Cities Growing Smaller, Vol .1:, p. 36.

institutional capacities and partnerships; and (4) Establish Buffalo-Niagra as a Vacant Property Living Laboratory (the nation's first such national demonstration model) through a series of innovative policy initiatives, done in partnership with relevant federal and state agencies and the regional vacant properties coordinating council.

4. Responsibilities / Implementation of the Living Lab: (1) Design the legal and policy structure; (2) identify the entity that oversees the initiative; (3) Experiment with Policy innovations within the Living Lab that promote new regeneration strategies: (1) Coordination and Integration of Economic Development and Community Revitalization Resources; (2) Performance-Based Regulatory Standards; (3) Revitalization Authorities; (4) Green Infrastructure; (5) Green Business Strategy.
5. A Network of Living Labs: The idea here is that other cities could benefit from the policy framework developed by the Living Lab – again, a way to streamline initiatives to make for a more cohesive approach to reclaiming vacant properties.
6. Land Banking and Green Infrastructure: Adjust the proportion of infrastructure to population in a socially equitable manner.
7. Community Driven Plan: Neighborhood and citizen groups must be at the forefront of this land-banking and green infrastructure effort. Initiate a community-driven green plan
8. What is Green Infrastructure? : Generally, green infrastructure functions as a network of protected green space. The functions within the network can range from parks and that are physically connected with paths to community gardens that function independently of one another but create an ecosystem within the community. It can be argued that green infrastructure can bring value back to the habitable properties that surround

#### v. Implementation

1. Land banking: Land Banks have emerged as tools for acquiring and managing vacant properties. These institutions have the power to assemble multiple parcels of land and legally transfer them to private developers or non-profits for development. In the case of Buffalo, where the primary goal is to establish a green infrastructure, the land bank would only be interested in truly abandoned property. The public infrastructure

associated with these properties would be decommissioned.

2. Green Infrastructure (a hybrid model): Because green infrastructure demands the permanent decommissioning of a property, or assemblage of properties, it will require a hybrid model of land banking / land trust. That is, land trusts primary mission is to protect land in perpetuity for public use. The land trust model is most relevant to Buffalo's green infrastructure strategy for re-sizing its footprint.
3. Community engagement / Collaboration: Because of the large scale that the Buffalo Blueprint is taking on, it is necessary that neighborhoods become engaged in the process. The main challenge associated with the implementation of green infrastructure is how do you select properties? In the case of Buffalo, a collaborative planning approach is necessary to ensure that issues of displacement and gentrification are taken into consideration.

vi. Looking Forward:

1. Mayor Byron Brown announced an initiative in 2007 that called for the demolition of 5,000 vacant properties in five years (5x5) based on the *Buffalo Blueprint's* insights and recommendations. Additionally, federal legislation was introduced by, then senator, Hillary Clinton and Congressman Brian Higgins that would infuse cities such as Buffalo with federal funds that would enable them to proceed.
  2. Buffalo received a 2007 planning grant from the National Park Service so it can become an official Groundwork USA pilot site.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, nearly 200 residents and nonprofits came together for a day-long Green and Growing Summit to discuss citizen input surrounding the issues of myriad of greening strategies.
    - a. Detroit / Genesee County, MI
    - b. Baltimore
4. Ideas Competition [s]
    - a. Urban Voids
    - b. "Right-Sizing Buffalo"
    - c. Retrofitting Commercial Corridors
  5. What emerges from these case studies?
    - a. Policy options
    - b. Funding
    - c. Design and Development Strategies
  6. Conclusion: Atlanta

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<sup>6</sup> Schilling, Joseph, 2008. *Blueprint Buffalo – Using Green Infrastructure to Reclaim America's Shrinking Cities*.

- a. Design & Development
- b. Redevelopment law
  - 1. Eminent domain
  - 2. Urban renewal law
  - 3. Policy
- c. Policy Recommendations
- d. Implementation