



Community Revitalization Advocates Gather in Cleveland, Ohio

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More than 950 community revitalization advocates convened in Cleveland, Ohio on October 13-15th for the third — and, by far, largest — national vacant properties conference.

Sponsored by the Center for Community Progress, a new group formed through the merger of the National Vacant Properties Coalition and the Flint, Michigan-based Genesee Institute, the conference aimed to focus, as its theme put it, on the “Intersection of Sustainability, Revitalization, and Policy Reform.”

In the conference’s opening plenary, Professor Joseph Schilling, Director of the Metropolitan Institute’s Sustainable Communities Initiative at Virginia Tech, noted that the conference had come to Cleveland for a reason. “Our first work was in Cleveland,” Schilling said. “They have instituted an online data tracking system, NEO CANDO [Northeast Ohio Community and Neighborhood Data for Organizing] and now they also have started the Cuyahoga County Land Bank. What’s going on regarding vacant properties? All eyes should be on Cleveland.”

The “issue of vacant properties is complex,” Schilling added. Many, Schilling noted, are “really involved on the reclamation side and many of us are involved on the sustainable reuse side. We need more collaboration.” Others who spoke at the introductory plenary included Dan Kildee, President of the Center for Community Progress [and founder of the Genesee Institute], as well as representatives from the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and Smart Growth America.

After these presentations, Mayor Frank Jackson of Cleveland addressed the conference. “Cleveland was hit hard and hit early by predatory lending that resulted in foreclosure and abandonment,” Mayor Jackson acknowledged. However, Jackson added, “We have an opportunity to reinvent ourselves and rebuild. We do that with great partnerships – partnerships with NPI [Neighborhood Progress, Inc., a local community development corporation intermediary], the State, the County, and the County land bank. We do it in a way that is very strategic. We want to do all of these things to accomplish a purpose and that purpose is to build quality neighborhoods and a quality city.”

Following Mayor Jackson’s remarks, two other Mayors took the stage — Mayor Dayne Walling of Flint, Michigan and Mayor A. C. Wharton, Jr. of Memphis, Tennessee. Both Mayors pointed to the importance of mobilizing anchor institutions as a means of revitalizing disinvested areas. Mayor Walling noted that in Flint, there is Hurley Medical Center, which forms part of the University of Michigan at Flint. The University of Michigan at Flint, Walling added, is the “fastest growing university in Michigan. The City of Flint, Walling indicated, intends to use federal Neighborhood Stabilization Plan dollars to focus investments in the anchor corridor. “These institutions in our downtown core are vital,” Walling said.

Mayor Wharton made a similar observation about Memphis, “In Memphis, the business community has subsidized vacant property work, but you have to make the case. The hospitals – they know what it costs. They are willing to pony up. Some businesses can pick up and leave town, but you can’t move the hospital. They are there. For a small investment, you can show them what the return is going to be.”

Rep. Dennis Kucinich of Cleveland provided the closing keynote address for the conference’s first evening. “Let’s face it,” Kucinich said, “the whole geography of cities has changed as a result of disinvestment in cities, energy policies, and the flight to the suburbs 40 years ago. But I see it changing again.” The land reclamation movement, Kucinich added, “Gives hope to the re-imagining of cities and neighborhoods applied block by block, literally identifying what you can do to restore an area. Create a park or an urban farm. Or put parcels together – we have a chance to rebuild our cities ... you’re doing work right now where the next generation will be able to see the fruits of your labor. You are rebuilding cities and hopes in a tangible way.”

A plenary session during the conference’s second day focused again on the host city of Cleveland. Frank Ford, Senior Vice President of the Cleveland-based Neighborhood Progress Inc., noted that Cleveland had been “hit harder and earlier by the foreclosure wave.” But Cleveland, Ford added, also “has a long and rich history of community organizing and labor organizing. It is not in our genes to sit and not do anything – this is a city with a fighting spirit. Flippers and speculators have learned that the hard way.” Ford’s speech was followed by a keynote address by Chicago journalist Alex Kotlowitz, who had written about foreclosures in Cleveland in a *New York Times Magazine* cover article titled “All Boarded Up” (March 4, 2009). Kotlowitz highlighted the role of Cleveland’s municipal housing court, where Judge Ray Pianka presides. Kotlowitz hailed Pianka’s courtroom as an example of “how American justice ought to work – with an eye to rebuilding community.” In particular, Pianka used a Court that typically focused on enforcing code violations to try banks that owned degraded properties in absentia and fined them when they didn’t appear on contempt charges. Kotlowitz called on attendees to “break the silence” that has enveloped the foreclosure crisis. “We do that by telling stories,” Kotlowitz added.

Shaun Donovan, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), drew the attention more to the “policy side” of the theme and served as the keynote speaker at the conference’s final plenary session. Donovan highlighted the Neighborhood Stabilization Program, which has provided communities with \$7 billion to help finance land acquisition and support the productive reuse of foreclosed property. Donovan highlighted some of the local efforts in the state of Ohio: “Columbus is acquiring homes and strategically locating new housing next door... Cuyahoga [County] is land banking vacant properties.” The goal, Donovan added is to make “neighborhood stabilization the comprehensive tool it needs to be” to enable greater collaboration across municipal lines and between government, philanthropic, and nonprofit partners.

For more information on the Center for Community Partners, see:
<http://www.communityprogress.net>. Presentations made during conference breakout sessions are also available on line at: <http://www.communityprogress.net/2010-reclaiming-vacant-properties-conference-pages-82.php>.