



First of its kind program to help cities reclaim abandoned properties, reverse blight

National Vacant Properties Campaign will give extra boost to seven cities already working to help themselves

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www.vacantproperties.org/press061505.html

WASHINGTON D.C., June 15, 2005 — In the first such systematic, multi-city effort, a consortium of national organizations will **provide expert assistance to seven cities** working to reclaim vacant and abandoned properties and restore vitality and livability to city neighborhoods.

With funding from the Surdna Foundation, the National Vacant Properties Campaign will bring national experts to help local officials, nonprofits, and residents adopt cutting-edge strategies for reclaiming their streets and neighborhoods. The cities are **Baltimore, Md., Bridgeport, Conn., Buffalo, N.Y., Indianapolis, Ind., Richmond, Va, Spartanburg, S.C., and Tucson, Ariz.** The Campaign is a collaboration of four leading national organizations, Smart Growth America (SGA), Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), and the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech (MI).

“Up to now, cities have struggled in relative isolation to solve their abandonment problems,” said Don Chen, SGA’s executive director. “But now they have a community of experts and practitioners to tap into. The Campaign received proposals from over 50 communities seeking assistance, indicating widespread need for the improved strategies and exchange of expertise the Campaign fosters.”

The assistance program comes at a time when many cities are recognizing abandoned properties as a formidable obstacle to stabilizing neighborhoods and stimulating their renewal. "While portions of America's older cities are seeing a resurgence of investment and a renewed interest in urban living, many continue to be held back by blighted and abandoned properties," said Jennifer Leonard, director of the Campaign.

"Abandoned buildings and vacant lots depress property values, reduce tax revenues, and discourage development, while at the same time acting as fire hazards and magnets for crime," added Robert O'Neill, executive director of ICMA. The National Fire Protection Association says that 6,000 firefighters are injured each year in vacant or abandoned building fires, and in some jurisdictions more than 70 percent of fires originate in abandoned buildings. Crime rates on blocks with open abandoned buildings were twice as high as rates on matched blocks without open buildings.

At the same time, these areas represent opportunity. Vacant and abandoned properties occupy about 15 percent of the area of the typical large city, more than 12,000 acres on average. This is usable land already connected to urban infrastructure. For metropolitan areas looking to accommodate growth without consuming the surrounding countryside, these properties amount to a large reservoir of land for well-planned development.

In Baltimore, for example, where the city recently has taken action to acquire 5,000 of its vacant properties, the Campaign's consultation will help the city develop stronger systems to manage its inventory of properties, prepare them for redevelopment and track progress. In Richmond, the assistance will support the city's efforts to promote reuse of abandoned properties, while also establishing a preventive program. The assistance will build on successful programs like Neighborhoods in Bloom, which has already returned 200 vacant properties to productive use. (A summary of each city's program will be posted at www.vacantproperties.org.)

The value of the technical assistance ranges from \$15,000 to \$70,000 per city, and could include roundtable discussions with national experts, consultations by public officials from cities leading effective local programs, and implementation of specific strategies.

“While nonprofit community organizations have made great strides in redeveloping vacant properties, they can achieve far greater impact as part of a city’s systematic effort to overcome the legal and economic barriers to reclamation,” said Michael Rubinger, LISC’s president and CEO. “The campaign is designed to help cities create those systematic approaches.”

A wide variety of cities and towns responded to the Campaign’s call for assistance. The majority of applicants were from medium sized communities in the North and the Midwest, with populations of 75,000 and above. But even communities in fast growing regions, such as Tucson Arizona, sought help. “A critical element in our assistance is to identify model programs and practices that are relevant for the scope and nature of a community’s vacant property problems,” said Joseph Schilling, Professor in Practice with the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech. “Part of our mission is to plant the seeds of revitalization through sharing innovative ideas from around the country.”

About the National Vacant Properties Campaign

The National Vacant Properties Campaign was launched by Smart Growth America, LISC, and ICMA in 2003 to advocate for property reclamation and offer technical assistance to communities. It is designed to help local governments and nonprofits throughout the country develop effective solutions to the pervasive problem of property abandonment — from producing cutting-edge research, identifying and disseminating policy innovations and best practices, and presenting model legislation. In addition to the pilot T.A. Program, the Campaign also offers fee-for-service technical assistance for local governments, nonprofit organizations, and communities. Funders of the Campaign include the Fannie Mae Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the C.S. Mott Foundation, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the Surdna Foundation.

About Smart Growth America

Smart Growth America (SGA) is a coalition of national, state, and local organizations working to improve the ways we plan and build the towns, cities and metro areas we call home. The coalition includes many of the best-known national organizations advocating on behalf of historic preservation, the environment, farmland and open space preservation, neighborhood revitalization and more. Our state- and

regional-level members are community-based organizations working to save treasured landscapes while making our towns and cities ever more livable and lovable. For more information, visit <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/>.

About Local Initiatives Support Corporation

Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) helps people build better lives and brighter futures by transforming distressed communities and neighborhoods into healthy ones. Through mobilization of corporate, government, and philanthropic support, helps provide community development corporations (CDCs) the technical expertise, training, and policy support they need to create affordable housing, commercial and retail property, community facilities, businesses, and jobs in their communities. For more information, visit <http://www.lisc.org/>.

About ICMA

The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) promotes excellence in local government through professional management. Toward this end, ICMA provides technical and management assistance, training and professional development, online services, and publications to nearly 7,600 appointed local government managers and administrators in cities, towns, counties, and other entities throughout the world.

About the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech

The Metropolitan Institute (MI) conducts applied research and provides strategic policy guidance on the key forces shaping metropolitan growth such as demographics, environment, technology, design, transportation, and governance. Through its Green Region's Initiative, MI will investigate innovative approaches to creating environmental sustainable regions through the revitalization and reclamation of vacant properties. For more information visit www.mi.vt.edu.