



National Vacant Properties Campaign, First National Conference, September 2007
Conference Report
By **Lisa Schames**

The Heart of What Matters

First National Conference on Vacant Properties Focuses on Ethics, Values, and Practical Solutions

“Vacant property is not a victimless crime.” The words of noted urban expert Alan Mallach became a rallying cry for the 600 participants in the first annual national conference on vacant properties, held in Pittsburgh September 24 and 25 and sponsored by the National Vacant Properties Campaign, in partnership with the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland.

In more than 30 concurrent sessions, mobile workshops, poster sessions, and special meetings, participants described a wide variety of community conditions and strategies to reclaim vacant and abandoned properties, from urban greening to legal action to nuisance abatement to mayor-driven community development. At the same time, participants sounded several consistent themes, including the deeply held belief that vacant property abatement is, at its heart, an ethical imperative.

“You don’t have the right to own a nuisance property,” said Michael Groman of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, in response to questions about negligent property owners who claim private property rights against public action. Deeohn Ferris, director of Sustainable Community Development group, LLC, challenged her audience to think in terms of community responsibility for vacant properties: “Our panelists have talked about how to [address vacant properties and revitalize communities]. I want to talk to you about *why* it’s important. There are places around the nation where land use, zoning, disinvestments, and other policies gave rise to vacant properties, and we are really talking about rebuilding our communities, not just bricks and mortars.” Ferris was among several prominent speakers who placed vacant property issues squarely in the field of environmental justice, telling audiences candidly that, “I am going to use the dreaded R word [race] and the dreaded C word” [class].

“Vacant properties affect all communities,” said the Ford Foundation’s George McCarthy. It is “a huge problem, not only in weak market cities but also in robust communities.” McCarthy and other speakers emphasized wide variation in practices and success rates in different communities, with a sense that many communities were working in isolation and reinventing the wheel.

The extraordinary attendance at the first NVPC Conference indicates the need for a national forum in which to share best practices. Some participants even called for a new, national urban policy to address vacant properties and related concerns. Usually seen as a symptom or adjunct to other pressing socioeconomic issues in urban areas, vacant properties are coming into their own as an important issue across the nation.

Notwithstanding the need for national exchange and national policy, McCarthy pointed out that solutions to vacant properties remain distinctly local in nature, with several capacities that had to be addressed, including local development capacities (staffing, leadership, expertise, etc).

McCarthy observed that the vacant property issue “sits on the boundary of two competing and powerful cultural norms or values: concerns for private property rights and the role of the public sector to reinforce and even force whatever it takes for the public good.” McCarthy held out hope that some solutions to vacant property issues can “unite both interests under the same tent.”

That vacant property abatement was not merely a matter of eliminating blight but is a catalyst for improving communities is dramatically illustrated by the findings of Susan Wachter of the Wharton School, among them that while blighted and abandoned properties can reduce adjacent property values by 20 percent, cleaned-and-greened lots actually *increase* adjacent property values by approximately 17 percent.

Property values and the commodity aspects of these properties aside, there was a call for philanthropic organizations to make a real commitment to equitable reinvestment in distressed neighborhoods with high vacancy rates. Left only to market forces, the reality is that many who lived through the worst conditions in their neighborhoods will be forced out or, at a minimum, last in line to receive any consideration as their neighborhoods bounce back. In the words of the Surdna Foundation’s Kim Burnett: “Addressing the needs of people who are living beside these vacant properties [is critical]. In places where there is revitalization, you need a strong nonprofit sector that can push back and say ‘who are we building this city for?’”

“Reclaiming Vacant Properties: Strategies for Rebuilding America’s Neighborhoods” was sponsored by the National Vacant Properties Campaign in partnership with the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. Sponsors were the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Genesee Institute, PNC Bank, the Surdna Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Heinz Endowments, Safeguard Properties, the National Association of Realtors, and VPS. In addition, the Conference Host Committee members and additional Conference Partners gave generously of their time and resources.