

Buffalo River valley (Ben Gingrich)



Buffalo as the Nation's First Living Laboratory for Reclaiming Vacant Properties

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In 2006 a team of national experts from the National Vacant Properties Campaign devised a regional revitalization strategy for Buffalo and Erie County, New York to address the blight and abandonment caused by the mounting numbers of vacant properties. Blueprint Buffalo set forth four leadership actions to coordinate efforts among city, county, and suburban communities. Local leaders would then implement four fundamental policy strategies that include real property information systems, comprehensive code enforcement, land banking, and green infrastructure.

Beyond these policy approaches to vacant property reclamation, the Blueprint calls for the designation of Buffalo/Erie County as the nation's first Living Laboratory for Vacant Property Reclamation. The Blueprint envisions the Living Lab as a collaborative model to test new plans and innovative designs for reclaiming vacant properties and revitalizing neighborhoods. Based on the German International Building Exhibition model (IBA, pronounced Ee-ba) from Emscher Park, the Living Lab would hold design competitions, manage pilot reuse projects, facilitate planning and zoning code reforms, and serve as a forum for civic engagement on right sizing.

This paper presents a vision of what the Living Lab would look like and how it could provide older industrial communities with a new paradigm for addressing the intractable blight and decay caused by vacant properties. Considering the patterns of decline and abandonment that stretch across the Northeast and Midwest, the Living Lab offers a unique vehicle for integrating federal, state, and local revitalization policies on a regional and perhaps mega-region level. The Living Lab would act as an incubator for innovative responses to the problems of shrinking cities, replacing abandoned buildings with networks of green infrastructure, taking urban agriculture to scale, and clustering homes and businesses into new green villages.

Buffalo Background

Once the eighth largest city in the United States, with a 1950 population of 580,132, the 2005 interim Census estimates that only 279,745 residents officially live within the city of Buffalo.¹ Buffalo, like its sister cities of Cleveland, Detroit, and Pittsburgh, offers a classic Rust Belt saga of dramatic displacement and economic dislocation caused by the loss of manufacturing companies, steel industries, and blue collar jobs. A convergence of factors—poverty, property speculation, fiscal instability of local government, poorly performing schools, and crime—have led to decades of disinvestment and decay.

Demographic and economic trends do not indicate any dramatic influx of new residents on Buffalo's horizon. While the city shrank, the suburbs grew. From 1960 to 2000 the region's urbanized area nearly tripled in size, from 123 square miles in 1950 to 367 square miles in 2000. Between 1980 and 2000, households in devel-

1. Thomas, G. Scott, "Declining Populations Shrinks Cities, Suburbs," *Buffalo Business First: Western New York's Business Newspaper*, June 23, 2006. At, buffalobizjournals.com/buffalo/stories/2006/06/26/story3.htm.

2. Joseph Schilling, Lisa Schames, Jonathan Logan, Blueprint Buffalo (Action Plan)-Regional Strategies and Local Tools for Reclaiming Vacant Properties in the City and Suburbs of Buffalo (October 2006). Pages 3-5. Accessed on July 13th at www.vacantproperties.org/buffalo.

3. The Shrinking Cities Project from Germany produced three publications: *The Atlas of Shrinking Cities* (Oswalt & Rieniets, 2006), *Shrinking Cities Volume 1: International Research* (Oswalt, 2005) and *Shrinking Cities Volume 2: Interventions* (Oswalt 2006) as well as an international traveling exhibit that was shown in New York, Detroit, and Cleveland. Additionally, in 2007 the Institute for Urban and Regional Development at UC Berkeley held an international symposium to discuss shrinking cities, the first of its kind in the US.

4. A 2004 report of Erie County Cornell Cooperative Extension Association (Vacant Land, Buildings, and Facilities Assets Management Project, January 2004) estimated that in the City of Buffalo alone, there were 13,000 vacant parcels, 4,000 vacant structures and about 22,290 vacant residential units. Given the current foreclosure crisis, the estimate of vacant properties continues to grow.

5. Ken Belson, "Vacant Houses, Scourge of a Beaten-Down Buffalo," *New York Times*, September 13, 2007.

6. Based on U.S. Postal Service data from March 31st, 2006 to September 20, 2007 Buffalo had 2,300 addresses where mail was not delivered for a period of 90 consecutive days or longer; this represents a 2% decrease of the city's total number of addresses in just six months. Presentation by Anthony Armstrong at the Northeast Midwest Coalition Vacant Properties Briefing, October 31st, 2007. Accessed on July 13th, 2008 at www.nemw.org.

oped areas of the Buffalo-Niagara region increased by 1 percent, while they increased by 33 percent in outlying areas, most of which were previously open land and green-space.²

A Footprint Too Big for Its Needs

Although Buffalo's population is less than half of what it once was, the city still has roughly the same footprint of roads, housing, and commercial/industrial buildings. Buffalo has lost thousands of residents and jobs as families moved to the suburbs in search of better schools, safer neighborhoods, and new opportunities. This phenomenon of shrinking cities repeats itself in communities throughout the Rust Belt. Thanks to the recent publications and exhibitions of the international shrinking cities network, more communities here in the United States are considering new planning and design strategies.³ The challenge for Buffalo and other shrinking cities is how to readjust or "right-size" a city's physical and built environment so it mirrors the city's and the region's existing and projected population.

Abandonment and the Costs of Vacant Properties

Another result of this exodus of people is the thousands of dilapidated homes, abandoned buildings, and vacant lots they left behind. The Buffalo-Niagara Region has approximately 40,000 vacant properties with roughly 10,000 to 13,000 located in the City of Buffalo.⁴ Buffalo is second only to St. Louis in the number of vacant properties per capita nationwide.⁵ A 2006 short video portrays the visual and community impact from the intense level of abandonment found on Buffalo's East Side (<http://www.brightcove.com/title.jsp?title=932486786>).

No one knows the precise number of vacant properties and databases do not include a comprehensive inventory of all vacant property types (residential, commercial, industrial, etc.) Recent data from the Postal Service on undeliverable address, however, paints a grim picture of abandonment on the rise.⁶ Moreover, fluctuations in market conditions, such as the current foreclosure crisis, make it difficult for most local governments to continuously track and maintain accurate inventories of vacant properties.

By their nature, many of these vacant parcels and buildings require local governments to take drastic and expensive public measures. Vacant properties are expensive for a city to maintain and protect. According to the *New York Times*, "gangs, squatters, and teenagers have been burning down hundreds of houses each year... the burned-out and boarded up buildings, which are visible on almost every street in East Buffalo, have deterred even the most pioneering investors from moving

in.”⁷ Moreover, the Times reports that 41% of all fires in Buffalo during the first 10 months of 2007 were in vacant homes; more than 90 percent of all arson fires, amongst the most dangerous to public safety personnel, were in abandoned properties. Vacant properties drain city treasuries through “nuisance reports, inspections, maintenance and mowing, forgone taxes, and eventual demolition costs.”⁸ For Buffalo the costs for each vacant property range from \$12,000 - \$20,000 over a five year period, depending upon the resource consulted.⁹

7. Op. Cit. Belson.

8. *Blueprint Buffalo*, p. 3.

9. *Blueprint Buffalo*, p. 3. Mayor Brown’s “5-in-5” demolition plan, p. 2.

Blight and Abandonment Capture a Foothold in the Suburbs

First tier suburban communities throughout the Buffalo/Erie county region are now facing challenges similar to those of the traditional urban core: declining population, aging housing, underused commercial sites, and deteriorating infrastructure. More than 50 percent of the county’s housing stock was built before 1960. Erie County’s first suburbs ranked 60th of 64 regions studied in terms of housing values with an average inflation-adjusted appreciation of only 33.5 percent.¹⁰

The Buffalo region’s most densely settled inner-city neighborhoods and its compact rural village and town centers continue to lose households. The urban areas experiencing decline include portions of the cities of Buffalo, Niagara Falls, Lockport, Tonawanda, and North Tonawanda, along with portions of the town of Niagara in Niagara County and Amherst, Cheektowaga and West Seneca in Erie County.¹¹

10. Robert Puentes and D. Warren, *One-Half of the Nation: America’s First Suburbs*, Brookings Institution (2006).

The Blueprint report identified the growing vacant property challenges in each of the adjacent suburban communities of Tonawanda, Cheektowaga, and Amherst.¹² Tonawanda was experiencing a steady annual increase in problem property cases. Its Building and Housing Department reports several hundred problem-property cases each year—and inspectors are seeing more chronically vacant homes and dilapidated rental units owned by out-of-town investors. Cheektowaga has fewer housing cases, but its code enforcement staff is now confronting the same business model that slumlords and speculators once reserved for the central city. Amherst’s strip shopping centers are experiencing a serious downturn, with vacant storefronts and “big-box” sites threatening to become chronic greyfields. As these commercial properties sit idle, sometimes for years, they can become eyesores that discourage and even drive away new retail and office uses. Together all of these conditions create the right climate for abandonment in the suburbs.

11. As early as the spring of 2003, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Buffalo Branch reported a trend toward more home foreclosures in three outer-ring neighborhoods of Buffalo, on both the east and west sides—a strong indicator of the spread of long-term or chronic vacancy beyond the city limits.

12. D. Esmonde, “Warnings of Sprawl Come True,” *The Buffalo News* (August 16, 2006).

Blueprint Basics—a regional revitalization strategy

As set forth in The Erie-Niagara Framework for Regional Growth, abandonment and disinvestment have now become region-wide problems. Without a cohesive array of development incentives and a coherent, regional approach, city and suburban governments will continue to work on their own programs, often duplicating efforts and investing resources that could be more efficiently used through regional collaboration and coordination.

Regional challenges demand regional solutions. While Buffalo-Niagara's latter-day legacy of disinvestment and decline has been studied and re-studied, few policymakers have considered reclaiming vacant properties as a regional revitalization strategy. Given the complexity and longevity of Buffalo-Niagara'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.

Four Essential Leadership Actions

Blueprint Buffalo report outlines four key actions for public, private and nonprofit leaders along with a framework of effective vacant property strategies. Each leadership action provides support for the specific vacant property strategies and tools set forth in the Action Plan:¹³

13. Blueprint Buffalo recommends four fundamental vacant property strategies: 1) develop a regional real property information system; 2) institute a comprehensive code enforcement approach; 3) establish a multi-purpose land bank authority or program and green infrastructure initiative to right size the city's most distressed neighborhoods; 4) create a holistic policy framework to the redevelopment of greyfields and Brownfields throughout the entire region. *Blueprint Buffalo*, p. 36.

Leadership Action One: Launch a citywide vacant properties initiative led by Buffalo's Mayor Byron Brown and his Offices of Strategic Planning and Economic Development.

Leadership Action Two: Develop a first-tier suburban vacant property agenda, spearheaded by local elected officials and civic/business leaders from first-tier suburban communities.

Leadership Action Three: 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 institutional capacities and partnerships; and

Leadership Action Four: Establish Buffalo-Niagara as a Vacant Property Living Laboratory (the nation's first such national demonstration model) through a series of innovative policy initiatives and done in partnership with relevant federal and state agencies and the regional vacant properties coordinating council.

Buffalo as a Living Laboratory of Revitalization

The first step in making the Living Lab a reality is to design its legal and policy structure. Even without a cohesive federal urban agenda, the Living Lab would likely require federal legislative and policy guidance so it could streamline and pilot test new economic and community development models. Strong and innovative state leadership will also be necessary to officially charter the Living Lab.¹⁴ State policies would then empower local governments, universities, and business to experiment with alternative, community-driven redevelopment approaches that transform blighted areas into destinations and neighborhoods.

University at Buffalo as the Living Lab's Institutional Home

The second step is identifying the entity that would oversee this regional regeneration initiative. The institution would need the respect and trust of its partners so it can facilitate collaboration across the region and help coordinate the vacant property leadership actions of the city, the suburbs, and the region. The Blueprint proposed that University at Buffalo, through its Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth, act as the institutional home for the Living Lab. The activity of inviting and supporting innovative practices for the purpose of advancing knowledge and expertise seems consistent with a university's mission.

University centers and institutes are often in ideal positions to navigate the complexities of the political, academic, and policy worlds. First and foremost, universities have a strong track record acting as neutral conveners and coordinators. Second, each federal agency engaged in community and economic development (HUD, EDA, EPA, and DOT) already fund special university centers that do research and provide technical assistance.¹⁵ Third, universities can enlist faculty and student resources to participate in the design and testing of new policies. Fourth, they could actively recruit other universities to participate and perhaps establish a network of living labs from other shrinking cities.

Experimenting with Policy Innovations

The Living Lab would orchestrate a series of collaborative policy actions by city, county, federal, and state housing, community, and economic development agencies and departments. The Living Lab would incubate policy innovation and pilot projects that create new models of urban regeneration, such as:

14. More research would be necessary to identify the optimum legal structure and sources of funds for its initial launch. Perhaps the authorizing charter could create a Living Laboratory Fund to which private business and regional and national foundations could contribute grants and gifts in support of this work in Buffalo.

15. For example, HUD maintains the Office of University Partnerships (OUP), DOT operates University Transportation Centers as part of its Research and Innovative Technology Administration (RITA), EPA has its Environmental Finance Programs that provide technical assistance and advice on environmental policy issues; EDA's University Center Economic Development Program is a long standing partnership that channels the expertise of academic institutions to communities with economic disparities and challenges. Given this federal institutional framework, we believe Congress and the new President could charter a Living Lab University institute that would require participation from multiple federal agencies.

Coordination and Integration of Economic Development and Community

Revitalization Resources: Federal and state economic and community development policy in this country is extremely fragmented with dozens of different agencies overseeing hundreds of grants, programs, and projects. During the Blueprint process the assessment team identified more than 100 separate federal, state, and local government incentives and tax breaks, such as the Enterprise Zones and the Brownfields Opportunity Areas. The Living Laboratory could search for ways to integrate these revitalization policies and consolidate duplicative redevelopment incentives and redevelopment agencies.

Performance-Based Regulatory Standards: Participants in the Living Lab should test the feasibility of more performance-based regulatory and development standards, such as state environmental cleanup standards for Brownfields redevelopment or special state rehabilitation building codes. Performance based models permit the government to work with property owners, the private sector, and nonprofit groups to forge creative solutions to intractable regulatory barriers. U.S. EPA experimented with a similar approach called Project XL (environmental excellence) whereby regulators negotiated new standards that were tailored to a particular project. In exchange, the industry or developer provided enhanced or supplemental environmental benefits. One of the Project XL success stories was the redevelopment of the old Atlantic Steel complex in Atlanta, which was transformed into a new-urbanist, mixed-use village (www.atlanticstation.com/concept_greenstar.php).

Revitalization Authorities: Another area for the Living Lab to explore is new models for redevelopment authorities. During the Blueprint process discussions arose about the possible merger of the industrial development agencies within Erie County. These debates raise the larger question of whether merger of these IDAs perpetuates a model that no longer fits the conditions of the region. The Living Lab should examine effective multi-dimensional programs such as the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh (www.ura.org/), which includes brownfields redevelopment and vacant housing, and the Genesee County Land Bank Authority (www.thelandbank.org).

Right-sizing through Green Infrastructure: Replacing vacant and abandoned properties with green infrastructure would be a top priority for the Living Lab. By converting surplus, blighted land into green space, right sizing would create community assets while aligning supply more closely with existing and foreseeable future levels of demand. With an abundance of vacant properties, shrinking cities provide fertile ground for neighborhood-scale and citywide greening strategies. Pioneering cities like Philadelphia, PA, and Lawrence, MA, have developed successful, cutting-edge urban greening initiatives that could provide the foundation for the Living Lab's right sizing initiatives.

Green collar jobs could also arise through the deconstruction and recycling of materials from the demolition of abandoned buildings. Additionally, cities could market the ability of urban forests on vacant land as long-term carbon sequestration sites and use vacant lots for urban farms and community supported agriculture initiatives.

Green Business Attraction Strategy: Just as some regions have created new market niches in their business base by offering incentives to high-tech or bio-tech businesses, Buffalo could encourage green-building designers, architecture firms, and construction companies to establish offices in a Buffalo Green Business Corridor, offering tax incentives and site relocation assistance to businesses in the growing green-building sector, along with resources for testing and perfecting green building techniques. Such businesses—with their high tolerance for risk and challenge and their focus on environmental remediation and enhancement—are ideal partners for the brownfield/greyfield sites, reclaimed land, and older buildings that will make up the bulk of the Living Lab's focus areas.

Emulating Germany's International Building Exhibition Model

Germany has a long tradition of state governments, universities, and communities working together to demonstrate innovative models of urban regeneration under the framework of International Building Exhibitions (IBA, pronounced Ee-ba) to spotlight creative regeneration projects.¹⁶ In 1989 the state government of North Rhine-Westphalia chartered the Emscher Park IBA in the Ruhr Valley—with a special focus on regeneration through industrial heritage.¹⁷ Emscher Park sought to change the negative image of the Ruhr by revitalizing a 20 by 50 mile industrial rustbelt with more than 5,000 acres of Brownfields.¹⁸

Instead of relying on existing regional authorities, the state established a small development agency to oversee the work. With fewer than 30 staff members, IBA Emscher Park involved four boards with members from critical state ministries along with regional and local governments, and technical experts. By vesting power in a new entity, IBA Emscher Park had greater flexibility to devise a vision for the region and minimize the competition among local political parties and local governments.

Over a ten year period IBA Emscher Park invested about \$2 billion in a broad range of activities to transform the ecology of derelict landscapes, rejuvenate the Emscher River, convert Brownfields into exhibits of industrial heritage, promote architecturally outstanding ideas, and promote cultural heritage and the arts to enhance the environment and create new jobs.

16. Internationale Bauausstellungen (IBA) have a long history in Germany, starting as far back at 1911 in Stuttgart and 1957 with Interbau. IBAs did not become interesting from an urban planning and political perspective until 1979 when West Berlin chartered an IBA to examine the Wilhelminian building stock that was originally meant to be bulldozed and replaced by social housing. When these plans became totally stuck (in part due to a militant squatter movement, partly due to financial and organizational difficulties) IBA was used as a means to bypass the usual political procedures and to work out solutions outside existing regulations and power structures. (Interview with Matthias Bent, May 6th, 2008).

17. www.epa.gov/brownfields/partners/emscher.html.

18. Klaus R. Kunzmann. "Creative Brownfields Redevelopment—the Experience of the IBA Emscher Park Initiative in the Ruhr in Germany," in eds. Rosalind Greenstein and Yesim Sungu-Eeryilmaz, *Recycling the City—the Use and Reuse of Urban Land*, Lincoln Land Institute (2004).

The IBA model provides provide the essential ingredients necessary for incubating pilot projects to test new policies and new designs. More than traditional design competitions, IBAs provide a broad quasi-public framework that integrates economic redevelopment, environmental sustainability, industrial heritage, public art, and recreation.

Given the success of Emscher Park, Germany currently has three IBAs: IBA Fuerst Pueckler Park in the Lusatia Region, that deals with postindustrial landscapes in a similar way to IBA Emscher Park; IBA Stadtumbau in the state of Saxony-Anhalt that focuses on the rebuilding of shrinking cities; and the IBA in Hamburg that examines economic development issues surrounding the knowledge society and immigration.

Design competitions

Buffalo's Living Lab could easily borrow and adapt various elements from these successful models:

The “Right-Sizing Buffalo” Design Competition: University at Buffalo and the city could sponsor an international design competition that brings together the most talented landscape architects, planners, and policy experts to collaboratively craft a potpourri of strategies for “right-sizing” Buffalo neighborhoods consistent with projected population, job growth, and existing levels of property abandonment. Major themes of the competition would include green infrastructure, landscape urbanism, and green building design. A great example of such a design competition is Philadelphia's Urban Voids Design competition (www.vanalen.org/urbanvoids).

“Retrofitting Commercial Corridors” Design Competition: Another design competition could focus on the underused or neglected commercial zones that plague first-tier suburbs along with the City of Buffalo. Many communities across the country are transforming tired malls and decaying shopping centers into vibrant mixed-use villages with housing and retail along with public schools, libraries, and town halls. Why not bring talented architects and designers from these successful projects to Buffalo through a competition that also includes the nation's first design competition for form-based codes? The New Millennium Group of Western New York, a citizen group committed to focused regional growth and urban design, is already exploring form-based codes; they could team up with Partners for a Livable Western New York or the First Suburbs Network.

Living Laboratory Demonstration Pilot Projects

The Living Lab would manage a series of special demonstration projects for revitalizing different types of vacant properties throughout the entire region. They

would pilot-test new building designs and land-use plans at various scales ranging from the neighborhood and community level to cities/towns and perhaps even on a regional scale. Similar to the IBA at Emscher Park, these pilot projects could test new adaptive reuses of industrial properties, such as cultural heritage museums of the industrial age. Green building design could also be highlighted, along with landscape urbanism, urban agriculture, renewable energy and other aspects of sustainability.

Community and University Engagement Activities

The Living Lab must offer a wide range of avenues for building civic and neighborhood organizations, engaging residents, and motivating new leaders, such as

- Living Laboratory Study Circles and Charrettes: which focus not only on the physical redesign of neighborhoods but also the redesign of policy and regulatory structures, such as zoning.
- Circle of Elders: retired public and private sector officials who volunteer their time and talent for projects and serve as the connection to Buffalo's rich traditions and culture.
- Circle of Young Leaders: young professional, entrepreneurs, and nonprofit leaders who show great promise and commitment to the revitalization of Buffalo. Build on the extensive virtual network of Buffalo Rising and Fix Buffalo.
- Living Laboratory Fellows: Recruit international teams of professors and graduate students that would bring the best minds in the United States and abroad to develop and test new policies, designs, and projects. Perhaps federal and state education resources, along with foundation grants, could provide stipends and fellowships of 18 to 36 months so they can become temporary residents of Buffalo. Think of these Living Lab Fellows as domestic Fulbright scholars that concentrates on urban regeneration and strategies for shrinking cities.
- Living Laboratory Educational Consortium: The Living Lab would also engage all local universities to recruit and empower students and professors for a series of studios, practicums, and clinics that devise and assist innovative vacant property programs and policies. They could easily expand the concept to local middle and high schools to develop curricula around vacant property revitalization and devote public service classes or offer credit to students to help community groups and property owners revitalize their neighborhoods and homes.

Document Results—Share New Models

An essential responsibility of the Living Lab is documenting the experience itself, monitoring the results, and facilitating the transfer of new models. Important insights can be learned from testing new programs and policies that do not always generate the anticipated result or benefits. The Living Lab must encourage risk-taking so that it can truly invent new approaches to revitalizing vacant properties.

One idea that comes to mind is for the University at Buffalo and other members of the Living Lab Advisory Board to enlist the expertise of documentary film makers (perhaps even convene a film competition) to tell the story of the Living Lab—its successes, its challenges, and its commitment to the regeneration of Buffalo. Beyond documenting the experience, the medium of filmmaking, photography, storytelling and the arts are powerful ways to share the lessons of regeneration.

A Network of Living Labs

Beyond Buffalo and Erie County, other shrinking cities (e.g., Cleveland, Detroit, Dayton, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Youngstown, Rochester, etc.) could benefit from the Living Lab policy framework. While a few communities have innovative programs and projects—Youngstown's smart decline comprehensive plan, Genesee County's land bank authority and Philadelphia's urban greening initiatives—no American city has yet to organize these individual reclamation programs into a cohesive and comprehensive right sizing initiative. Lessons on policy integration, leadership, community and government capacity could easily translate and transfer across these shrinking cities.

Since diffusion of innovation is an essential tenet of the Living Lab, why not form a network of living labs to share model practices and collaboratively problem solve? For example, the International Shrinking Cities initiative offers good lessons on how to organize and promote the transfer of innovative right sizing models, alternative designs, and cultural reuse.¹⁹ A potential network is already emerging between Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Youngstown.²⁰ Perhaps a national organization, such as the National Vacant Properties Campaign, could facilitate and manage such a network of Living Labs.

Blueprint Buffalo Postscript

Despite the Blueprint's holistic framework of strategies and leadership actions, city and county officials continue to work independently of each other. As illustrated in a three part Buffalo News expose, residents are frustrated about the city's lack of

19. In 2002 four international interdisciplinary teams came together to study and document the process of shrinking cities in Detroit, Manchester/Liverpool, Ivanovo (Russia) and Halle/Leipzig (Germany) (see www.shrinkingcities.com)

20. With assistance from the Surdna Foundation, Kent State's CUDC and the Cleveland-based nonprofit Neighborhood Progress, Inc. organized a one-day learning session to facilitate the sharing of shrinking city strategies among these three rust belt communities, <http://shoutyoungstown.blogspot.com/2008/06/clepittyo-regional-learning-network.html> (accessed July 12, 2008).

progress on vacant property reclamation.²¹ As decline and decay persists and festers within the city of Buffalo, vacant properties have now gained a foothold in first-tier suburban communities. Even rural areas are started to feel the pinch of abandonment. Moreover, the current foreclosure crisis foreshadows even greater levels of vacancy and abandonment on the horizon.

Transformative policy change is a complex and difficult task. Buffalo, like many shrinking cities attacks the contagion of vacant properties with safe, incremental approaches to community and economic development. Relying almost exclusively on the promise of state funds, in August 2007 Mayor Brown announced his “5 x 5” plan to demolish 5,000 properties in 5 years. Demolition is an essential strategy, but it must be done in a surgical fashion driven by neighborhood based reclamation plans.

Progress towards the Blueprint’s vision continues one step at a time. For example, in June 2008 the New York Legislature passed land bank legislation that could create an Erie County land bank authority. In the fall of 2007, through the coalition building of Buffalo LISC, Groundwork USA awarded a modest planning grant to explore the formation of a nonprofit urban greening initiative. The Erie County Legislature has established a Vacant Properties Task Force with participation across governmental levels, non-profit institutions, and academia. Buffalo LISC along with a growing team of neighborhood based organizations conduct neighborhood condition surveys and inventory the mounting number of vacant properties by relying on new Postal Service data of undeliverable addresses. The University at Buffalo’s Regional Institute is also seeking foundation funding for the creation of a regional real property information system.

The Living Lab still offers Buffalo and Erie County the opportunity to connect these disparate policies and players, but more importantly, it provides the only policy model that would pilot test new ideas, take bold action, and facilitate the transformative policy change necessary to address the intractable blight and abandonment caused by vacant properties.

21. Phil Fairbanks, “SPECIAL REPORT: ABANDONED HOMES, Neglected homes and vacant lots leave Buffalo residents angry,” *Buffalo News* (July 6, 2008).

