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# **COMBATING PROBLEMS OF VACANT AND ABANDONED PROPERTIES**

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*Best Practices in 27 Cities*



**The United States Conference of Mayors  
June 2006**

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## **Task Force on Vacant and Abandoned Properties**

**John M. Fabrizi, Mayor of Bridgeport**

**Chair**

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## FOREWORD

As Chair of The U.S. Conference of Mayors Task Force on Vacant and Abandoned Properties, I extend my thanks to all the mayors who contributed to this initial Task Force report on efforts to combat the problems of vacant and abandoned properties in our cities. I believe that the exchange of “best practices” among mayors is one of the simplest and most effective things we can do to help one another tackle the complex and costly problems these properties create.

I’m opening this report with a brief description of a couple of initiatives we have undertaken in my City, Bridgeport, the largest city in Connecticut. I believe the problems that prompted these initiatives are representative of the kinds of challenges faced by mayors across the country.

In Connecticut, the major revenue source for a municipality’s budget is the property tax. We have all heard a lot of talk over the years about the unfairness of the property tax and about how it punishes our State’s urban centers. But the fact remains that, for now at least, we will continue to rely on the taxes we collect based upon the value of our real estate for the bulk of our revenue.

Of course, we continually work to hold the line on spending so as not to increase that real estate tax burden, and we continually work to find and to fight for other sources of revenue. But our biggest challenge continues to be how to maximize the amount of revenue we can raise from real estate property taxes without adding to the burden of those who already pay. One of the most obvious routes to accomplishing this is to find creative ways to develop and redevelop properties within our City that are unproductive and generating little or no tax revenue.

Unfortunately, our City’s proud manufacturing past has created some very challenging conditions for the Bridgeport of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Today we are dealing with a large number of properties that are environmentally contaminated and often are abandoned – the kind of properties that are the most difficult and costly to turn around. Nevertheless, one of our primary economic development strategies must be to return these properties to productive use and get them back on the tax rolls. Bridgeport is finalizing a new inventory of all of these unproductive, abandoned properties, and we are going to be very aggressive in the years ahead in returning these properties to productive use.

A few months ago my Administration made two recommendations regarding the future of two very significant pieces of real estate that have been unproductive for years. Without a doubt, these proposals have generated some controversy.

First, we proposed, and asked the Bridgeport City Council to approve, an agreement that will result in the redevelopment of a five-story building on State Street – an eyesore for a dozen years. The new Housatonic Community College was literally built around this decaying structure. The building’s owner owed the City significant back taxes and the building, in addition to being dysfunctional, has been tied up in all sorts of litigation. Additionally, the owner is a single asset company, which means that the only thing the City could ever hope to get from the owner is the building itself, not the back taxes owed.

For the first time in 12 years, the owner has interested a developer in rebuilding the property for commercial and residential uses. The City has agreed to receive from the new developer the fair market value for the property, \$550,000, and to give up its claim to the back taxes owed. The agreement requires performance by a date certain or the property reverts to the City’s control.

Our second initiative involved proposing tax forgiveness for an unproductive property on Housatonic Avenue which was part of the former Bridgeport Brass site. The owner has invested about \$4 million of his own money to clean up this environmentally contaminated site, which included demolishing and clearing dilapidated buildings. He intends to spend another \$1 million to finalize the clean-up if we can come to an agreement on the forgiveness of about \$1.5 million in unpaid property taxes. The proposal that we've negotiated is to forgive about 50 percent of these taxes.

Let's do the math: The City has not received taxes on the State Street property in a number of years. Because of the litigation involved, the City would not be receiving taxes for a number of additional years, and would in fact incur significant legal fees. The deal struck means that \$550,000 will be deposited in the City's general fund pending transfer of title, and it's estimated that the new development will pay \$120,000 per year in real estate taxes.

For the Housatonic Avenue property, it is estimated that a new 12.5 acre development, built in accordance with zoning allowances, would likely generate about \$400,000 per year in property taxes. This means that the City recoups what it gives up in unpaid taxes in two years. Beyond that, the City realizes significant new tax revenue.

The best practices that follow in this report contain examples, like these, of how cities of all sizes are ridding themselves of underutilized and abandoned properties that don't generate tax revenues but do generate costs of many kinds to governments and citizens. This is just the first of the reports that the Task Force will be producing in its effort to call attention to the problems posed by these properties, and the solutions that our cities are developing.

John M. Fabrizi  
Mayor of Bridgeport, CT  
Chair, Task Force on Vacant and Abandoned Properties

June 2006

## INTRODUCTION

Vacant and abandoned properties, whether residential or commercial, create costly problems for cities. They are a drain on city budgets. They detract from the quality of life, as well as the economic opportunities, of those living around them. They are an impediment to individual neighborhood redevelopment and, ultimately, to achievement of city-wide economic development goals.

Minimizing the harm done by vacant and abandoned properties and restoring these properties to productive use are priorities for mayors across the nation, and many have developed successful strategies to accomplish this. Recognizing this, in late March, The U.S. Conference of Mayors Task Force on Vacant and Abandoned Properties invited the mayors of cities throughout the nation to submit descriptions of their approaches they have taken to converting vacant and abandoned properties from costly liabilities into productive assets.

A letter sent to mayors by Conference Executive Director Tom Cochran explained that mayors' submissions would be compiled in a "best practices" report that would feature cities' approaches to all the basic elements of an abandoned property strategy – preempting the problem by preventing abandonment in the first place; gaining control of the properties in order to minimize the problems they create; and fostering the reuse of the properties for the benefit of the neighborhood and the city as a whole. Cochran explained that the report would be provided to mayors participating in this year's Annual Conference of Mayors, being held June 2-6 in Las Vegas, and then made available to others nationwide as part of the Task Force's plan to equip all mayors with resources they can use to combat abandoned property problems.

Information on a wide range of initiatives was submitted by the mayors of 27 cities ranging in size from the largest – Chicago, Dallas, and Houston – to smaller cities such as York, Burlington, and South Salt Lake. In addition to describing the major activities undertaken, most described their approach to leadership and organization, the partnerships formed with other organizations in the city, their funding sources, their most serious challenges, their accomplishments, and the lessons learned that they believe would be helpful to others wanting to replicate their initiative. Bridgeport's initiative is described in the Foreword written by the Task Force Chair, Bridgeport Mayor John M. Fabrizi.

Many of the successful initiatives described in this report are well established and large in scale, others are operating on a smaller scale, and some are just getting underway. Many of the cities have significant accomplishments to report; those with less experience are pursuing what they believe are promising strategies. All share the goal of putting troubled properties to productive use for residents and the community as a whole.



**ALBANY, NY: MAYOR GERALD D. JENNINGS**  
**Vacant Building Registry and Committee**

Over the past several years, Albany has established a multi-pronged approach to dealing with vacant and abandoned buildings, and the City continues to build upon and improve it through its Vacant Building Registry, reinvigorated Vacant Building Committee, and ongoing efforts to strengthen communication and partnerships within the City.

**Vacant Building Registry**

In July 2000 Mayor Gerald D. Jennings signed into law an ordinance creating the Albany Vacant Building Registry. The Registry was instituted to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public by establishing a registration process for vacant buildings. The process requires responsible parties to implement a maintenance plan for such buildings in order to remedy any public nuisance problems and prevent deterioration, unsightly blight, and consequent adverse impact on the value of nearby property.

The ordinance requires owners to register their buildings with the Albany Fire Department’s Division of Buildings and Codes within 30 days of becoming vacant. Owners must register vacant buildings annually, by mail or on-line, and submit a yearly \$200 fee for each registered building. The yearly fee acts as an incentive for building owners to maintain their buildings.

In addition to the dangers they pose, vacant and abandoned buildings often are signals of a neighborhood in distress or that is not a fit place to live. Such signals, in turn, discourage private investment, thereby stunting community growth. Recognizing that these buildings contribute to a “domino effect” in the loss of a city’s quality of life, staff of the Division of Buildings and Codes offers to educate and assist building owners by showing them how to mothball their buildings to make them safe and secure and to prevent deterioration. Staff also refers building owners to contractors who might be interested in buying their property, or to agencies such as the Albany Community Development Agency that may be able to offer Community Development Block Grant funds to stabilize and rehabilitate properties.

**Vacant Building Committee**

In 2005 Mayor Jennings established a Vacant Building Committee to examine how the City can be more proactive in enforcing the Vacant Building Registry and to counteract the continuing increase in the number of vacant and abandoned buildings in the City. The Committee, led by the Fire Department’s Deputy Chief for Buildings and Codes, also includes representatives from the Mayor’s Office, the City’s Corporation Counsel, a private engineering firm, the City Engineering Department, the Historic Albany Foundation, the Albany Community Development Agency, the public utility company National Grid, and the New York State Department of Codes. Currently the Committee is organizing a massive identification and notification drive that will catalog all of the vacant buildings in the City and notify building owners of the need to comply with City vacant building codes and ordinances. The following activities are being undertaken:

1. **Identification** – The Fire Department’s Buildings and Codes staff is performing a street-by-street analysis of the City to identify all vacant buildings subject to the Vacant Building Registry and/or maintenance of vacant building requirements. At the time of identification, a full exterior inspection is performed, including roof inspection using a Fire Department aerial bucket truck. Photographs are taken to further document the condition of the building. Each building then receives a rating. The three ratings are
  - C cosmetic work needed;
  - C rehabilitation needed and economically feasible; and

- C demolition recommended/not economically feasible for rehabilitation.
- In extreme instances, immediate demolition may be necessary. During the identification stages, all code violations are noted and entered into the Codes computer system.
2. **Notification** – Within three business days of the inspection/identification process, the owner of the building is notified as to actions that must be taken (e.g., register the building on the Vacant Building Registry; maintain the building’s exterior in compliance with Article XI which outlines the criteria for vacant buildings in the City Code; obtain a structural engineering report; etc.). In most instances owners are given 30 days to comply. At the same time the National Grid, City Water Department, Albany Community Development Agency, and Office of Communications (for Fire and Police Dispatch) are each notified to take the following actions:
    - C National Grid – terminate and disconnect the power and/or gas utilities for long term vacant buildings and buildings that are unsafe and not economically feasible for rehabilitation;
    - C Water Department – terminate and disconnect the water supply to the building to prevent wasting water resources and possible flooding of the vacant building as well as neighboring properties;
    - C Albany Community Development Agency – if possible, follow up with the owners of these buildings and offer them assistance and/or link them with potential buyers who will then rehabilitate the buildings;
    - C Office of Communications – internally mark in the joint Computer Aided Design (CAD) system vacant and abandoned buildings identified as unsafe so that emergency personnel can be alerted to the condition of the building.
  3. **Re-inspection** – A re-inspection is performed after the 30 days has elapsed to determine if the owner has complied with requirements outlined in the letter of notification.
  4. **Prosecution** – In cases of non-compliance, the matter will be referred to the City Court for prosecution.

With the Committee’s renewed and dedicated effort to this initiative, the City expects to achieve greater compliance in a shorter period of time and to obtain a more accurate picture of the work that needs to be done to prevent further deterioration and demolition.

### **Communication and Partnerships**

In an effort to create public awareness of the safety issues related to vacant and abandoned buildings, Code Enforcement staff members of the Albany Fire Department regularly attend neighborhood association meetings throughout the City to listen to concerns, identify potential problem buildings and, thereby, increase their ability to respond before demolition becomes necessary. In addition, citizens are encouraged to call the Mayor’s weekly radio show to raise issues that affect quality of life. Often issues are uncovered that can be addressed immediately. The Albany Police Department also works cooperatively with the Fire Department to advise them of building issues they encounter in the course of their normal duties.

Because Albany is a historic city with many public buildings and private residences that are centuries old, the Mayor’s Office and the Division of Buildings and Codes have worked hard to establish open communication with Albany’s historic preservation groups to seek joint solutions to problems. The City is currently considering the institution of systematic facade inspections of the historic buildings that are in danger of decaying and falling into disrepair.

*For additional information, please contact Deputy Chief Robert C. Forezzi, Sr., Albany Department of Fire and Emergency Services at (518) 434-8045 or [rcforezzi@albany-ny.org](mailto:rcforezzi@albany-ny.org).*

## **ANCHORAGE, AK: MAYOR MARK BEGICH Operation Take Back**

When Mayor Mark Begich took office in July 2003, the Municipality of Anchorage faced an uphill battle in bringing dilapidated and dangerous properties into productive status. Because Alaska State law limits foreclosures on property for Municipal liens based on code enforcement costs, sources of funds for these activities were limited. Consequently, over the years, code enforcement activity had been frustrated by lack of revenues for demolition.

Soon after his election, Mayor Begich aggressively pursued alternative sources for these funds. Procedures were developed to identify which derelict buildings could be demolished using Community Development Block Grant funds available to the Municipality. CDBG is a great source of funds for this type of activity, but use of the funds requires clearing some hurdles in relation to environmental reviews, one-for-one replacement of affordable housing units, and potential relocation of existing tenants.

Through cooperation between the Building Safety Department (in charge of Code Enforcement) and the Department of Neighborhoods (administrator of CDBG funds), these requirements were incorporated into Code Enforcement procedures, and CDBG funds assisted in the demolition of seven derelict buildings in 2004. This coordination benefited from strong leadership from the Mayor's office and weekly meetings of key staff members in each of the departments involved.

Next, the Municipality went a step further by partnering with the National Guard on Operation Take Back. In this innovative program, the Alaska National Guard, led by Col. Thomas Katkus, carried out the demolition of the infamous "Pink Hotel," a condemned building that had been the source of numerous citizen complaints about vagrancy, fights, drugs, and other illegal activity. In addition to assisting the community, Operation Take Back enhances Guard readiness and effectiveness by providing Guard members the opportunity to train in specific areas of equipment use and demolition.

The cost of these demolitions was included in liens on the properties, ultimately to be paid by the owners. The increased activity in Mayor Begich's early years in office brought greater public awareness of property owner responsibilities, and of the ramifications if these responsibilities are not met. Consequently, several property owners have since resolved their code issues independently. Other owners sold properties to affordable housing providers who have since demolished the dilapidated housing and built new, affordable homes.

The coordination across departments, government entities, and organizations took perseverance and vision, but resulted in a sustainable program for code enforcement in Anchorage.

*For additional information, please contact Carma Reed, Director, Department of Neighborhoods, at 907-343-4848 or [reedce@muni.org](mailto:reedce@muni.org).*

## **BALTIMORE, MD: MAYOR MARTIN O'MALLEY Project 5000**

In his January 2002 State of the City address, Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley declared the goal of acquiring 5,000 vacant and abandoned properties in two years and outlined the series of steps that would be taken to accomplish that goal. The Mayor believed that setting such a high acquisition target would help galvanize the public around the issue, ensure greater inter-agency cooperation, and achieve economies of scale.

When Mayor O'Malley embarked on Baltimore's Project 5000, his City had a vacancy rate of 14.1 percent, the fourth highest in the nation. It had more than 15,000 vacant and abandoned houses and more than 10,000 problem vacant lots – many in tax arrears. These properties represented “dead capital,” the Mayor asserted in his address. “No one can use their value to make improvements or create wealth,” he said. “Potential investors can't buy up abandoned blocks to rehab historic row-houses or start over with new homes. Neighbors can't claim vacant lots to make side yards or new green space. These properties, for all intents and purposes, are without owners – except for the City, by default.”

### **The Plan**

Mayor O'Malley's plan to accomplish Project 5000 included:

- C aggressively pursuing tax sale foreclosures, quick-takes, and traditional acquisitions;
- C transferring surplus vacant properties owned by the Housing Authority of Baltimore City; and
- C calling on law firms, title companies and related businesses to help clear titles.

Implementation of Project 5000 involved four major steps:

**1. Strategic Identification of Properties** – Through a collaborative process, City agencies and community partners developed property selection criteria in more than 100 hours of meetings. The City used the latest geographic information and property-related data bases in its decision-making process. All City vacant buildings and lots were reviewed – in-depth, block-by-block. Property selection focused on areas where development opportunities already existed.

**2. Strategic Partnerships** – By working with attorneys, the court system, and others in the legal system, litigation services were provided either free or at a reduced rate. The City estimates that, to date, \$5.1 million in free and discounted services have been provided:

- C Private attorneys have donated \$3.2 million in legal services.
- C Property Insight has supplied \$62,000 in discounted judgment reports.
- C The Daily Record has discounted publishing costs by \$1.4 million.
- C The Circuit Court has waived \$340,000 in filing fees.
- C The Sheriff's Office has waived \$93,000 in posting fees.

In addition, many City government agencies have been involved in, and contributed to, the initiative. These include Housing, the Mayor's Office of Neighborhoods, Transportation, the Baltimore Development Corporation, Planning, Police, and Finance.

**3. Building New Infrastructure** – The legal process has been improved to allow large-scale tax foreclosures by creating electronic pleadings and a legal manual; hiring and training qualified staff and pro bono firms; getting advanced buy-in from national underwriters for a uniform process; and creating a web-based tracking tool for organizing and tracking data, generating pleadings, and tracking progress. City officials worked closely with the Circuit Court to prepare the manual and all forms, provide funding for additional Court staff dedicated to the initiative, and create timely case status reports.

**4. Moving Beyond Acquisition** – Various methods for property disposition have been employed: SCOPE – Selling City Owned Property Efficiently – is a public-private partnership with local realtors employed in the sale of higher value properties. Rolling bids – managing “unsolicited” offers through streamlined sales – are used for less valuable properties. RFPs and RFQs are used for unique properties or areas in which the City wants greater control of development outcomes.

In conjunction with these activities, the City has employed stepped-up code enforcement through its TEVO (Targeted Enforcement for Visible Outcomes) program on over 6,000 vacant properties on viable blocks throughout the City. TEVO is used where the City believes aggressive code enforcement will make a significant difference in the strength of the housing market. It is expected that between now and 2013, TEVO will generate \$139 million in private investment and bring in over \$37 million in revenue for the City.

### **Accomplishments and Challenges**

Over the past three years Project 5000 has cost \$22,044,486 – \$7,418,238 in operating costs and \$14,626,248 in capital costs. Average expenditures per acquisition are \$12,606 for those involving eminent domain, \$1,600 for tax sale foreclosures. City officials have helped to meet these costs by investing sales revenues back into the program.

Baltimore’s Project 5000 has produced significant results. In the four years since it began:

- C 6,000 abandoned properties with clear title have been acquired.
- C 1,000 properties have been returned to private ownership.
- C 2,000 more properties have been programmed for a specific development outcome.
- C Sales revenues since 2003 total \$4.5 million.
- C Taxes and fees collected total \$1.8 million.
- C Home sale values have soared from \$69,000 in 1999 to \$170,000 in 2005.

City officials have identified other benefits resulting from Project 5000: Limited code enforcement resources have been redirected. Private investment has been directed to strategic neighborhoods. The opportunity for predatory real estate practices has been limited. Information sharing among agencies has improved substantially.

Despite the remarkable success of Baltimore’s Project 5000, several challenges remain:

Intra- and inter-agency coordination could be further strengthened: Property management and sales processes remain fragmented within various agencies. There is tension between legitimate competing governmental objectives – for example, between short term revenue collections and long term development objectives. Maintaining consensus among the various stakeholders for a consistent, targeted acquisition and disposition strategy is difficult.

The disposition process needs additional improvements: The City is exploring the creation of a land bank or similar vehicle that would allow it to sell property in a more streamlined and market-sensitive manner. The collective capacity of community partners – neighborhood organizations and CDCs – needs to be expanded. Transparent sales policies are needed to help protect against outside pressures and inconsistent outcomes.

The initiative is operating in a dynamic market: Rising home values have further restricted the City’s acquisition resources. As a result of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Kelo*, there is growing anti-takings sentiment. Safeguards to ensure development outcomes are achieved need further improvement. Properties need on-going monitoring after they are sold to ensure that new purchasers are redeveloping

the properties. The City needs to develop a comprehensive strategy to address vacant properties not in tax arrears or occupied properties on otherwise blighted blocks.

*For additional information, please contact Michael Bainum, Assistant Commissioner for Land Resources, Baltimore Department of Housing and Community Development, at (443) 984-1645 or [Michael.Bainum@Baltimorecity.gov](mailto:Michael.Bainum@Baltimorecity.gov).*

## **BOSTON, MA: MAYOR THOMAS M. MENINO**

### **Strategy to Address Abandoned Buildings**

Between 1997 and 2005, the number of abandoned buildings in Boston – residential, commercial and/or mixed use – dropped 66 percent, from 1,044 to 350. In assessing this progress, officials acknowledge that ongoing City programs which address the problem have been helped in recent years by a healthy local real estate market. A part of Mayor Thomas M. Menino's *Leading the Way* and *Leading the Way II* Housing Strategy is a commitment to reduce the remaining number of abandoned residential buildings from 188 to 130 by July 2007.

The City uses a combination of programs to address abandonment, but the remaining abandoned buildings, which tend to be those most difficult to redevelop, often are privately owned. An important tool used in dealing with these problem private properties is receivership, and Boston's approach to using it involves coordination between City departments – Neighborhood Development, Inspectional Services, and Tax Title – and the State Attorney General's office. This collaboration is now focusing on some of these difficult properties by placing them in receivership or city ownership.

Implemented by the Department of Neighborhood Development (DND), Boston's strategy is multi-pronged:

- An annual Abandoned Building Survey identifies newly abandoned buildings, examines the causes of abandonment, and prioritizes properties for action. From this survey, a list of privately owned abandoned buildings is published on Boston's website – [www.cityofboston.gov/dnd/U4\\_Abandoned\\_Buildings\\_Information.asp](http://www.cityofboston.gov/dnd/U4_Abandoned_Buildings_Information.asp). The objective is to encourage potential developers to contact the building owners and initiate a private renovation of the property.
- DND's Homeowner Services Division helps seniors living in properties on the verge of condemnation to prevent their abandonment by providing repair services.
- Project Pride – a cooperative effort of DND, Inspectional Services, and the Sheriff's Department – combats illegal activity on City-owned and privately-owned abandoned properties by boarding and securing buildings. Costs are passed to the owner through the property tax bill.
- The Real Estate Disposition Initiative uses requests for proposals to dispose of tax-foreclosed abandoned buildings. The City-owned inventory has been reduced 84 percent since 1997.
- DND's Office of Business Development works to eliminate the remaining publicly-owned commercial buildings by taking on the challenges of environmental clean-up and redevelopment. This Office also provides technical assistance and financing to private and nonprofit developers seeking to renovate privately-owned, abandoned commercial buildings.
- DND's Housing Division provides funds to transform publicly- and privately-owned abandoned buildings to affordable housing.
- Through a State receivership law, abandoned buildings can be renovated. The costs of the renovation are passed along to the owner, who typically sells the property or turns control of the property over to a nonprofit organization.
- Mayor Menino filed two bills in the current legislative session to address abandoned housing: H3169 would beef up the receivership law and clarify the ability of municipalities to use it to address abandoned vacant land and commercial buildings. H2525 would eliminate the preferential residential tax rate on abandoned residential property in order to make it more expensive for speculators to buy and hold abandoned properties for extended periods – an incentive to sell or rehabilitate more quickly.

*For additional information, please contact Tim Davis, Senior Research and Development Analyst, Department of Neighborhood Development, at (617) 635-0269 or [tdavis.dnd@cityofboston.gov](mailto:tdavis.dnd@cityofboston.gov).*

**BUFFALO, NY: MAYOR BYRON W. BROWN**  
**Neighborhood Beautification Collaborative**

The City of Buffalo recognizes that the problem of vacant and abandoned housing units is a barrier to reducing crime, encouraging private investment, and enhancing the well-being of neighborhoods, and has launched an aggressive neighborhood revitalization strategy that includes investing in neighborhood assets, engaging in community planning, and rehabilitating or demolishing derelict properties. One approach is being implemented through a collaboration of the City's Urban Renewal Agency and Revitalizing Urban Neighborhoods, Inc. (RUN Buffalo).

Since 1950, huge losses in industry and manufacturing contributed to a downward economic spiral that resulted ultimately in the loss of more than 50 percent of Buffalo's population. The loss of the tax base that has occurred has resulted in vacant and uninhabitable housing of crisis proportions: There are more than 23,000 vacant, uninhabitable structures in the City.

The mission of the collaborative program created by the City and RUN Buffalo is to acquire vacant and abandoned properties, remove uninhabitable buildings, and replace them with landscaped green spaces – eventually returning the properties to productive reuse. The program has direct community volunteer involvement and will serve to empower residents by enabling them to make dramatic physical changes to their neighborhoods.

Specifically, this project involves the demolition and removal of blighted residential buildings slated by the City for demolition. In turn, the City will transfer ownership of the properties to RUN Buffalo which will develop community gardens and park-like settings on these properties. RUN Buffalo is funded in part by portions of the City of Buffalo's Community Development Block Grant allocation and is assisted by Community Planners in the City of Buffalo Office of Strategic Planning. Working in partnership with the City of Buffalo helps RUN Buffalo avoid many administrative hurdles and financing gaps that may otherwise be present.

The Revitalizing Urban Neighborhoods/City of Buffalo Neighborhood Beautification Collaborative will embark on its first endeavors with the beginning of this construction season.

*For additional information, please contact Timothy E. Wanamaker, Executive Director, Office of Strategic Planning, at (716) 851-5035 or [twanamaker@city-buffalo.com](mailto:twanamaker@city-buffalo.com).*

## **BURLINGTON, VT: MAYOR BOB KISS**

### **Vacant Buildings and Dangerous Structures Ordinance**

The Burlington City Council adopted the City's Vacant Buildings and Dangerous Structures Ordinance in 1999 in recognition of the fact that dangerous and/or vacant buildings pose public health and safety threats and are blights on neighborhoods which must be abated. The ordinance had been drafted by a Vacant Building Committee created in 1997 by then-Mayor Peter Clavelle. The committee – an interdepartmental group made up of representatives of the Departments of Public Works, Police, Fire, Planning and Zoning, and the Community and Economic Development and City Attorney's Offices – incorporated existing ordinances on abatement of dangerous buildings with provisions to make the abatement process more effective. Based in part on ordinances in Cincinnati and San Diego, it requires maintenance and planning for a return of properties to productive use. The group drafting Burlington's ordinance was in direct communication with the owner of every vacant structure in the City.

The ordinance defines a vacant structure or building as one that is unoccupied or occupied by unauthorized persons for 90 days, excepting garages, vacation or resort facilities, or those buildings or structures only used on a seasonal basis. In brief:

- The ordinance requires compliance with all appropriate building, life safety, and zoning ordinances when taking down or making safe a dangerous building.
- Buildings shall be inspected when information is received that a building is dangerous. If inspection is resisted and no emergency exists, a search warrant shall be applied for. No warrant is needed in emergency situations.
- If the inspection finds the building to be dangerous, an abatement action may be started. A careful survey report by the inspector must be made and a notice given to the owner to make the building safe within a time certain.
- If the owner fails to make the building safe, the City will do the work and place a lien for the cost on the property. The owner is also liable for a \$50.00 fee for each day's neglect, recoverable on a civil action in Superior or Small Claims Court. The City can also bring a public nuisance action in Superior Court or criminal charges in District Court for violations.
- Owners can appeal the inspector's decisions to the Public Works Commission, whose decision may then be appealed to Superior Court.

The ordinance also details the obligations of owners of vacant or abandoned buildings:

- Owners must apply for a permit and include a "Statement of Intent" which includes the expected period of vacancy, a regular maintenance plan, and a plan and timeline for lawful occupancy, rehabilitation, or demolition.
- Owners must arrange inspections by the agency and police and fire officials to determine the repairs needed for structural integrity, the safe entrance of police and fire officers in emergencies, and that the building is not a danger to the public.
- Upon inspection, an order may be issued to protect the building from intrusion and deterioration in accordance with the maintenance standards, with a time certain for completion of the work needed. All work must be done according to applicable codes.
- A permit shall be issued when the building is in compliance with the maintenance standards. The standards cover openings, roofs, drainage, structure, decorative features, overhanging extensions, chimneys and towers, walkways, and garages and accessory structures.
- A quarterly fee of \$500 to cover the cost to the departments, including the time spent monitoring buildings prior to "vacancy" under the ordinance. The fee is waived if the building is being actively marketed for sale and maintained according to the standards. The fee is also waived if the building is sold during the period of vacancy and the new owner has developed a statement of intent, scope of work, and a schedule to meet the standards and minimum housing standards; rehabilitation financing has been secured, the rehab work has been put out to bid and estimates

have been obtained, or the owner has the plans and expertise and capacity to do the work, and all permits are secured.

The Department of Public Works Commission hears appeals and variances just as it does all building inspector decision appeals. Variances may be granted when strict compliance is unusually difficult or unduly expensive or would create an undue hardship which was not created by the owner. Violations are criminal misdemeanors subject to \$50-500 fines and/or imprisonment for not more than 30 days. The City can bring a public nuisance action to abate violations.

The City of Burlington places a high priority on preserving historic structures and the existing supply of affordable housing. The vacant building ordinance actually discourages “demolition by neglect” through the enforcement of “standards of care.” In addition, the City has a separate zoning ordinance which is designed to prevent the demolition and conversion to nonresidential use of residential structures. This applies to all demolitions and all conversions of residential structures or units, and offsets the loss of housing from demolition or conversion by requiring replacement housing units through new construction, conversion, or creation of “assisted housing.”

Burlington’s good real estate market and economy have kept the number of vacant buildings at a minimum. Officials believe the quarterly inspections and fees required by the ordinance have also motivated owners to keep control over their properties or sell them. When the ordinance was passed in 1999 the City had about 40 buildings on the vacant list; it now has about a dozen. The City sold one house in a tax sale this year; the owner owed real estate as well as vacant building fees.

Officials also believe the ordinance’s fairly liberal fee waiver provision has allowed honest owners to try to sell or renovate their properties without the added cost of the fee, and has cut out the argument by dishonest owners that the City is unfairly gouging them.

*For additional information, please contact Gene Bergman, Assistant City Attorney, at (802) 865-7121; Gregory B. McKnight II, Director of Code Enforcement, at (802) 863-0442; or Brian Pine, Assistant Director for Housing, at (802) 865-7232 or [bpine@ci.burlington.vt.us](mailto:bpine@ci.burlington.vt.us).*

**BURNSVILLE, MN: MAYOR ELIZABETH KAUTZ**  
**Redevelopment of Aging Retail Strip Centers**

The City of Burnsville is a fully-developed, aging suburb of Minneapolis that is committed to investing in and sustaining economic viability. Because of the aged, dilapidated, and semi-vacant condition of some Burnsville retail strip centers, the City Council expressed concern about their viability and the potential that existed for future blight. Wanting the City's strip retail centers to perform as strongly as possible, the Council called for a study of them which would include land use identification and market and economic analysis. The initial study showed that, in order to effectively engage a property owner in the needed redevelopment, policy direction was essential.

The Council proceeded with a process that involved hearing expert testimony on the feasibility of retail area redevelopment, hearing public comment on this, and gathering detailed background information on financial constraints of redevelopment. Key financial considerations included acquisition costs, demolition costs, environmental issues, relocation issues, and site considerations. The Council learned that, in general, for a redevelopment project to be feasible, it must exceed its original value approximately eight to 10 times.

In May 2006 the City adopted redevelopment policies for aging neighborhood retail strip centers as part of the City Business Subsidy Policy. Two significant considerations in policy development are land use and financial assistance options. The City will consider several options to assist in financing redevelopment projects, including the creation of a Tax Increment Financing District, the abatement of incremental property taxes and, in limited circumstances, the acquisition of property and/or leases. The City agreed to assist in bringing private developers and property owners together to facilitate the consideration of redevelopment.

As this is a new initiative, no projects have been undertaken to date. Projects will be considered for rezoning for mixed-use development even if resulting in increased density. Relief from existing City ordinances, in an effort to increase the feasibility of projects, will be considered on a case-by-case basis. The Council is open to projects that will not change the intensity or type of use of the property after the improvement.

Prior to adoption of this policy, it was uncertain whether the Council would support financial assistance for proposed redevelopment projects. In most cases, developers were unwilling to put their money at risk unless they could be certain the Council would consider assistance.

The most serious challenges in this initiative were encountered when the City initially attempted to engage citizens in a charette-like exercise at one of the aging neighborhood retail strip centers. The surrounding residential property owners were generally predisposed to redevelopment only in the form of improved retail facilities. Existing leaseholders were alarmed that future occupancy might be questionable. Landowners became concerned about the visibility of the process and the effect this was having on the existing tenants. Although some landowners agreed about the aged condition and under-utilization of the property, some seemed reluctant to engage in redevelopment processes until the buildings deteriorated and rents declined, making it necessary to take action.

*For additional information, please contact Tammy Omdal, Deputy City Manager, at (952) 895-4535 or [tammy.omdal@ci.burnsville.mn.us](mailto:tammy.omdal@ci.burnsville.mn.us).*

**CHARLESTON, SC: MAYOR JOSEPH P. RILEY, JR.**  
**Homeownership Initiative**

Noting the need for residential development and community revitalization in some of the City of Charleston's depressed neighborhoods, the City adopted a redevelopment plan in 2000. This plan established the Homeownership Initiative, which called for the acquisition of abandoned properties and vacant lots. These small, infill lots are transferred to local nonprofit organizations for redevelopment as affordable housing. The homes are then sold to first-time low-to-moderate-income homebuyers.

Using Community Development Block Grants and general revenue funds, the City acquired more than 60 residential lots through both direct purchase and condemnation. Many of these properties included rundown, vacant houses which could not be demolished because of their historic character. In fact, a majority of the properties acquired were targeted for this reason, thus allowing the program to serve the dual purpose of providing affordable housing and rescuing dilapidated housing stock. The most significant challenge has been maintaining these lots after acquisition while waiting to transfer them to nonprofit organizations for redevelopment. This process has taken several years because of the intricacies involved in financing affordable housing and in rehabilitating historic structures. The Initiative is currently funded by Special Economic Development Initiative funds and Section 108 Loan proceeds.

The City's Fire Department has been monitoring these properties and contracting with local companies to stabilize them as needed. Two contracts, one for boarding and securing the buildings and one for cleaning the lots, are bid out on a yearly basis. Working in conjunction with Housing and Community Development staff to maintain a current list of addresses, Fire Department staff members conduct regular inspections to ensure that the properties are maintained in an acceptable condition. Houses are checked to be sure they are adequately secured from the elements and from potential illicit activity. If any break-ins or imminent problems are noted, a contractor is on standby to board them up or perform necessary short term repairs pending redevelopment. Litter is picked up and vegetation cut on a regular schedule, which varies with the time of year.

The most important lesson that the City has learned is the need to phase the acquisition of such properties. A large number were purchased at the same time, increasing the carrying costs for the Initiative. In addition to the pre-development costs, these properties also have to be maintained during and after construction or rehabilitation of the affordable housing units. Phasing the acquisition would have reduced these costs.

To date, the City has completed 29 houses, and an additional 53 housing units are at various stages of development. As a result of the Homeownership Initiative, these homes have been returned to the tax rolls, increasing local revenues, in addition to serving as an impetus for private redevelopment of adjoining properties. The Initiative has also allowed local nonprofit organizations to build capacity in developing affordable housing. To date, 20 first-time low-to-moderate-income persons have become homeowners through the Initiative, providing economic and social diversity in Charleston's downtown neighborhoods and allowing the City to serve as a role model in efforts to rehabilitate historic housing.

*For additional information, please contact Geona Shaw Johnson, Interim Director, Department of Housing and Community Development, at (843) 724-3766 or [johnsong@ci.charleston.sc.us](mailto:johnsong@ci.charleston.sc.us).*

## **CHICAGO, IL: MAYOR RICHARD M. DALEY**

### **Comprehensive Attack on Troubled and Vacant Buildings**

The City of Chicago, in combating problem properties that reduce the quality of life in neighborhoods, has recognized that troubled and vacant buildings pose public safety problems, lower property values, and contribute to neighborhood blight. Despite aggressive prosecution and fines against owners of troubled multifamily buildings, many owners continually failed to make court-ordered repairs. Properties sometimes languished in Housing Court, frustrating tenants, neighbors, community leaders, and City staff.

In an effort to comprehensively address the causes and effects of troubled buildings, the City has implemented a Troubled Buildings Initiative, enhanced its existing Vacant Buildings Program, and promoted its Homeownership Preservation Initiative.

#### **Troubled Buildings Initiative**

Three years ago, the City developed an interdepartmental initiative to preserve its existing multifamily housing stock and to ensure that owners and managers were qualified. This initiative included the Departments of Housing, Law, Buildings, Police, Water, Planning, Streets and Sanitation, and Human Services, and a nonprofit partner, the Community Investment Corporation.

The City developed a new, streamlined procedure so that departments could more efficiently coordinate efforts to address troubled buildings. The procedure ensured that code violations could be identified and resolved in a timelier manner, decreasing the negative impact of troubled buildings on their surrounding neighborhoods.

This initiative requires significant investments of staff time and resources, to handle ongoing tracking of properties, coordination of departmental efforts, and strategic interventions.

Since the program began three years ago, more than 1,100 units have been recovered, 1,000 units are under rehabilitation, and 600 units are currently under court-ordered receivership.

#### **Vacant Buildings Program**

Building on the success of these initial efforts, in 2006 the City expanded the program to include vacant buildings. The City is now proactively averting the creation of troubled buildings through preventative measures, and reacting to troubled buildings that have become catalysts for criminal activity.

In April 2006 there were 5,100 vacant buildings in Chicago, of which 475 are open. While all vacant buildings pose problems to a neighborhood, open buildings are particularly troublesome because of the public safety issues they create.

The goal for the expanded initiative is to reduce the existing list of 475 vacant and open buildings by at least 75 percent in one year. This will be achieved by securing the buildings according to Municipal Code, making them inaccessible to the public and off-limits to criminal activity; and rehabilitating, demolishing, forfeiting, or selling at least half of the buildings.

The Vacant Building Initiative is a multi-departmental effort involving the Departments of Police, Buildings, Law and Housing. Departmental roles include:

- **Police: Issuing citations to building owners for failure to secure the vacant building and failure to post a watchman at the building.** Each building will be cited on multiple dates to increase potential penalties for non-compliance. Fines of \$1,000 per day can be assessed, with a cap at \$50,000.
- **Buildings: Inspecting vacant buildings that remain open following the issuance of citations by police.** For the roughly half of the buildings that will remain open post-citation, each must have complete interior and exterior inspections. For all 475 vacant buildings, Buildings will create and maintain a Web site, including a photo, ownership information, and information on the status of City enforcement action.
- **Law: Prosecuting all vacant and open buildings that are sent to the Department of Administrative Hearings and the Circuit Court of Cook County.** For police citations, the City will seek fines and orders to secure the buildings at the Department of Administrative Hearings. For non-compliant buildings, inspections will occur and the Law Department will prosecute those violations at the Circuit Court of Cook County. For prosecuted violations, the Law Department will seek four basic remedies: demolition, forfeiture, forced rehabilitation, or forced sale.
- **Housing: Working with the Law Department on non-compliance cases.** Housing will identify buildings that are salvageable and work with the Law Department to force the owner to rehabilitate or sell or transfer the title to an owner who is willing to perform the rehabilitation.

In addition to departmental coordination, the City will also be working very closely with two outside agencies, the Community Investment Corporation and Neighborhood Housing Services. These organizations will be relied upon for identifying viable owners to take over buildings, or will be called upon to take ownership of these properties themselves.

Getting the four City departments to coordinate their efforts has been challenging. This challenge is being addressed with strong support from the Mayor's office.

This expanded and enhanced initiative began in April 2006, and the City is working towards a one-year goal. Results will be tracked monthly, and an oversight meeting will be held quarterly.

### **Homeownership Preservation Initiative**

A complement to the City's programs to address buildings that are already in distress, the Homeownership Prevention Initiative proactively prevents buildings in neighborhoods from becoming vacant. Tackling foreclosure is part of this larger strategy to address the root causes of vacant buildings.

The number of foreclosures initiated in the City of Chicago increased by 91 percent between 1993 and 2002. A recent study of foreclosure costs by Neighborworks America estimated that a single foreclosed, vacant property can cost municipalities up to \$30,000; costs are associated with police and fire protection, clean-up of debris, court costs, unpaid water bills and, possibly, demolition. It is much more cost-effective for municipalities to prevent foreclosure by funding homeowner counseling and assistance.

Responding to the alarming increase in foreclosures, the Department of Housing, Neighborhood Housing Services of Chicago, and more than 20 financial institutions launched the Homeownership Preservation Initiative (HOPI). The goals of HOPI are to help families avoid foreclosure whenever possible and, when foreclosure is inevitable, to reclaim vacant properties for affordable housing. As part of this effort, to reach homeowners at risk of foreclosure, the City launched an Every Minute Counts Campaign that encourages homeowners to call 311 (the City's non-emergency hotline) at the first sign of mortgage delinquency. Callers are immediately connected to a credit counseling agency for a free telephone counseling session. The counseling agency:

- Provides an in-depth assessment of the homeowner's financial situation and an individual action plan;
- Serves as a liaison between the homeowner and the mortgage company, where appropriate, to advocate for a repayment plan, loan modification, or other loss mitigation strategy that will help the homeowner avoid foreclosure; and
- Provides referrals to local resources, where appropriate, for job training, tax assistance, emergency grants, and foreclosure prevention classes.

Counseling is much more likely to result in a positive outcome if the homeowner seeks help early in the process. Unfortunately, many homeowners wait until it is too late to resolve the delinquency through loss mitigation or workout. In addition, many homeowners seek help from "rescue" firms that only worsen the homeowner's financial plight. The City's challenge has been to encourage homeowners to seek timely assistance from legitimate credit counseling agencies funded by the City.

To accomplish this, the City has expanded its partnership with faith-based organizations and nonprofits and increased its marketing in high foreclosure zip codes. In February 2006 approximately 20 pastors participated in an outreach Sunday and included the City's Homeownership Preservation message in their sermons. In addition, the City expanded its marketing on cable television and radio, and conducted targeted mailings. These efforts resulted in more than 300 families calling 311 for assistance in the first quarter of 2006.

Through the combined efforts of the City, Neighborhood Housing Services, and participating lenders, and through the City's Every Minute Counts Campaign, HOPI has prevented 940 families from losing their homes to foreclosure. More than 2,800 individuals have received post-purchase education and foreclosure prevention counseling.

*For additional information, please contact Jeff Ahmadian, Chief Assistant Corporation Counsel, Department of Law, at (312) 744-3823 or [jahmadian@cityofchicago.org](mailto:jahmadian@cityofchicago.org) or Stacie Young, Assistant to the Mayor, at (312) 744-2818 or [syoung@cityofchicago.org](mailto:syoung@cityofchicago.org).*

## **COLUMBUS, OH: MAYOR MICHAEL COLEMAN Home Again Initiative**

Recognizing that vacant and abandoned housing in neighborhoods constitutes blight with many causes, many legal complications, and few proven cures, Columbus Mayor Michael B. Coleman launched a new \$25 million initiative this year to tackle the problem at every level and to engage residents, not-for-profit and private sector partners, and local government in the solution. The eventual goal of Mayor Coleman's Home Again initiative is to fix up or replace the 3,200 listed vacant homes in Columbus, starting with a six-year plan to go after 1,000 properties. The Mayor's view is that "what may look like a statistic to bureaucrats is a very real problem to a family living next to an abandoned house." The five separate strategies that the Home Again initiative weaves into an overall program are enforcement, prevention, acquisition, rehabilitation, and demolition.

**Enforcement** – Through a unique partnership with the City Attorney, Safety Director, and Development Director, the Mayor has created an enforcement team designed to expedite the process of declaring an abandoned house a public nuisance. A code enforcement officer and assistant city attorney are assigned full-time to aggressively pursue the law and reduce the foreclosure process by three to six months. Police officers are also engaged, with the legal authority to arrest anyone found on "nuisance" property. Their goal is to cut crime, arson, and vandalism in neighborhoods.

**Prevention** – Of the \$25 million dedicated for Home Again, \$5 million are earmarked for prevention efforts, to help families remain in their homes. Building on existing City programs, the efforts include emergency shelter rehabilitation and roof repairs. In 2006 the City already has initiated 88 roof repairs at an average cost of \$11,000 each.

**Acquisition and Rehabilitation** – The City is partnering with the nonprofit Columbus Franklin County Affordable Housing Corporation (CFCAHC) and others to acquire property and spur housing rehabilitation. These private partners will help break through bureaucratic hurdles while allowing the City to retain oversight for rehabilitation specifications and inspections. Neighborhood redevelopment priorities will be identified by the City as part of an overall strategy that is guided by a public/private advisory committee. Once the properties are acquired, either by the City or its partners, City staff will write rehabilitation specifications and work with the partners to select an approved contractor to perform the work. From there, the CFCAHC and local Community Development Corporation partners will market and sell the improved homes to families.

**Demolition** – The last-resort component of Home Again is demolition. In 2006 the City anticipates demolishing eight vacant houses per month for nine months. The per-house cost of the demolitions averages \$8,000. Mayor Coleman has dedicated the \$576,000 needed to maintain an aggressive schedule that will remove a direct blight and send a clear message to those who refuse to take responsibility for their properties. Demolition costs for private properties that have repeatedly been cited as a dangerous nuisance will be assessed to the owner's property taxes.

*For additional information, please contact Greg Davies, Deputy Director, Development Department, (614) 645-5630 or [gdavies@columbus.gov](mailto:gdavies@columbus.gov).*

## **DALLAS, TX – MAYOR LAURA MILLER**

### **Urban Land Bank Program**

The City of Dallas recognizes the important role local governments can play in encouraging economic growth and development. In 2002 Mayor Laura Miller's Affordable Housing Task Force developed an innovative way to address the problem of vacant, tax-delinquent properties: The City of Dallas Urban Land Bank Program. The goal of the program is to develop affordable, single-family homes on vacant, tax-delinquent properties in Dallas neighborhoods. It is designed to expand the supply of affordable housing and to stabilize and revitalize City neighborhoods, neighborhood commercial areas, and neighborhood schools.

Creation of the Urban Land Bank Program required special state legislation, the Texas Urban Land Bank Demonstration Program Act (HB 2801), which authorizes a demonstration program to streamline the process for foreclosure and sale of identified tax delinquent properties, and authorizes the Land Bank to assemble tax-foreclosed properties and sell them at below market prices to nonprofit and for-profit affordable housing developers. The City has forged partnerships to implement the program with other local taxing entities, including the Dallas Independent School District, the Dallas County Sheriff's Office, and Dallas County Tax Courts, as well as with private and nonprofit organizations, including the Real Estate Council Foundation, Community Housing Development Organizations (CHDOs), title companies, and developers.

The Land Bank works with other local taxing entities to identify properties for foreclosure and assemble suitable clusters to entice development. After foreclosure, CHDOs have the right of first refusal to acquire property in their area of service.

Dallas voters approved \$3 million in property acquisition bond funds to provide for the purchase of foreclosed properties. In addition, the Real Estate Council Foundation provided a loan in the amount of \$250,000 for expenses related to the purchase and resale of Land Bank lots. Title companies and law firms are providing pro bono services to assist with the program by identifying appropriate properties, clearing titles and filing tax lawsuits. The City pays the majority of costs associated with land acquisition using General and Bond Funds.

To date, the Urban Land Bank Program has identified 1,087 properties for tax foreclosure referrals, filed 474 suits, purchased 51 parcels, and sold 42 properties to CHDO's for affordable housing development. The City's goal is to acquire up to 2,000 unproductive, vacant, and developable lots to be "banked" for affordable housing development.

The major challenge for the program has been securing the involvement and agreement of all of the local taxing entities. In addition, reworking the delinquent property foreclosure and sale processes proved to be more complex and time consuming than originally anticipated, and streamlining of these processes continues.

By restoring these properties to productive uses, the City is stabilizing and revitalizing its neighborhoods, enhancing neighborhood quality of life, stimulating community investment and growth, reducing local government expenditures, and increasing local government property and fee revenues.

*For additional information, please contact Mayor Laura Miller at (214) 670-4054; Meranda Cohn, Press Secretary, Office of the Mayor, at (214) 670-0656 or [meranda.cohn@dallascityhall.com](mailto:meranda.cohn@dallascityhall.com); or Mary K. Suhm, City Manager, at (214) 670-3297 or [mary.suhm@dallascityhall.com](mailto:mary.suhm@dallascityhall.com).*

## **DEARBORN, MI: MAYOR MICHAEL A. GUIDO**

### **Property Rescue**

Mayor Michael A. Guido and the City of Dearborn have applied a multi-faceted approach to the ever-increasing vacant, abandoned, and sub-standard property problem. As both a “first suburb” (built in the World War II era) and a “first ring community” (directly adjacent to a major metropolitan center), Dearborn recognized the need to address these problems several decades ago.

Because the State of Michigan has one of the highest mortgage foreclosure rates in the nation, the City has had to expand its efforts and develop creative alternatives to typically-limited governmental involvement in this area. Mayor Guido has brought together strong neighborhood associations, the Dearborn Board of Realtors, the East and West Downtown Business Districts, the Dearborn Chamber of Commerce, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and a major portion of the mortgage industry to address these problems. Additionally, the Mayor has expanded the scope and involvement of its Building and Safety, City Planning, Economic and Community Development, and Legal Departments to create directed initiatives to assist the private sector organizations. These alliances have fostered more than a dozen separate but inter-connected programs, all of which are having a very positive impact on the condition of the communities’ property stock. By maintaining consistency in implementing these programs, and by showing the united commitment of all stakeholders, the City is recording steady progress.

### **Property Rescue**

The City of Dearborn has implemented several internal programs, starting as far back as the 1960s, to combat the effects of vacant, abandoned, and sub-standard structures. Examples include:

- ***Operation Eye Sore*** – Developed in the 1960s, this City Planning Department program identifies “garage homes” and substandard and non-conforming properties, purchases them when they become available, demolishes them, and maintains the real estate in a land bank for future use. This has been a general fund program since its inception.
- ***Existing Property Sales and Rental Re-occupancy Programs*** – These programs were established in the 1980s to insure that all of the existing structures in the City meet a minimum quality level of safety and maintenance. Approximately 3,500 one- and two-family properties are evaluated yearly.
- ***Property Assessment Division*** – This is a division of the Building and Safety Department that evaluates properties using a State of Michigan-adopted Existing Structures Building Code and State of Michigan statutes that determine whether a structure qualifies for demolition. The City, with the assistance of its State representative, sponsored a successful effort to clarify the existing laws that controlled the demolition process. The new clarity has helped reduce the number of court cases that were being overturned due to interpretation loopholes. Even though more than 75 percent of the evaluations are recommended for rehabilitation, the inspection process still provides a tool to legally remove unsafe and substandard structures. Of the approximately 3,500 property evaluations from the Sales and Rental groups in 2005, only 143 were referred for more in-depth evaluation. An additional 117 properties that had fires or structural collapses or were severely unfit were also referred in 2005. Of the 260 properties evaluated, 42 were recommended for demolition and those remaining were subject to a very detailed list of rehabilitation corrections.
- ***Neighborhood Services Division*** – Established in 2003, this group of 25 field inspectors and three vector control inspectors are responsible for property maintenance and ordinance enforcement throughout the City. Primarily funded with CDBG funds, this group is both a citizen resource and a community monitoring group: They are the eyes and ears of the Building and Safety Department in the community. The City is divided into 23 districts with an inspector

assigned to each one. The field inspectors have ownership of their districts and work the area like the traditional “beat cop.” In 2005 this division made 60,000 contacts with residents, issued about 20,000 “Notices of Violations,” and achieved an 86 percent compliance rate without the need for legal action.

## Stakeholder Contact

The City maintains continuous contact with many of the stakeholder groups in the community:

- **Neighborhood Associations** – There are about 28 associations throughout the City, 15 of which are very active. Field inspectors are required to make weekly contact with the leaders of the associations for which they are responsible and attend association meetings. Because the inspector is the liaison between these residents and the City government, they maintain a two-way information exchange. The association members have firsthand knowledge of properties that have recently become, or are about to become, vacant. The addresses are put into a data base which triggers a daily report and can be set up to prompt periodic inspection visits to monitor the condition of the properties.
- **Dearborn Board of Realtors** – This organization knows firsthand what is happening in the real estate market. Members of Building and Safety attend all of the regular meetings of the Board. Their presence at these meetings provides a face-to-face opportunity to solve problems that may be hindering a sale or inspection.
- **Neighborhood Task Force** – Established in 2002, this group has grown in size and involvement. It is comprised of neighborhood associations, the Chamber of Commerce, civic groups, business owners, and most City departments. The Task Force meets monthly to address community-wide problems, such as vacant and abandoned properties, and has produced initiatives now being implemented.

Mayor Guido has directed the Building and Safety Department to partner with HUD and Fannie Mae, as well as many of the large mortgage foreclosure property servicing companies, to ensure that the vacant properties in their possession are being maintained and kept secure while they are attempting to repair and market them. Contacts have been established with these organizations that allow the Neighborhood Services field inspectors to e-mail digital photos of problem properties directly to the responsible party, and this has produced swift corrections. This method is replacing the former system of posting a property with a 72-hour Notice of Violation. The field inspectors also assist the asset holders in evicting squatters or following up with the contractors. This has been a “win-win” situation for the City and the organizations, and several successful programs have grown out of these close relationships:

- **HUD’s Good Neighbor Program** – For the first time in Dearborn’s history, the Department of Housing and Urban Development is offering the City all of the properties that it is not able to sell to the public. HUD is charging only \$1, plus costs, for these properties. The City has been purchasing only the worst ones – those that qualify for immediate demolition – and then offering the lots for redevelopment. The City intends to start purchasing marginal properties soon and turn them over to the Economic and Community Development Department to supervise rehabilitation and put them back in the marketplace. Revenue from these sales will go back to the CDBG fund to continue rehabilitation projects, eventually creating an economically self-sufficient program.
- **Fannie Mae’s “First Suburbs Program”** – The Economic and Community Development Department is working with Fannie Mae to redevelop existing structures by redesigning the interiors to provide modern amenities while maintaining the exterior character of the neighborhood. By adding larger master bedrooms with baths, larger kitchens, and family rooms, they can now attract the buyers that are moving to the outer ring suburbs for the newer houses that offer these features.

- ***National Code Enforcement Initiatives*** – Several Building and Safety management staff members have become involved with counterparts in other major cities at the national level in efforts to provide uniform and more constant ordinance enforcement. Sharing information about which programs have worked and which have not is helping prevent wasted time in addressing problems. The major subject of these conferences is the issue of vacant and abandoned properties and the processes that are used to abate them. Several of the programs currently utilized in Dearborn came out of these meetings, and programs that have worked in Dearborn are being implemented in other jurisdictions.

Because the vacant property problem is expected to increase as the Michigan economy continues to struggle, the City is adding programs to combat the problem. One is a Financial Task Force, a project intended to bring together the resources of the many local lending institutions, as well as the Federal Housing Administration and Fannie Mae, to come up with creative lending programs. These programs will target the unique lending challenges that vacant properties historically have posed. By coming up with programs that provide both purchase and repair financing, and possibly adding incentives to promote owner-occupied end users, a large portion of the buying market may be able to afford to live in neighborhoods they normally would not have considered.

*For additional information, please contact Dearborn's Building and Safety Department: John Cascardo, Deputy Director, at (313) 943-2216 or [jcascardo@ci.dearborn.mi.us](mailto:jcascardo@ci.dearborn.mi.us), or Keith Woodcock, Existing Structures Manager, at (313) 943-2196 or [kwoodcock@ci.dearborn.mi.us](mailto:kwoodcock@ci.dearborn.mi.us).*

## **DURHAM, NC: MAYOR WILLIAM (BILL) BELL**

### **Southwest Central Durham Initiative**

The City of Durham has identified areas that are most in need of stabilization and rejuvenation. One of them, Southwest Central, has since the mid-1980s been targeted for investments of HOME and Community Development Block Grant funds. This is an area in which 29 percent of households subsist below the poverty level, and 52 percent have annual incomes below \$25,000. By 2004, a community-based nonprofit homebuilder, Durham Community Land Trustees, had built or renovated over 115 homes that are permanently affordable to low income residents, and had renovated two commercial buildings. Habitat for Humanity also had built a clustered development on Gerard Street in the West End and several homes in the Lyon Park neighborhood.

In 2004, The City of Durham, Durham Community Land Trustees, and Habitat joined forces with two new partners to dramatically expand the effort to acquire vacant and dilapidated homes in the Southwest Central neighborhood and either fully renovate them or demolish and replace them with new affordable homes. Duke University's Office of Community Affairs, working in consultation with a six-neighborhood "Quality of Life" Committee, made a substantial loan to Self-Help Community Development – an organization that builds and renovates homes and holds properties for construction by other nonprofits builders – for acquisition of vacant and dilapidated properties that would be held in a land trust. These properties are subsequently purchased for demolition and rebuilding by the City's nonprofit partners using CDBG and HOME funds.

The partners and the City have a two-pronged strategy: First, they develop housing in clusters that create a "mini-community" where residents have confidence that their closest neighbors share their interest in a safe, attractive, well-maintained environment. Three examples are Habitat's homes on Gerard; the Land Trust-developed Morehead Glen on Rock Street; and a 14-home subdivision, Pauli Murray Place on Gattis Street, now under construction.

Second, the partners are strategically redeveloping nearby housing to replace the worst conditions in an otherwise attractive street face, or to change the ownership of structures that have continuously provided shelter for illegal and dangerous activities. Construction is underway on Carroll and Proctor Streets, and the partners will break ground this spring on Jackson and Kent.

Since 2004, the collaborative partners have:

- Renovated a small apartment building for tenants who have sickle cell disease and need to live near Duke University Medical Center;
- Renovated a third commercial building on West Chapel Hill Street;
- Purchased a boarding house to renovate and house a Duke chaplains' program;
- Acquired, replaced the street, improved the open space, and built and sold seven homes in Pauli Murray Place; and
- Acquired 45 additional houses or home sites for building in the next two to three years.

Another program the City is participating in involves a partnership with Rebuild Durham, a nonprofit organization that acquires individual single family homes throughout Durham that are either vacant or in need of substantial renovation. Rebuild Durham focuses on that one house that is a blighting influence on a block, with the intention of acquiring and renovating it to preserve and maintain a stable neighborhood. These houses are acquired and fully renovated using HOME funds and then rented to low-to-moderate income families. To date, Rebuild Durham has acquired and renovated 12 houses.

*For additional information, please contact Mike Barros, Director, Housing and Community Development, at (911) 560-4570 or [mike.barros@durhamnc.gov](mailto:mike.barros@durhamnc.gov).*

## **HOUSTON, TX: MAYOR BILL WHITE**

### **Project Houston Hope**

Project Houston Hope is a community revitalization initiative being implemented in several Houston neighborhoods with high concentrations of vacant, abandoned properties. The targeted areas are communities that historically have been neglected. While they are near Houston's employment centers, the areas suffer from poor physical infrastructure, inadequate housing, and a scarcity of retail outlets. In recent years they have lost population. Typically, households that move away seek affordable housing opportunities outside the city limits in neighboring counties.

The central goal of the initiative is to revitalize Houston Hope neighborhoods without destroying their rich historical fiber. The expectation is they can be revitalized so that they are attractive to a younger generation of households that moved away but continue to have family and other ties to these neighborhoods, and attractive to new Houston residents searching for safe, vibrant communities.

### **Land Assembly Redevelopment Authority**

A key activity has been to foreclose on tax delinquent vacant lots. Targeted lots are those where taxes have not been paid for at least six years and outstanding taxes exceed the market value of the property. Foreclosures have been completed on more than 300 lots; lawsuits have been initiated on more than 1,200 lots; and another 1,400-plus lots will be added to the foreclosure pipeline this year. The City is also upgrading the physical infrastructure in the targeted areas to support the new housing development.

The City works closely with other government jurisdictions on project implementation. Tax foreclosure activity has been possible due to a partnership of all tax jurisdictions having an interest in tax arrears. In 2003, by inter-local agreement, the tax jurisdictions created the Land Assemblage Redevelopment Authority. LARA serves as a land bank and holds foreclosed lots until sufficient numbers of lots can be assembled and released for the new housing development.

Recognizing that schools play an important role in families' decisions about where to live, the Mayor's Office has formed a close working relationship with the leaders of the surrounding school districts and the community college system. Through these alliances, adult education and vocational programs are now offered in Houston Hope neighborhoods.

Project funding comes from a variety of sources including: the City's Capital Improvement Fund, Community Development Block Grants, and affordable housing set-aside monies generated through Houston's Tax Increment Revenue Zones.

Persuading all tax jurisdictions to enter into an agreement creating LARA proved difficult. The jurisdictions decided to start with a small pilot program involving 250 lots before agreeing to expand the effort to include another 1,500 lots. State laws governing foreclosure and redemption of tax-foreclosed property had to be amended in order to provide for more expeditious handling of lawsuits. Most important, community residents needed to be persuaded that the initiative would not displace long term residents.

The most visible result to date is the new physical infrastructure that is being constructed in Houston Hope neighborhoods to support new single-family housing construction. Soon, LARA will release a request for proposals for the construction of approximately 175 infill homes. By next year, the LARA lot inventory will be sufficient to release RFPs on a quarterly basis.

Among lessons learned which should be helpful to others wanting to replicate this initiative: Engage all tax jurisdictions having an interest in abandoned lots early in the formation of the initiative, undertake extensive due diligence in researching existing laws governing tax foreclosures, and engage stakeholders in each step of program planning and implementation.

*For additional information, please contact Stephen Tinnermon, Mayor's Office, at (713) 247-1037.*

## **INDIANAPOLIS, IN: MAYOR BART PETERSON Abandoned Housing Initiative**

In February 2003 Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson announced a long term commitment to addressing the problem of abandoned properties in the City. “This problem has existed for decades, and solutions are neither easy, nor quick,” Mayor Peterson said at the time. “But we have reached a point where we must act to deter continued deterioration.”

To measure the scope of the problem, the City, with the help of students from Ball State University, initiated a first-ever, comprehensive inventory of vacant houses. The goal of the inventory was to locate and inventory every vacant or abandoned home within the downtown and inner-ring suburbs, or “old City limits,” of Indianapolis.

Ball State students conducted field work over six weeks in the summer of 2003. Three field teams consisted of two students each, with a student project manager overseeing the inventory. Each field team was equipped with a personal digital assistant (PDA) outfitted with ArcPad GIS software that contained detailed maps of the City.

The GIS maps indicated likely vacancies based on the following indicators:

- boarding, repair, or demolition orders
- property tax delinquencies
- mortgage foreclosure and Sheriff sale records
- power company records (no electricity for six months)

These indicators provided an initial assessment of possible vacancy. Ultimately, within the old City limits, due to high concentrations of vacancy and the density of construction, the survey team inventoried the entire area building-by-building. Outside the old City limits, the above indicators guided the survey teams to specific properties.

Survey teams collected five pieces of information on each building:

1. ***The number of dwelling units*** – The number of dwelling units was noted and additional information was collected for each unit within a structure that contained vacancy.
2. ***The status of vacancy*** – There was a tiered system for classifying vacant properties (e.g., vacant properties could be boarded or for sale). For that reason, three categories were created: Vacant, Vacant for Sale, and Vacant/Boarded. If a property rated as Vacant/Boarded, it could also be for sale. If the building rated as Vacant for Sale, however, it was identified as such, which also indicated that it was not boarded.
3. ***Condition rating*** – Each property was rated on a scale of A to E. An A rating was given to vacant homes in excellent condition. A C rating included homes that needed minor rehabilitation, while an E rating was given to homes that were severely dilapidated.
4. ***Site condition*** – Surveyors also rated the surrounding site, using a “good/fair/poor” scale. A “good” yard was well maintained while a “poor” yard had overgrown weeds or contained dangerous trash and debris.
5. ***Digital photograph*** – The front façade of each property was digitally photographed.

Over the course of the project, surveyors identified 7,913 vacant properties. As a direct result, Mayor Peterson’s Abandoned House Work Group – comprised of local experts and community leaders – convened to recommend solutions. The work group’s two reports now provide the framework for the City’s housing and code enforcement policies. Mayor Peterson’s efforts caught the attention of the State Legislature, which earlier this year approved new legislation that will help speed the redevelopment of abandoned properties in Indianapolis and throughout the State.

The work group's two reports may be viewed on the City's Web site at [www.indygov.org/eGov/City/DMD/Abandoned/reports](http://www.indygov.org/eGov/City/DMD/Abandoned/reports).

*For additional information, please contact Jeff Bennett, Assistant Administrator for Community Economic Development at (317) 327-5617 or [jbennett@indy.gov](mailto:jbennett@indy.gov).*

## **KALAMAZOO, MI: MAYOR HANNAH MCKINNEY Anti-Blight Team**

As in nearly every older urban center, private mortgage foreclosures, tax delinquency, and lack of private financing in Kalamazoo resulted in a number of vacant and blighted dwellings. Beyond their visual impact on the community, these properties were attracting vandalism, drug dealers, prostitutes, and other unsafe and unsavory transient uses. The costs of weed, trash, and junk auto enforcement coupled with low value and limited or no tax payments were a drain on City resources. A strategy was developed to gain some control over these abandoned properties and encourage their reuse for affordable housing.

A new Abandoned Residential Structures ordinance was enacted and became effective January 6, 2003. This ordinance focused on residential buildings vacant for more than 30 days with significant exterior violations, requiring their owners to register the properties, pay a monthly administrative fee, and submit a plan for prompt resolution through rehabilitation to occupancy standards or through demolition. In February 2003 the City of Kalamazoo Anti-Blight Team was activated.

The Anti-Blight Team consists of a Coordinator, an Inspector, a Building Inspector/Rehabilitation Specialist, and two clerical support positions. The Team operates in the Code Administration Division under the supervision of its Manager. In addition to intakes initiated by the Team, referrals come from Housing Inspectors, the Department of Public Safety, neighborhood leaders, and local residents. Members of the Anti-Blight Team keep communication open with all parties through e-mail, telephone, facsimile, and field contact. Information and updates on the program are provided for neighborhood and community newsletters and presented at neighborhood, task force, and other public meetings. Team activities are funded through a Community Development Block Grant allocation.

After initial inspection and intake, entities with ownership interests (including lenders, heirs, nonprofit organizations, and others) are notified of the ordinance requirements, and monthly site monitoring begins. These dwellings are often found open to casual entry and are subsequently boarded by City contractors. Also, the City often undertakes weed, trash, and junk auto abatements. A database containing the names and addresses of the owners of these “abandoned” dwellings is placed on the City Web site – [www.kalamazoo.org](http://www.kalamazoo.org). Staff members give advice and encouragement to owners that make reasonable progress toward occupancy certification. Owners unable or unwilling to make the necessary investments in a timely manner receive enforcement notices and bills for related charges. Inquiries and contacts with the growing pool of housing investors often result in investor acquisition and rehabilitation. A very small percentage of cases do not progress and ultimately require Dangerous Buildings Board orders for rehabilitation or demolition by City contractors using CDBG funds.

The most significant challenge encountered has been determining and tracking the multiple, uncertain, competing, and constantly changing ownership interests for each property. This dynamic factor dramatically increases the difficulty of notifications and communication and threatens the validity of enforcement and cost recovery actions. The early reliance on municipal documents and databases combined with street knowledge is later supplemented with a formal ownership search/title insurance commitment. Cultivation and maintenance of personal contacts within principal lending institutions and their servicing agents is critical to the physical and fiscal success of the program.

Since inception of the Anti-Blight Team, over 500 properties have been inspected and over 400 have been registered. The owners have rehabilitated 104 dwellings to occupancy standards. Another 18 had exterior repairs completed by the City. Twenty-five houses were demolished by their owners, 23 by the City. Private investment returning to the community through the rehabilitations is estimated to total over \$2,000,000. Quality of life and nearby property values are immediately increased and tax revenues increase as these properties are resold.

The City of Kalamazoo Anti-Blight Team has learned that each property must be evaluated and guided to resolution in accordance with its unique physical and fiscal context, acquisition by an able investor/owner is usually the best path to rehabilitation, and early attention to ownership interests minimizes the likelihood of legal complications later.

*For additional information, please contact Jeff Chamberlain, Director, Community Planning and Development, at (269) 337-8039 or [chamberlainj@kalamazoocity.org](mailto:chamberlainj@kalamazoocity.org).*

## **LOUISVILLE METRO, KY: MAYOR JERRY E. ABRAMSON Blight Busters Initiative**

During the late 1980s, under the leadership of Mayor Jerry E. Abramson, the former City of Louisville created two nationally recognized programs that address urban blight and abandonment. The first, the Louisville Vacant Property Review Commission, was created to stem the proliferation of blight within the urban core through the imposition of an “abandoned urban property tax” on vacant nuisance properties and vacant/boarded structures. In practice, this tool taxes derelict property owners at three times the regular rate and continues to be an aggressive and effective deterrent.

Mayor Abramson and Louisville also created the Louisville Land Bank to facilitate the resale and redevelopment of derelict and tax delinquent properties acquired by the local government. These tools have been instrumental in Louisville’s success in creating quality affordable housing units on properties once considered eyesores.

To date, the Louisville Vacant Property Review Commission and the Louisville Land Bank have acquired, managed, sold, and redeveloped more than 4,000 blighted parcels. Providing housing choice and quality neighborhoods has been a priority and has led to the redevelopment of sites for not only infill housing and award-winning mixed income projects, but the redevelopment of several old school buildings, brownfield sites for commercial reuse, faith-based expansion uses, and community gardens.

In January 2006, following the merger of Louisville and Jefferson County, Louisville Metro Government published its first-ever Comprehensive Housing Strategy to guide public policy and investment in housing. One of the strategy’s key findings is that instances of abandonment and blight are not restricted to the urban core. Rather, they are prevalent, albeit in varying degrees, throughout the entirety of Louisville Metro.

Building upon the lessons learned, and moving forward with a more comprehensive approach, the Mayor and Louisville Metro Government are now poised to implement the Blight Busters Initiative. This planned new “war on blight” updates and strengthens existing tools, coordinates the effort and resources of several local departments, and aggressively attacks blight block by block, wherever it may exist.

Features include :

- Creation of a Blight Busters Action Team consisting of the directors of several Metro departments most closely associated with blighted properties and their eventual reuse;
- Led by the Director of Housing and Community Development, consideration of all acquisition targets utilizing formal Planning and Zoning Regulations, Development Codes, Neighborhood Plans, HUD Federal Entitlement Action Plan, and Historical Guidelines. Planning and coordination is the “mantra” from acquisition through appropriate disposition and redevelopment;
- Use of “spot-basis” condemnation, when necessary, to rid neighborhoods of vacant, boarded and derelict properties or to acquire key or historic properties for residential redevelopment;
- Creation of a “vacant property registration program” to track the whereabouts and plans of persons owning vacant/abandoned properties;
- Proactive involvement with residents, neighborhood organizations, and the real estate and banking industries to identify target properties and to facilitate resolution;
- On-site identification of the owners of blighted and tax delinquent properties – “Offenders in stocks;”
- Maintenance of high standards of quality regarding design, property management, and credibility for potential owners so that the cycle of abandonment comes to an end for any given property.

Local leadership plays a critical role in establishing and/or implementing each individual tool or element of a program to address vacant and abandoned properties. The Blight Busters Initiative imposes

political will and leadership on several departments in an effort to broaden and accelerate success through thoughtful and meaningful planning and coordination.

*For additional information, please contact Melissa B. Barry, Director, Louisville Metro Housing and Community Development, at (502) 574-3107 or [melissa.barry@louisvilleky.gov](mailto:melissa.barry@louisvilleky.gov).*

**MALDEN, MA: MAYOR RICHARD C. HOWARD**  
**Mayor's Housing Task Force**

Established in 1996 by Malden Mayor Richard C. Howard, the Mayor's Housing Task Force takes advantage of Chapter 111, Section 1271 of the Massachusetts General Laws, which provides the opportunity to inspect problem residential and commercial properties throughout this City of some 56,000 persons located 10 minutes north of Boston. The City, with the cooperation of the local court system, exercises this so-called housing receivership law only after it has exhausted all other avenues with egregious properties that have a long history of code violations and, in many cases, numerous public safety complaints. The nuisance properties – illegal rooming houses and vacant and abandoned properties – are the targets of the City's "Pride in Malden" campaign.

The Task Force unites the Mayor's Office; the Malden Redevelopment Authority (MRA); the Malden Fire and Police Departments; the City of Malden's Board of Health; Code Enforcement, Building, Legal, Plumbing and Wiring Departments; and the Assessor's and Tax Collector's offices in a common effort to eliminate blight in the neighborhoods.

Generally, property owners are cooperative when encouraged to undertake actions to correct code violations. Low-cost financing to undertake the needed repairs is offered by the MRA, which has overseen a housing rehabilitation loan program since the 1960s. For property owners who are not cooperative – and there have been only a few – the MRA, on behalf of the City, is named the receiver of the property by the local district court and undertakes the needed repairs on its own. The local banking community also came forward to provide the upfront financing at low cost to effectuate the repairs in receivership situations.

The Task Force receives its referrals from neighbors, police and fire officials, and Malden City Councilors who suspect abandonment, considerable neglect or, in some cases, illegal activities. Task Force members inspect the exteriors of these properties for building and safety code violations. They report that most common violations include missing windows, holes in roofs, and dilapidated stairs or unregistered vehicles, which often violate the community's fire code. Whether the code violations are observed outside or inside a house, inspectors will attempt to locate the owner and ask permission to complete the inspection. If they are denied permission they seek a court order to proceed. Equipped with video and still cameras, inspectors go through these properties and record conditions and breaches of building and health codes. Homeowners typically are given seven days to address the cited problems, after which the receivership process starts. Clearly, receivership is not the goal of the task force; the goal is to work with property owners to reach a solution.

The day-to-day director of the Malden Mayor's Housing Task Force is a 35-plus-year employee of the Malden Redevelopment Authority with extensive experience in housing financing and home rehabilitation processes who has earned statewide recognition for his expertise in handling code violations and lead paint violations. The Task Force also enjoys an excellent working relationship with the local district court, which has been a willing partner in the effort to rid Malden of nuisance properties.

Two major challenges had to be overcome to ensure the program's success, and both were overcome through better communication. In the first instance, the program had to gain buy-in from the various City departments, many of which were not accustomed to working together on a regular basis. Ongoing communications and twice-a-month meetings fostered a good working relationship among all the players at the table. In addition, communication with the greater Malden community was also needed to acquaint residents and businesses with the Task Force and its role. Pamphlets were produced, infomercials were aired by the local cable access station, articles were placed in local newspapers, and

inserts about the Task Force and the City's Pride in Malden campaign were included in various City mailings, including property tax bills.

Since the inception of the program 10 years ago, Malden has seen significant results in terms of the overall quality of life in its neighborhoods:

- More than 1,000 properties have been inspected and, based on those inspections, approximately 500 properties have been targeted. To date, there have been seven receivership cases and six demolitions.
- Once vacant and abandoned properties have been rehabilitated, sold to owner-occupants, and returned to the tax rolls.
- Properties that once detracted from the overall quality of life in the neighborhood have been restored.
- Vacant eyesores, now restored, have been the catalyst for other home improvements in the neighborhoods.
- Public nuisance properties have been restored and sold to owner-occupants. (One example is a house in which a moderately handicapped 80-year-old woman was virtually held hostage and neglected by her drug-dealing grandsons until a social service agency contacted the Task Force. The proceeds from the sale of that property were set aside to finance in full the cost of providing elderly housing and care for the woman.)
- In some instances stolen property has been recovered after the Task Force has gained access to abandoned or vacant housing.

There has been a learning curve associated with Malden's program. Officials have learned that issues needing to be addressed early in the process include selection of the right contractor who can deliver a project on time, outreach to the banking community to ensure adequate capital is available at all times to effectuate repairs, and attention to internal and external communications.

*For additional information, please contact the Malden Redevelopment Authority: Ronald F. Grasso, Director of Neighborhood Revitalization, at (781) 324-5720, or Deborah A. Burke, Project Director, Economic Development & Planning, at (781) 397-700 or [dburke@cityofmalden.org](mailto:dburke@cityofmalden.org).*

## **SAVANNAH, GA: MAYOR OTIS S. JOHNSON Neighborhood Revitalization Model**

Many of Savannah's inner-city neighborhoods have a large number of vacant and abandoned properties, both structures and lots. Many of these are "heir" properties which have bad titles and cannot easily be redeveloped. These properties contribute to blight, disinvestment, crime, and other problems that negatively affect neighborhoods and the City overall. Combating these problems requires continuous investment of City, State and federal resources. Returning vacant and abandoned properties to productive use and revitalizing distressed neighborhoods, therefore, is a City goal.

Working together with neighborhood residents, Savannah has used the Georgia Urban Redevelopment Law to redevelop these properties. The City adopted an Urban Redevelopment and Land Use Plan which calls for the development of affordable housing and neighborhood compatible businesses on vacant and abandoned properties. Property owners may develop their property in accordance with the plan. When they are unable or unwilling to do so, the City can acquire the property at fair market value. When necessary, the City uses its eminent domain powers to acquire vacant and abandoned property.

Properties acquired by the City are sold through a competitive request for proposal process to developers who must comply with the Plan. Successful developers of single family homes include nonprofit housing organizations and minority contractors. The City provides low-interest development loans and other assistance, including infrastructure and green space improvements. It provides single family developers with free house plans to ensure the houses built are of high quality and architecturally compatible with the neighborhood.

Larger nonprofit developers, such as Mercy Housing Southeast and The Paces Foundation, have partnered with the City and the Community Housing Services Agency (a consortium of banks) to secure federal and State low income housing tax credits and historic tax credits to finance high quality, affordable rental housing. The City, working with several national and local volunteer organizations – including World Changers, Group Work Camps, YouthBuild, and Rebuilding Together-Savannah – offer home improvements to existing homeowners. The City purchases the material installed by volunteers. It uses HOME and Community Development Block Grant funds in addition to local tax and Special Purpose Local Option Tax funds to leverage the necessary private investment from banks and mortgage companies. The Georgia Department of Community Affairs participates in rental and homeownership programs. The Federal Home Loan Bank has contributed grants.

Since 1999 the City, with neighborhood support, has implemented Urban Redevelopment and Land Use Plans in four neighborhoods. This has led to the transformation of more than 150 vacant and abandoned properties into more than 500 quality dwelling units; approximately 100 were converted to single family homes, the remaining 400 into rental properties. Crime and associated problems have dropped noticeably in these neighborhoods. This investment is sparking new private investment from property owners with clear title who until now have not been motivated to improve their property due to distressed market conditions. Savannah officials believe the leadership shown by the Mayor, Aldermen and City officials has created an environment of trust, partnership, and private investment – all of which are leading to significant neighborhood revitalization. The biggest challenge facing the City and neighborhood residents, they say, are recent changes in the State's eminent domain laws. While State legislators have hailed these changes as a victory for property owner rights, officials say it remains to be seen whose rights have been protected – those of vacant and abandoned property owners, or persons who live and/or own properties in close proximity.

*For additional information, please contact Martin Fretty, Director, Savannah Housing Department, at (912) 651-6926 or [mfretty@savannahga.gov](mailto:mfretty@savannahga.gov).*

## **ST. LOUIS, MO: MAYOR FRANCIS G. SLAY**

### **Problem Properties Unit**

St. Louis is typical of the many major U.S. cities that over time have witnessed the deterioration of once grand neighborhoods – neighborhoods which, despite their problems, retain diverse ethnic influence and appeal. Since the 1960s, St. Louis has experienced the kind of disinvestment that has tested the economic and spiritual will of these neighborhoods to endure.

Today, however, formerly proud and culturally unique neighborhoods are coming back, and many are thriving. Their renaissance is the product of innovative and sustained efforts by local government to promote and sustain development. Mayor Francis G. Slay's administration has devoted extensive resources and focus to a broad effort that includes a calculated and hard-earned plan to combat vacant and abandoned property.

The City of St. Louis Neighborhood Life Initiative, designed to revitalize, promote and sustain City neighborhoods, was a core initiative when Mayor Slay took office. Due to the overwhelmingly positive response to the Initiative during his administration's first term, it remains at the core of City neighborhood revitalization efforts in the Mayor's second term. And due to revenues created by the procedures implemented to handle vacant properties, the Initiative now has expanded resources with which to work.

The core of the Neighborhood Life Initiative is the Problem Properties Unit, a group of attorneys and City law department personnel dedicated solely to solving City neighborhood problems. The Unit was initially formed and funded through a federal grant. Some Unit personnel are dedicated to behavioral nuisance problems, that is, conduct that represents a human blight on a given neighborhood. The balance of the Unit consists of a task force of attorneys and staff focused solely on vacant properties, many long abandoned.

Among the many critical components of the vacant property effort is a Problem Property Court dedicated to cases of derelict properties, many of which are vacant. In contrast to a traditional housing court, punitive monetary fines assessed against property owners are not the focus; instead, the property's stagnant status is addressed. Restoration or sale of subject properties are the best outcomes for the City in its efforts to overcome the negative effects of vacant properties and get these properties back on the tax rolls. Problem Property Court, held several times per week, also addresses as priorities the "the worst of the worst," those properties or owners of greatest concern to neighborhoods.

In addition to a Judge solely committed to this Court, City police officers are assigned directly to the Problem Properties Unit. These officers get problem property owners into court, which on occasion requires them to make an arrest. Officers resolve court warrants on old court cases, dated and lingering, where property violations remain. The goal: Every owner of derelict property within the City is to be held accountable for their property.

An initial and significant challenge faced was the enforcement of approximately 8,000 outstanding warrants on stagnant court cases involving problem properties. These warrants were cleared in their entirety over the first few years of the effort, resulting in long-time property issues between delinquent owners and the City being resolved. It was not uncommon for property owners who had lived outside Missouri for years to return for their court dates in Problem Property Court.

Problem Property officers continue to work aggressively with Unit members to locate property owners, and they accompany attorneys who visit and monitor properties. The cooperation between the

Unit and the Police Department experienced at the start of the Initiative remains a critical component of the current effort.

Another vacant property initiative involved development and implementation of procedures to aggressively enforce Vacant Property/Nuisance laws. For example, a City ordinance provides for the charging of a fee, which could become a lien against real property, for property that is vacant and in violation of codes. Steps have been taken to inventory these vacant properties and enforce this ordinance City-wide. The message is simple: The City is no longer going to be the caretaker of private property at its own expense; if an owner is going to hold vacant non-code-compliant property, there will be a cost and other consequences, perhaps foreclosure of the property itself.

The Problem Property Unit also aggressively pursues expenses the City regularly incurs in its basic upkeep of vacant property – public safety and quality of life services regarding building board-up, partial or full demolition, trash and debris removal, and weed and grass abatement. The Unit has been successful in attaching these expenses to the vacant property so that the property owner has no choice but to deal with them. The City has gone beyond the simple idea of collection, constructing a system under State and local law whereby properties are subjected to foreclosure for failure to pay City upkeep expenses. This system parallels that used for the collection of real estate taxes and utilizes the same procedures, resulting in clear title for the ultimate purchaser of the property at foreclosure sale. It has been an overwhelming success, resulting in the sale and eventual rehabilitation of long-time vacant properties and the payment of the City's delinquent property upkeep expenses. Properties not purchased by others or redeemed are being titled and remarketed by the City. The goal is always to get properties back in productive use and on the tax rolls.

Officials in St. Louis have learned that a comprehensive approach to vacant properties will not work if the effort is diluted by other pursuits; it requires that resources be focused. In handling vacant property problems, success is achieved “one property at a time.” All City systems involved must be integrated and functioning effectively. When dealing with a large volume of vacant properties, it is important to get each of them into the system, update information on them, ensure that all applicable fees have been assessed and any resulting liens asserted, be diligent about getting cases into Problem Property Court, and use Equity Circuit Court divisions when necessary to resolve difficult property disputes. Doing all of this helps overcome the perception that “nothing can be done” about this problem. Results in St. Louis have produced more positive perceptions and greater expectations of what can be done.

*For additional information, please contact Matthew Moak, Associate City Counselor, (314) 641-8271 or [moakm@stlouiscity.com](mailto:moakm@stlouiscity.com).*

**SOUTH SALT LAKE, UT: MAYOR ROBERT D. GRAY  
Revitalization Program**

The City of South Salt Lake's program to revitalize tired residential and business districts is multi-faceted and involves coordination and cooperation among several City departments and two private nonprofit organizations.

South Salt Lake Works, Inc. and the Community Development Corporation are nonprofit organizations focusing on the rehabilitation of dilapidated homes and businesses and the revitalization of tired neighborhoods. Working with the City's Community and Economic Development Director, vacant lots, abandoned buildings and nuisance properties are targeted for rehabilitation. The City partners either financially or with in-kind donations (fee waivers, construction of infrastructure, etc.) with the nonprofit groups to acquire and renovate troubled real estate.

In concert with the City's investment in new development, the Public Works Department may also upgrade the physical appearance of a selected neighborhood by repair or replacement of streets, sidewalks and lighting. The Community and Economic Development Department will educate owners of properties adjacent to the new development about the availability of low cost rehabilitation loans. The Police Department steps up its code enforcement activities and may increase police patrols.

In certain instances the City administration may sponsor a neighborhood celebration in connection with the ribbon-cutting for a newly constructed development in order to generate excitement in the area. The idea is to make as big a splash as possible in a declining area, with the hope of increasing pride of ownership among existing owners. Another objective is to remove the fear of investing in the area on the part of private investors by demonstrating the City's willingness to "jump in the water first."

Most importantly, says Mayor Robert D. Gray, the program works. "In every case in which the City has invested in a declining neighborhood," he says, "it has been the catalyst for similar investment by private property owners."

*For additional information, please contact Dave Carlson, City Attorney, at (801) 483-6095 or [dcarlson@southsaltlakecity.com](mailto:dcarlson@southsaltlakecity.com).*

**TOLEDO, OH: MAYOR CARLTON S. FINKBEINER**  
**The Dirty Dozen**

The purpose of The Dirty Dozen program, just launched by the City of Toledo, is to aggressively and continuously pursue decrepit commercial, industrial, and residential properties containing numerous code violations – properties that present an immediate risk to the health, safety, and welfare of the citizens of Toledo. Efforts will be concentrated on obtaining rehabilitation or demolition of these properties.

A property and its owner are added to The Dirty Dozen list when it's identified as a contributor to blight in a neighborhood. When a list of 12 properties has been assembled, a team of inspectors from several City departments converges on them, performs a thorough inspection, and issues citations and orders. The location of each property, a picture of the property, and the name of the owner are provided to the news media and published on the City's Web site.

A team of "blight busters" was assembled from several City departments, including the Department of Neighborhoods, Department of Law, Divisions of Building Inspection and Code Enforcement, Prosecutor's Office, Health Department, Fire Department, and Police Department. An inspection team was also assembled from these departments. Other partners in this effort are the Department of Economic Development and Community Development Corporations. Funding for this program is being provided by several sources, including the Department of Neighborhoods, the Department of Economic Development, the Nuisance Abatement Trust Fund, and federal agencies. The personnel involved in the program are funded through the operating budget of each department involved.

The first serious challenge encountered by this new program has been identification of the correct property parcels. Corporations owned seven of the 12 properties on The Dirty Dozen list, with a registered agent listed as the contact person; initiating communication with the actual owner is often a serious problem. Once a property owner is taken to court, the lengthy court proceedings needed to abate the nuisance presents another obstacle to rehabbing or demolishing the structure involved.

Another difficult issue has involved the filing of a foreclosure through which the State of Ohio becomes the legal owner of a property due to the owner's inability to pay the taxes owed. When a property is going through a foreclosure involving the State it is very difficult for the City to file charges and issue citations against it. The issue was resolved by informing the State that the property is on The Dirty Dozen list and that the City is aggressively pursuing the owner.

In the one month since the start of this program the City has one property that is undergoing rehabilitation and that will be occupied by a business within the next 120 days. Two other locations have shown significant progress on exterior clean-up. A partnership between one of the property owners and the Toledo Zoo is a possibility. The Toledo Zoo has undergone a major expansion over the last few years and now is fully utilizing all available power sources. Any additional expansion will require the Zoo to construct a power substation at a cost of approximately \$3 million. For a much lower cost the Zoo could purchase the subject property, which would provide another power source and about three acres of land for use in future development.

Consistent, aggressive enforcement has proved effective in getting the attention of many of the property owners on The Dirty Dozen list, as has publishing their names. Coordinated intergovernmental efforts are keeping continuous pressure on the owners of the nuisance properties.

*For additional information, please contact Hussein Abounaaj, Commissioner of Code Enforcement and Building Inspection, at (419) 245-1440 or [Hussein.Abounaaj@toledo.oh.gov](mailto:Hussein.Abounaaj@toledo.oh.gov).*

**TRENTON, NJ: MAYOR DOUGLAS H. PALMER**  
**Capital City Revitalization Plan**

In 1990, when Douglas H. Palmer was elected to his first term as Mayor of the City of Trenton, more than 1,000 vacant and abandoned properties dotted the City's 7.5 square miles. Mayor Palmer tasked his Department of Housing and Economic Development with the systematic redevelopment of those sites with both for-profit and not-for-profit developers.

Foreclosure and condemnation are key tools used in this ongoing effort. Once the properties were on the City's maintenance roles, the Department of Inspections and the Real Estate Bureau evaluated their condition. Properties that are beyond repair are demolished and the site prepared for new construction. Then, both vacant lots and sites with structures are packaged for redevelopment and sold either by designation or through public bidding. No matter which method is used, the redevelopment process is closely monitored by either the Division of Housing Production or the Division of Economic Development, depending on whether the final use will be housing or commercial.

As part of the City's standard disposition agreement, clauses addressing local and minority hiring are included, adding another key economic growth dimension to the City's redevelopment process for vacant or abandoned properties.

Funding sources for affordable housing development have included the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which granted Homeownership Zone (HOZ) status to the historic Battle Monument area in the City's Canal Banks Redevelopment Area. Other sources have included Federal Home Loan Banks and New Jersey's Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency. Commercial redevelopment funding has been obtained from the U.S. Economic Development Administration. For sites needing environmental remediation, the City has received financial support from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and New Jersey Economic Development Authority.

Today, properties that once were vacant or abandoned are part of the City's ratables, and once-blighted areas are vibrant communities. In fact, using such troubled property, Mayor Palmer's administration has developed more than 1,600 homes for working families. The City has learned that the keys to success are having a comprehensive approach to redevelopment and effective partnerships with state and federal agencies.

*For additional information, please contact Taneshia Nash Laird, Director, Division of Economic Development, at (609) 989-3603 or [tlaird@trentonnj.org](mailto:tlaird@trentonnj.org).*

**WILMINGTON, DE: MAYOR JAMES M. BAKER**  
**Vacant Property Registration Fee Program**

When Mayor James M. Baker took office in 2001, it was quickly apparent that the City needed to direct greater efforts toward the problem of vacant buildings. A Community Working Group consisting of neighborhood residents, community leaders, social service agencies, the Police Department, and code enforcement officials was formed in one of the more problematic, densely populated areas of the City – Census Tract 22, or the Hilltop area. The group discovered an 18 percent vacancy rate in the area and learned that the vacant properties were the sites of loitering and vagrancy, drug use, and prostitution. Soon after, other Community Working Groups began reporting vacant property problems in other neighborhoods. Based on this, the new Administration determined that a new initiative to combat vacant properties would be launched citywide.

The Mayor asked the Department of Licenses and Inspections to study the procedures and staff -hours involved in the code enforcement of vacant properties. It was obvious to all involved that the \$25 yearly vacant registration fee did not come close to covering the cost of monitoring, citing, and prosecuting property owners. In response to the need to amend the existing codes, a Vacant Property Working Group formed in 2002 devoted a year to drafting new legislation. Along the way, the concerns of some property owners and community groups had to be managed, as did resistance from banks and mortgage holders. But when the drafting process was completed, the legislation was quickly adopted.

The Vacant Property Registration Fee Program that grew out of the new legislation set vacant registration fees based on the total number of years a property is vacant, regardless of varying ownership over time. The fees, which are billed every November 15<sup>th</sup> and are due the first week of January, increase with years of vacancy. The fee schedule is: \$500 for one year, \$1,000 for two years, \$2,000 for years three and four, \$3,500 for years five through nine, and \$5,000 for 10 years, with \$500 added for every year over 10. Three months before the billing statements are sent, a notice goes to every vacant property owner, informing them of the years of vacancy involved and the size of the fee they are going to be assessed. The program also allows fee waivers which give property owners one year to rehabilitate, sell, or demolish their properties. The one-time, one-year waivers are intended to encourage renovations to be completed in a timely manner. In the past year, 285 such waivers have been granted.

As of the end of March, the program had collected \$331,000 in 2006 fees – an amount expected to double by the end of the year. Last year the program collected \$446,000. In comparison, prior to the creation of the program, in 2003, the City collected \$7,875.

Prior to 2003, Wilmington did not offer a deterrent to owning vacant properties, only disincentives to maintaining them. Mayor Baker credits the City's revised vacant property code and increased registration fees for dramatic and sustained reductions in the vacant properties that devastate people and neighborhoods. The program, he says, has led to production of affordable homes and restored a sense of community in neighborhoods where rehabilitated dwellings have replaced vacant eyesores.

There were 1,528 vacant buildings in Wilmington prior to January 2005. In the past year, 380 became occupied, 217 were sold to new owners, and 16 were demolished. "From the outset," the Mayor says, "the goal has been to get properties back in shape, provide housing for those who need it, and preserve and strengthen neighborhoods – not to collect fees from derelict property owners."

*For additional information, please contact Jeffrey Starkey, Commissioner of License & Inspections at (302) 576-3059 or [jstarkey@ci.wilmington.ed](mailto:jstarkey@ci.wilmington.ed) or Cynthia Ferguson, Administrator of the Vacant Property Registration Fee Program, at (302) 576-3096.*

## **YORK, PA: MAYOR JOHN S. BRENNER Inventory of Vacant and Abandoned Properties**

In 2004 York Mayor John S. Brenner commissioned the University of Pennsylvania's Fels Institute of Government to inventory vacant houses in the City of York. The inventory, conducted between November 2004 and January 2005, provided the Mayor with a current, address-specific list of vacant houses in areas of the City known to have concentrations of vacant properties. The Fels Institute also recommended policy and program options intended to address housing vacancy and abandonment in York.

To develop the inventory, the Fels Institute examined every residential and mixed-use building in every block in sections of the City identified by City staff as areas of concentrated housing vacancy. All of the sections identified were within the "inner ring" neighborhoods which surround the downtown area.

The inventory includes two types of properties: Buildings that appear to be vacant and in need of major repairs to be habitable, and occupied buildings that appear to require substantial rehabilitation to comply with municipal code standards. It does not include vacant properties that were posted for sale or for rent, or that are in good condition.

Properties were given numerical code rankings consistent with those which the City used in its Housing Condition and Land Use Survey conducted 18 months prior to the Fels Institute survey. The codes used were:

1. ***Sound*** – sound condition, good maintenance;
2. ***Substandard Minor*** – needs basic cosmetic repairs;
3. ***Substandard Major*** – substantial improvement required;
4. ***Dilapidated*** – abandoned.

The survey was limited to a cursory inspection of building exteriors. The Fels Institute cautions that it is likely that some buildings designated code 4 were actually occupied, deteriorated houses, and that some of those identified as in need of substantial rehabilitation (code 3) may actually have been vacant. When it was difficult to determine whether a building was a code 3 or a code 4, it was usually designated code 4.

The survey identified 350 buildings located on 144 City blocks as vacant and in need of rehabilitation or demolition. Of these blocks, 61 had one vacant house, with the remainder fully occupied; 35 had two vacant houses; and 18 had three vacant houses.

The report concluded that "the solution to York's vacant property problems is neither a large-scale demolition program nor an effort to rehabilitate every building in the City." Rather, it said, it is necessary to reposition the City's neighborhoods for success in the current real estate market by attracting middle- and upper-income residents. "With a stronger local tax base consisting of more middle- and upper-income people, the City will be better able to improve public education and public services and to use available government resources to address the housing needs of lower-income citizens by strengthening and improving the City's affordable housing base."

The report makes specific recommendations for three types of vacant properties:

- ***For Vacant Houses Suitable for Rehabilitation*** –
  1. Select houses located in the strongest neighborhood real estate markets or on attractive blocks with higher-than-median real estate values;
  2. Pursue acquisition through eminent domain, tax sale, or negotiation;
  3. Conduct property inspections and evaluate rehabilitation costs;

4. Determine the subsidy level required for feasible rehabilitation and subsequent sale for owner-occupancy.
- ***For Vacant Houses not Suitable for Rehabilitation*** –
    1. Complete code inspections, fine owners for non-compliance, and impose liens where appropriate;
    2. Seal window and door openings where needed;
    3. Pursue opportunities for demolition in bid packages that include demolition of adjacent or nearby substandard garages and sheds.
  - ***For Isolated Occupied Homes*** (on the few blocks where almost all houses are vacant) –
    1. Conduct code inspections and complete inspection reports. For absentee-owned properties, fine owners for non-compliance, and impose liens where appropriate;
    2. Through review of these houses, identify each case in which the City has legal grounds to require that the property be vacated, based on health and safety considerations. For these cases, relocate occupants to suitable replacement housing and provide service support as needed.
    3. Pursue bulk acquisition and a “string demolition” approach to clear vacated blocks at the lowest possible expense.

Recognizing that the cost of the actions recommended will far exceed available resources, the report recommends that priority be given to properties which exhibit the following characteristic s:

- Substantial delinquent taxes or code violations;
- Low or nominal acquisition cost;
- High potential for leveraging other funding to support property development and/or re-use;
- Higher-than-median market value following rehabilitation;
- High potential to be combined with other vacant properties in site assemblage for subsequent bulk bidding on either rehabilitation or demolition; and
- Reasonable relocation/replacement housing expense, with minimal burden for displaced persons.

Finally, the report recommended that the City maintain and annually update the list of top-priority addresses in each of the three categories, and then estimate the costs and benefits associated with each of the factors listed for each property. It suggested that the City explore opportunities for collaboration with the County and/or local businesses to assemble the funding needed to pursue projects involving properties with the most promising cost/benefit ratios.

*For additional information contact York Mayor John S. Brenner at (717) 849-2221.*

**YUMA, AZ: MAYOR LAWRENCE K. NELSON**  
**Carver Park Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy Area**

The City of Yuma identified the Carver Park Neighborhood as an area for comprehensive revitalization. It is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Yuma and one of the most impoverished, with a poverty rate of 48 percent and a low-to-moderate-income rate of 78 percent. The 22-block area is home to 2,042 residents, 18 businesses, and a variety of religious and nonprofit entities.

A revitalization strategy plan, created with resident and stakeholder participation, was submitted to the Department of Housing and Urban Development and, in early 2000, HUD designated the Carver Park Neighborhood as a Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy Area. Surveys and neighborhood meetings identified the biggest issues as crime, neighborhood appearance, and the lack of decent, affordable housing. Using Community Development Block Grant funds, the City hired a Code Enforcement Officer specifically dedicated to this neighborhood. A major clean-up campaign was organized: The neighborhood was divided into seven areas; on seven Saturdays, City staff coordinated with various organizations to sponsor volunteer clean-up efforts. The campaign, considered to be very successful, marked the beginning of the revitalization of the Carver Park neighborhood and won a national Make-A-Difference Day Award.

The neighborhood contained approximately 20 dangerous abandoned buildings and 20 vacant lots containing debris and having various Anti-Ugly Ordinance issues. The Code Enforcement Officer took a proactive approach to get property owners to comply with the City's Public Nuisance Ordinance and building codes to maintain their properties. Using CDBG funds, the City implemented a neighborhood clean-up/fix-up activity. If property owners did not have the means to participate, the City would provide assistance such as dumpsters and towing of inoperable motor vehicles at no cost. Further enforcement action was never required in order to get abandoned buildings demolished.

Funded by CDBG and a Section 108 loan, the Yuma Neighborhood Development Organization (YNDO), a Community Based Development Organization, collaborated with the Arizona Western College (AWC) Building Trades Program and the Yuma Private Industry Council's YouthBuild Program to build decent, affordable housing in the Carver Park neighborhood. YNDO purchased some of the vacant lots and paid for building materials and required subcontractors. AWC provided an instructor and students to construct homes. The homes were sold at below-market prices to low-to-moderate-income families. To date, 10 homes have been constructed.

The Arizona Housing Development Corporation (AHDC), also a CBDO, received Low Income Housing Tax Credits to construct "scattered-site" rental housing in the neighborhood. The AHDC purchased four lots and constructed 26 two-story townhomes that are available to low-to-moderate-income families through the City's Housing Authority at below-market rents. The City also redeveloped three dilapidated properties and constructed The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Neighborhood Center with the use of CDBG funds and other state and federal grants.

The changes to this once-distressed neighborhood have encouraged the private development of new infill construction and residential redevelopment. Approximately 40 new homes have been added to this neighborhood through private investment. Yuma officials report that the appearance of the neighborhood has improved significantly, property values have increased dramatically, and residents' pride in their transformed neighborhood can be seen in the care they now give to their yards and homes.

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