

# BLUEPRINT **BUFFALO**

**POLICY BRIEF**

**REGIONAL STRATEGIES AND LOCAL TOOLS FOR RECLAIMING  
VACANT PROPERTIES IN THE CITY AND SUBURBS OF BUFFALO**

Frank Lloyd Wright's "Tree of Life" window originally adorned the Darwin Martin house and complex in Buffalo. One of 394 art-glass works that once graced the Martin home, the window was returned to the City of Buffalo in 1994 after years in a private collection in Toronto. Now this resplendent art-glass window resides at the Albright-Knox Gallery. For information on the Darwin Martin House restoration, see [www.darwinmartinhouse.org](http://www.darwinmartinhouse.org).

Cover photo: Biff Henrich

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## Acknowledgments

*BLUEPRINT BUFFALO* is the result of an intensive team effort, led by Joseph Schilling, Professor in Practice at the Virginia Tech Metropolitan Institute; and facilitated by project writer Lisa Schames and Jonathan Logan, graduate researcher at the Institute. The result reflects many hours of local interviews and follow-up calls, conversations, and refinements to create a pragmatic action plan suited to the Buffalo-Niagara region's specific challenges and assets. Particular thanks go to assessment team members and co-authors of sections of this plan: John Kromer of the Fels Institute of Government, University of Pennsylvania; Lucinda Flowers, New Orleans Neighborhood Development Collaborative; Kermit Lind, Community Advocacy Clinic, Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, Cleveland State University; and Lee Sobel, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Our work would not have been possible without the initial invitation and continuous support of our local hosts: Michael Clarke and Anthony Armstrong, program director and program officer of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation-Buffalo (LISC-Buffalo); Kathryn Foster, director of the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth, University at Buffalo (the Institute); and James Allen, executive director of the Town of Amherst Industrial Development Agency (IDA); as well as the local officials and individuals we interviewed throughout the region, including those in Cheektowaga and Tonawanda.

Adam Ploetz, AICP, currently manager of sustainable development programs at the 495/MetroWest Corridor Partnership in Boston, was a key catalyst for pulling together the three sponsoring organization and creating momentum around this project as a program manager for the Amherst IDA from 2003 to 2005. Adam led the first study visit and has continued to take part in discussions and to review drafts of the plan along the way.

With the Surdna Foundation's generous financial support, *Blueprint Buffalo* evolved into the flagship project of the NVPC's 2005–2006 Technical Assistance Demonstration Program. The partnership between Surdna and Campaign staff was indispensable to the realization of this action plan. For their personal contributions as well, we would like to thank Kim Burnett at the Surdna Foundation; Jennifer Leonard, director of NVPC; Lisa Mueller Levy, program director of LISC's Vacant Properties Initiative and director of technical assistance at NVPC; and Donald D.T. Chen, executive director of Smart Growth America and chairman of the NVPC.

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# Introduction

**QUEEN CITY...THE CITY OF GOOD NEIGHBORS**...City with a Heart...Buffalo is known by many names. Anchoring an eight-county region in Western New York State, Buffalo is a friendly and affordable place to live, with an average 20-minute commute from tree-lined neighborhood streets to jobs in industry, technology, education, banking, and government. Its beautiful setting on the eastern shore of Lake Erie offers great recreation and cultural opportunities. The Buffalo-Niagara region as a whole, with its 1.2 million residents, shares close economic and residential ties to the City of Toronto and the entire Niagara Peninsula of Southern Ontario, Canada.

So why have out-migration and job loss tarnished the Queen City's reputation, leaving almost 40,000 homes and land parcels vacant in downtown and in surrounding Erie County, more than half of these in Buffalo itself? Why have nearly half of the city's once-600,000 residents fled from the city or, worse, the state? The vacancies left behind represent vast challenges—and opportunities—for business and government leaders in the Buffalo-Niagara region.

## Numerous Studies, Modest Results

The shifting fortunes of the Buffalo-Niagara region have made it one of the most-studied urban areas in the nation. Organizations as diverse as the Brookings Institution, University at Buffalo's Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth, the American Institute of Architects, and the Congress for the New Urbanism have issued reports or sponsored study teams to evaluate planning and development policies and specific projects for Buffalo. Dozens of experts have documented the challenges confronting Buffalo and its surrounding communities, including a loss of manufacturing companies, poverty, property speculation, fiscal instability of local governments, poorly performing schools, and crime. A convergence of factors—some causal, some symptomatic—have led to significant population loss, sprawl, and property abandonment.

Buffalo has been studied so well and so often that its challenges appear to dwarf the considerable advantages and opportunities the region offers. Few commentators have devoted enough attention to the area's significant architectural treasures designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, Stanford White, H.H. Richardson, and Louis Sullivan, among others; Frederick Law Olmsted's beautiful and extensive park system; and the city's impressive stock of single- and multiple-family homes. Buffalo's waterfront—lined with factory buildings from its manufacturing past—shows great promise for residential development and neighborhood retail areas. The city and its suburbs are home to many traditional neighborhoods (such as Elmwood in Buffalo) that new urbanists tout as the perfect places for attracting and retaining young professionals. In fact, Buffalo's traditional street grid and historic building stock (from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) is among the most intact in the nation. Buffalo's growing arts community and burgeoning bio-medical industry are poised to build the base for new businesses and jobs. The city's 70 public schools are undergoing a 10-year facilities modernization that could help draw families back to the region's core. The region's strategic location as a key hub between Canada and the United States and a logical pressure valve for crippling freight congestion on eastern seaboard ports could serve as the gateway for expanded international trade.

The many studies of Buffalo-Niagara have offered a wealth of good ideas for attracting residents and businesses back to the city and protecting the livability of suburbs. The city and nearby towns, with assistance from the state, have developed promising individual programs and initiatives—more than

100 at last count. But Buffalo-Niagara still lacks a comprehensive strategy and the necessary regional leadership to address its difficulties.

An important recent step forward at the citywide level was the Buffalo Common Council's February 2006 adoption of *The Queen City in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Plan*, a comprehensive 20-year plan for the City that includes a Facilities and Vacant Land Management Plan. The City has also worked to strengthen the responsiveness of its planning department in recent years, by establishing an Office of Strategic Planning by public referendum; and the Good Neighbors Planning Alliance, a network of 10 neighborhood-based volunteer planning groups with whom the City coordinates its planning.

A collaborative regional strategy is called for, however, because Buffalo's vacant-property challenge is urgent: Estimates place nearly 10 percent of the city's land and 15 percent of its structures as vacant (Cornell, 2004, p. 5). Nearby "first-tier suburbs" such as Cheektowaga, Tonawanda, and Amherst are undergoing vacancy problems as well, which could accelerate without coordinated attention. Although the problems in inner-city Buffalo warrant immediate intervention, the region's nearby suburbs should begin now to establish action frameworks to prevent and address vacancies, especially commercial vacancies and industrial brownfields.

### Buffalo's Challenge—A Footprint Too Big for its Needs

Although Buffalo's population is less than half of what it once was, the city still has roughly the same footprint of roads, housing, and commercial/industrial buildings. Buffalo has lost thousands of residents and jobs as families moved to the suburbs in search of better schools, safer neighborhoods, and new opportunities. This trend mirrors the overwhelming population drain in Upstate New York since 1970, particularly population in the prime working years of 35 to 55 years of age, according to the Buffalo Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York (*The Regional Economy of Upstate New York*, Winter 2005).

As in other communities, this exodus left behind thousands of dilapidated homes, abandoned buildings, and vacant lots (see text box below: *What Are Vacant Properties?*). U.S. Census data from 2000 reveal that the city alone had 23,000 vacant housing units at that time, with perhaps another 16,000 within the region. Buffalo's challenge is how to readjust or "right-size" the city's physical and built environment so it mirrors the city's and the region's existing and projected population.



## Brownfields, Greyfields, Greenfields

**THE U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY** ([www.epa.gov/brownfields](http://www.epa.gov/brownfields)) defines **BROWNFIELDS** as real property where the actual presence or potential presence of hazardous substances, pollution or contaminants may complicate expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of the site.

A **GREYFIELD** is a vacant or under-performing commercial property such as a shopping mall or strip commercial property.

A **GREENFIELD** is undeveloped, raw land, considered the opposite of a brownfield. Because state laws governing the clean-up and reuse of brownfields can add time and expense to redevelopment costs, the Buffalo area is especially vulnerable to the loss of greenfields to new development, even though it also incurs additional costs for new infrastructure, from roads to utility lines.



# What Are Vacant Properties?

**THE NATIONAL VACANT PROPERTIES CAMPAIGN** (NVPC) views vacant properties through a continuum of residential, commercial, and industrial buildings and vacant lots that either:

- ▶ Threaten public safety (e.g., meet the definition of a public nuisance); and/or
- ▶ Have been subject to the neglect of fundamental duties of property ownership (e.g., failure to pay taxes or utility bills, defaults on mortgages, and liens against the property).

These problem properties can include abandoned, boarded-up buildings; lots with trash and debris; vacant or under-performing commercial properties known as greyfields (such as shopping malls and strip commercial properties); and neglected industrial properties with environmental contamination, known as brownfields. The NVPC continuum also includes deteriorating vacant single-family homes, apartments with significant housing code violations, and long-term vacant housing as indicators of future abandonment.

State laws and uniform building codes further refine what defines an abandoned building in particular jurisdictions, such as vacancy of over one year, deficiencies deemed beyond repair, and serious public safety hazards.

## Buffalo's Costs of Abandonment

Cities rely on U.S. Census data to quantify current vacancies. Although the data categories are not refined enough to distinguish actual abandonment and chronic vacancies from temporarily or seasonally empty residences (such as houses for sale or rent, and vacation homes), the Census does have an “other vacancies” category that indicates the magnitude of long-term vacancy problems. The danger signal for a city is a high percentage of overall vacancies combined with a high percentage of “other” vacant properties within overall vacancies (these are units that are neither for rent, for sale, seasonally vacant, nor vacant for typical real estate reasons).

Buffalo received its danger signal in the 2000 Census. That year, residential vacant housing units stood at 15.7 percent overall. Of those vacancies, an astonishing 43.7 percent are classified as “other,” a rate that exceeds those of other Rustbelt cities such as Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia.

Each known abandoned residential property may involve 20 or more city actions and cost taxpayers nearly \$12,000 over a five-year period, according to the Cornell Cooperative Extension Association report (p. 29).

Nuisance response, inspections, maintenance and mowing, foregone taxes, and eventual demolition costs represent public funds that could be spent on more productive city priorities, from education to health care to housing innovations. Since 1995, Buffalo has spent in excess of \$30 million to demolish more than 4,500 vacant buildings. The 2007 New York State budget has allocated half of the \$10 million requested by the City to aid in the demolition of 3,000 more (Precious, *Buffalo News*, March 22, 2006).

## Blight and Abandonment Capture a Foothold in the Suburbs

The Buffalo region's established suburban communities need a wholly different approach to the vacant property challenge than does the city center. These suburbs, most developed just after World War II, need a “wellness” approach that supports the relatively healthy residential and commercial markets in these communities, yet recognizes that these communities face challenges similar to those faced by the traditional urban core: declining population, aging housing, underused commercial sites, and deteriorating infrastructure. Within Erie County, 17 percent of the suburban population is over the age of 65, the fourth-highest proportion of older residents among 64 regions studied by Robert Puentes

and David Warren of the Brookings Institution in their 2006 report *One-Fifth of the Nation: America's First Suburbs*. The report found that from 1970 to 2000, the number of children under 15 in Erie County dropped by 34.5 percent. More than 50 percent of the county's housing stock was built before 1960. Erie County's first suburbs ranked 60th of 64 regions studied with an average inflation-adjusted appreciation of only 33.5 percent (p. 20).

In Spring 2003, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Buffalo Branch reported a trend toward more home foreclosures in three outer-ring neighborhoods of Buffalo, on both the east and west sides—a strong indicator of the spread of long-term or chronic vacancy beyond the city limits. Vacant properties are already becoming more common in each of the adjacent suburban communities of Tonawanda, Cheektowaga, and Amherst. Tonawanda's Building and Housing Department reports a steady annual increase in problem property cases, now handling several hundred problem-property cases each year—and inspectors are seeing more chronically vacant homes and dilapidated rental units owned by out-of-town investors. Cheektowaga has fewer housing cases, but its code enforcement staff is now confronting the same business model that slumlords and speculators once reserved for the central city. Amherst's strip shopping centers are experiencing a downturn, with vacant storefronts and “big-box” sites threatening to become chronic greyfields, failed or older and economically obsolete retail or commercial areas. As these commercial properties sit idle, sometimes for years, they can become eyesores that discourage and even drive away new retail and office uses. Together all of these conditions create a climate ripe for future abandonment.

### Assets and Opportunities: A New Way of Seeing

At the request of the City of Buffalo in 2004, the Cornell University Cooperative Extension Association of Erie County conducted a project to help reclaim the city's vacant properties. Led by Darlene Vogel and drawing on wide participation, the project emphasized an “asset approach” to the challenge of identifying, rehabilitating, and reusing vacant land and buildings in Buffalo. Although focused on the city, the report identified vacant property prevention and abatement as a regional priority (p. 5). Its findings have particular application to close-in suburbs, which are showing signs of incipient vacancy and abandonment.

The report noted the region's many strengths, including cultural and natural resources, a strategic location within the region and the U.S.-Canadian trade corridor, and strong neighborhood identities. In fact, the report found that the very challenges presented by vacant properties have also opened doors in Buffalo:

- ▶ Available land at affordable prices.
- ▶ Land assembly options for development.
- ▶ Development incentives, existing and new.
- ▶ Room in the landscape for innovative solutions.
- ▶ Room in the landscape to provide common community areas in association with new development.
- ▶ Potential for a variety of development types and mixes.
- ▶ Potential for job generation around a skilled workforce.

For decades, public officials have tried traditional redevelopment policies to retool the existing economy and attract new business development with modest success. Such traditional policies are flawed for the present conditions. Complaint-driven and reactive enforcement strategies and duplicative, uncoordinated redevelopment strategies fall far short of the visionary, systemic change Buffalo now needs.

City, county, and town leaders must make the revitalization of vacant properties their top priority, and must base their cooperation on a new view of vacant land and properties as potential assets to be reclaimed, either as green space or as redeveloped sites and structures, bringing revenue and residents to the city and region.



At first it might be difficult for public officials, business leaders, and citizens to view dilapidated buildings and boarded-up homes as assets. Residents become immune or numb to the constant presence of vacant properties—they have lived next door or driven past blocks of vacant properties for years, perhaps even decades. Policymakers have instituted numerous programs to gain control over the ever-expanding inventory of vacant and abandoned buildings with only modest success. But this new view of vacant properties is well worth the effort. *Blueprint Buffalo* proposes that this new policy lens—supported by a coordinated regional effort and translated into a specific step-by-step framework— will help the City and region transform thousands of vacant properties into assets for the next century and beyond. ●

**At first it might be difficult to view dilapidated buildings and boarded-up homes as assets...But this new view of vacant properties is well worth the effort.**



## Blueprint Buffalo

**IN EARLY 2005 THE NATIONAL VACANT PROPERTIES CAMPAIGN** (NVPC) launched its Technical Assistance Demonstration Program, with financial support from the Surdna Foundation. The program brings together teams of practitioners to evaluate existing policies and programs that address abandonment and blight in seven pilot communities.

The Buffalo-Niagara region was one of 7 communities selected from among 50 who responded to NVPC's nationwide request for proposals. The Buffalo-Niagara proposal was sponsored by the Office of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), the Amherst Industrial Development Agency, and the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth at University at Buffalo. This team requested a regional vacant property assessment that would include the surrounding suburban communities of Amherst, Tonawanda, and Cheektowaga. The informal advisory committee includes Partners for a Livable Western New York, Buffalo's Director of Strategic Planning, and other key stakeholders in the Buffalo region.

Over a period of about nine months, the NVPC team conducted interviews and gathered insights that have resulted in this report. During the study period, Buffalo-Niagara emerged as a region broadly challenged by decades of disinvestment and population loss, but also as a close network of communities singularly blessed with a wealth of historic, transit-friendly, and affordable neighborhoods and commercial areas. Building on the City of Buffalo's *Facilities and Vacant Land Management Plan* now formally adopted by the Buffalo Common Council as part of its comprehensive 20-year plan for the city, the NVPC team sought to reexamine how the revitalization of Buffalo's vacant properties could actually serve as a catalyst to address the region's other most pressing problems: population loss, a weak real estate market in the inner city, signs of incipient economic instability in older suburbs, quality-of-life issues, school quality, and suburban sprawl.

The authors of this report found that Buffalo's vacant and underused properties offer a crucial convening point for turning the region around economically and protecting its intrinsic value as a livable, friendly "City with a Heart."

For additional information on the Blueprint Buffalo study process, please see the full report, *Blueprint Buffalo: Action Plan* at [www.vacantproperties.org](http://www.vacantproperties.org).





### The Action Plan and Policy Brief Reports

*Blueprint Buffalo* offers pragmatic approaches to vacant properties that builds on the assets of the city and suggests important strategies for enhancing regional relationships. Some of these actions may require changes in state and local laws, while others could happen with simple policy shifts. Most can be initiated within the next six months.

The *Blueprint Buffalo Action Plan* provides policymakers, civic and business leaders, and citizens with specific ideas and tools for addressing vacant properties, highlighting current activities in Buffalo and providing information on model practices from other communities, including the Oak Hill neighborhood visioning process in Youngstown, Ohio; the Genesee County Land Bank Authority in Flint, Michigan; and the Cleveland Vacant Properties Coordinating Council. The *Action Plan* offers the technical details on how to create a stronger, more stable, and more vibrant Buffalo-Niagara region.

The *Blueprint Buffalo Policy Brief* offers an overview of these recommendations and models to emphasize the Blueprint's major theme: that a comprehensive vacant properties initiative will require coordinated action by the city, surrounding communities, state and federal agencies, and neighborhood groups. Both components of the Blueprint make the case for why vacant property revitalization should become the major focal point for the rebirth of the city of Buffalo and the entire Niagara region. ●

## Framework for Action: Leadership to Support Key Strategies

**R**EGIONAL CHALLENGES DEMAND REGIONAL SOLUTIONS. Regional solutions need enlightened and committed leadership throughout all government, business, civic, and nonprofit sectors. While Buffalo-Niagara’s latter-day legacy of disinvestment and decline has been studied and re-studied, few experts have considered the reclaiming of vacant properties as a regional revitalization strategy. Only within the past three years have several groups begun to assess vacant properties in a regional context, notably the Cornell Cooperative Association and the sponsors of this NVPC assessment report (Buffalo LISC, the Institute, and the Amherst IDA). Vacant properties could easily serve as a catalyst for collaboration among regional leaders by implementing the comprehensive set of revitalization strategies set forth by the NVPC team. This report outlines four key actions for public, private and nonprofit leaders along with a framework of effective vacant property strategies.

### Making the Case for Regional Vacant Properties Action

Although viable ideas are on the table, and promising programs are on the ground, a truly regional strategy to reclaim these properties has yet to emerge. The lack of clear regional consensus around vacant properties lies partly in the perception that abandonment and disinvestment are largely “city” problems. Despite common beliefs, recent articles in the *Buffalo News* document the increase of abandonment in adjacent suburb of Cheektowaga, pinpointing sprawl as a major culprit. The May 2006 release of the draft *Erie-Niagara Framework for Regional Growth* carefully details the close relationship of abandonment in Buffalo and the adjacent first-tier suburbs in contrast to the steady, yet not spectacular, growth and new development in region’s outlying towns and cities.

Although most vacancies are found in or near downtown Buffalo, the difficulties—and potential benefits—presented by these properties extend far beyond the city’s boundaries. Not only Buffalo itself but its older surrounding communities—from close-in suburbs to the small villages serving threatened farmlands—suffer disproportionately from what the *Erie-Niagara Framework* report calls “the progressive draining of population and households from the region’s traditional urban and rural centers.” The greatest declines in population and household correlate directly with declining or stagnant housing values, eroded demand for retail and commercial services, and deterioration of housing stock, not only in the city, but also in town and country.

**More than 500 vacant buildings clutter Cheektowaga’s landscape...Kenmore’s main drag is pockmarked with empty storefronts. Tonawanda lost a larger percentage of people since 2000 than Buffalo.**

—Donn Esmonde, *Buffalo News*, August 16, 2006

The livability of newer suburbs—once praised for their bucolic settings and quiet streets—is threatened by the blurring boundary between developed and rural areas. Newer development hotspots include those near the towns of Wheatfield and Lockport in Niagara County; and East Amherst, Clarence, Cheektowaga, Lancaster, Orchard Park, and Hamburg in Erie County. These areas are the region’s most recently built communities and with relatively low overall densities they continue to consume more of the region’s farmland. Meanwhile, the region’s most densely settled inner-city neighborhoods and its compact rural village and town centers continue to lose households. The urban areas experiencing decline include portions of the cities of Buffalo, Niagara Falls, Lockport, Tonawanda, and North Tonawanda along with portions of the town of Niagara in Niagara County and Amherst, and Cheektowaga and West Seneca in Erie County. Rural communities experiencing losses include the northernmost towns in Niagara County and the southern tier of towns in Erie County.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JMSCHILLING

Even a few of the region’s more stable suburban communities, such as Amherst, are beginning to experience challenges similar to those faced by older communities—declining population, aging housing, vacated and underutilized commercial buildings and sites, and tired infrastructure. Early commercial corridors are at a similar disadvantage as properties in more newly developed areas. Accessibility, code compliance, parking deficiencies, and declining population and income put mid-century commercial properties in a difficult competitive position.

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

## Framework for Regional Growth

**SINCE THE FALL OF 2002**, Erie and Niagara county officials have been working on a plan for regional cooperation and development through 2020. The *Framework for Regional Growth* establishes a range of actions that local governments, the private sector, and nonprofit organizations can take to focus and reinforce regional growth and development where it is most needed. The process has engaged community and regional stakeholders through interviews, focus group meetings, presentations, and public workshops. The intent of the plan is to coordinate local planning and investments and to slow the spread of development by encouraging reinvestment in previously developed centers.

Local implementation of the plan is voluntary, but the goal of the counties is to achieve buy-in from communities so that the *Framework* can become a catalyst for more environmentally and fiscally sound planning and development practices in the region. Current development practices have created a system that causes inefficient infrastructure utilization, loss of important natural resources, abandonment of urban/village centers, and sprawling growth. The plan is to be implemented by Erie and Niagara Counties, with oversight provided by a newly formed bi-county Planning Board, comprised of officials from both counties and affiliated with a reconfigured Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council.



## Four Essential Leadership Actions

Given the complexity and longevity of Buffalo-Niagara's vacant property problems, public, private, and nonprofit leaders throughout the region should launch a series of initiatives in concert with one another. Local and state governments, universities, and the nonprofit community must play major roles. The City of Buffalo should take the lead for certain initiatives while Erie County or the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth at University at Buffalo oversee the design and development of other vacant property programs and policies. Together they and other entities will coordinate and contribute to a broad base of regional actions. Each leadership action provides support for the specific vacant property strategies and tools discussed beginning on page 23 of this Policy Brief.

*Blueprint Buffalo* identifies local institutions and the roles they can play in leading these initiatives. The report's authors recognize that local leaders, with guidance from neighborhood residents, must ultimately decide how best these critical initiatives should be led, but the successful revitalization of Buffalo and its first-tier suburbs depend on making these four **leadership actions** a top priority for the region:

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

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

**Leadership Action Three:** Create an *Erie-Buffalo Vacant Properties Coordinating Council* as a vehicle for ongoing communication and information sharing and to develop institutional capacities and partnerships; and

**Leadership Action Four:** Establish Buffalo-Niagara as a *Vacant Property Living Laboratory* (the nation's first such national demonstration model) through a series of innovative policy initiatives driven by the state's new Governor in cooperation with the State Legislature and the area's elected Federal officials.

The NVPC team anticipates that each sector (public, private, civic, and nonprofit) must do its part by making vacant property revitalization a top priority for at least the next four to five years. Thereafter, leadership activities may continue at a similar level of commitment, depending upon market conditions and the success or potential success of the partnerships set in motion by these actions.

### ● LEADERSHIP ACTION ONE: The Citywide Vacant Property Initiative

Within the next six months Mayor Brown should lead the Offices of Strategic Planning and Economic Development to launch a citywide vacant properties initiative that addresses the multiple fronts of vacant properties. The recently adopted comprehensive plan and its *Facilities and Vacant Land Management Plan* establish a strong foundation for the city wide initiative and will guide city vacant property programs for many years. Without such a management approach, Buffalo would run the risk of merely reacting to its growing surplus of land and properties.

The city must build citizen education and outreach into virtually every aspect of its vacant property initiative. Through established mechanisms such as the Office of Strategic Planning's Good Neighbors Alliance and the Housing Court's Citizen Liaison, the city initiative could offer foreclosure



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID TORKE

# Leadership Actions

## Roles and Responsibilities

Buffalo  
First-Tier Suburbs  
Counties  
Nonprofits  
Universities  
State

### Launch Citywide Vacant Properties Initiative

Institute Comprehensive Code Enforcement	●	○	○	○	○	○
Create a Land Banking Program or Entity	●	○	●	●	○	●
Establish Right-Sizing and Greening Policies and Practices	●	○	○	●	●	●

### Develop a First-Tier Suburban Vacant Property Agenda

Hold a Series of Forums to Create a Vacant Property Agenda	○	●	○	●	○	○
Create a First-Tier Suburbs Network	○	●	○	●	○	○
Leverage Support for Implementing the Regional Framework	○	●	○	●	○	○

### Create an Erie-Buffalo Vacant Properties Coordinating Council

Organize Regular Meetings for the Major Public and Private Players in Vacant Properties	●	●	●	●	○	○
Oversee Implementation of the <i>Blueprint's</i> Strategies and Initiatives	●	●	●	●	○	○
Create Regional Vacant Properties Work Plan and Coordinate with <i>Framework for Regional Growth</i>	●	●	●	●	○	○

### Establish Buffalo-Niagara as a Vacant Property Living Laboratory

Charter the Buffalo Regional Living Laboratory	●	●	●	●	●	●
Create Management Framework with University at Buffalo	●	●	●	●	●	●
Institute Pilot Projects	●	●	●	●	●	●
Performance-Based Regulations	●	●	●	●	●	●
Emulate the IBE Exhibition Model	●	●	●	●	●	●

**KEY** ● Leadership Role ● Major Player

# Mayors are more than managers

**A MAYOR'S ABILITY TO PROVIDE VISION AND DIRECTION** is as important as providing good public services. How today's mayors address their city's vacant properties and their redevelopment potential will determine their future legacy.

A mayor can focus attention and action on vacant properties through these actions:

**Broad community leadership.** The mayor can use his prominent position in the region as a bully pulpit. People look to mayors to set the tone and direction for the community and articulate a vision to which they can aspire.

**Setting the direction for city government.** Mayors can inspire and motivate city employees and take concrete steps to create change, from setting up interagency coordinating bodies to restructuring the functions and organizational lines of command at City Hall to get the job done.

**Uniting governmental and nongovernmental partners.** As head of the area's largest government, the mayor is the one public official best suited to reach out and gain the attention of the city's nongovernmental partners, from major corporations and foundations to community organizations.

**Advocating for change at the state level.** State governments define the framework for local abandoned-property efforts through the ground rules established by state statutes and the opportunities created by state funding and investment. Individually and through their peer networks, mayors can be powerful advocates for state-level change.

*Adapted from the Mayor's Resource Guide on Vacant and Abandoned Properties by Alan Mallach.*

prevention workshops, provide urban homesteading incentives, conduct “visioning” processes in preparation for demolition and land banking activities in neighborhoods, gain citizen input into the design and training for a comprehensive Real Property Information System (RPIS), and consistently base its own vacant-property planning on citizen-driven neighborhood plans.

The first public education effort will be to communicate with citizens about the citywide initiative itself. The “Queen City” theme has been a prominent and successful means of educating Buffalonians about plans for the city. Also successful, more recently, was the citizen-driven revival of Old Home Week, which drew expatriates back to the city for a job fair and neighborhood tours. Whatever the theme chosen, the mayor and Common Council will need to craft and communicate a compelling message that energizes staff and residents. The mayor will definitely need the buy-in of all local officials so they can fully support the strategic targeting of resources to certain vacant property programs and neighborhoods.

Buffalo's mayor must reach out to many local partners—including major public institutions such as the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth at University at Buffalo, private nonprofits such as Partners for a Livable Western New York and LISC-Buffalo, real estate experts and developers, faith-based community groups, and individual citizens. Strong partnerships and community support behind a citywide vacant properties initiative would build momentum for several suburban and regional strategies as outlined by this Action Plan. Engaging in such activities as the regional Real Property Information System (Strategy One) and formation of the Erie-Buffalo Vacant Properties Coordinating Council (Leadership Action Three) will not only advance the city's vacant property strategies, but build goodwill and cooperation with its suburban neighbors and regional partners.

Although the city has a role in all four of the recommended strategies that begin on page 23, the citywide initiative should take a leadership role on Strategies Two and Three, comprehensive code enforcement and land banking and green infrastructure.

### **Comprehensive Code Enforcement Approach**

Communities will need to enhance existing code enforcement approaches in ways that strategically target the most complex cases and that link enforcement actions with rehabilitation resources for those owners in need—a good strategy to preserve and stabilize vacant properties. Moreover, commissioning a new citywide vacant property unit and strengthening the role of the Housing Court as recommended in Strategy Two could contribute to more far-reaching institutional change. These agencies could also work together to focus on building the capacity of the local development community (profit and nonprofit) to act as court-appointed receivers to rehabilitate and perhaps acquire and manage these vacant properties.

### **Right-Sizing, Green Infrastructure, and Neighborhood Reinvestment Plans**

Buffalo has increased its activity in recent years to demolish derelict structures and acquire or transfer title to usable vacant properties. In effect, Buffalo has already entered the land-banking arena. All that remains is to institutionalize these functions and establish a reliable ongoing source of funding for the important work of acquiring vacant sites and clearing title so they can be returned to use. Although the effort needed to establish a permanent land bank for Buffalo seems daunting, the establishment of such an entity, as recommended in Strategy Three, can increase the city’s autonomy, reduce dependence on the State Legislature for funding demolition/acquisition activities, and enable the city to expedite the clearing, acquiring, and retitling of land and properties.

The cities of Atlanta, Louisville, Cleveland, and St. Louis have some of the longest-running land-banking programs in the nation. Land-banking has also been implemented at the county and regional level. Recently Genesee County, Michigan established one of the nation’s most comprehensive land bank programs to revitalize more than 25,000 parcels of vacant and abandoned land in the city of Flint. Although these land bank programs vary by community need, they have all broken through legal and technical barriers to restore neighborhoods and commercial areas once plagued by vacant and abandoned land.

Given shrinking populations, Buffalo’s own land bank will likely contain a specific element addressing “green infrastructure,” whereby a large percentage of vacant properties will be transformed into open space, trails, community gardens, and parks. A green infrastructure initiative could create value



in the habitable properties that remain, and attract investors and residents back to these neighborhoods devastated by decay. In order to right-size the city, a considerable number of these sites will become pocket parks and open spaces linked with an extensive web of trails and greenways. Opportunities also exist to develop urban agricultural sites and community gardens, such as the Massachusetts Avenue Growing Green Project.



Creating a stable land-banking entity at the city level will call for greater leadership from the mayor and Office of Strategic Planning. These offices should examine functions of key city departments and staff to realign them with the requirements of a land-banking program. The city/county tax foreclosure procedures will also need to be streamlined to expedite the acquisition of vacant properties by a central land trust or land bank that can facilitate the eventual transfer to qualified and capable nonprofit and for-profit developers or responsible owners.

### ● LEADERSHIP ACTION TWO: First-Tier Suburban Agenda

The nearby towns and suburbs of Buffalo need their own agenda to address the special nature of suburban blight and abandonment. For the surrounding towns of Tonawanda, Cheektowaga, and Amherst, the primary goal is containing and managing the growing number of vacant properties before the problem gets out of hand. As outlined in Strategy Two on page 26 of this report, these first-tier communities need a suite of tools, from code enforcement strategies to zoning changes, that address the suburban scale of vacancy. As outlined in Strategy Four (see page 28), these communities need more of a “wellness” approach than the city, when it comes to the problems of housing vacancies and underperforming or vacant shopping centers and retail strips.

Suburban elected and civic officials should work with a knowledgeable convenor, such as Partners for a Livable Western New York, to hold a series of short forums aimed at creating a first-tier suburban agenda to consistently nip vacant-property problems in the bud. Topics could include code enforcement, consolidation of existing economic development programs and incentives, changes and updates to comprehensive plans and local zoning codes, and incentives to stimulate population retention and commercial revitalization.

These forums could naturally lead to establishment of a **First-Tier Suburbs Network** to coordinate the agenda and help these smaller governments share resources to carry out the strategies recommended in this *Blueprint*. For example, as one of its first actions, the Network could convene code enforcement managers from throughout the Buffalo-Niagara region to work together on various vacant property strategies—essentially form a regional code enforcement working group. The Network could also offer a meeting ground for the suburban vacant-property coordinators recommended in Strategy Two.

The Network would be an effective mechanism for assuring that the unique perspective and needs of older established suburbs are well-represented in regional actions to address land use, from the Erie-Buffalo Vacant Properties Coordinating Council described in Leadership Action Three to the anticipated follow-through on *Erie-Niagara Framework for Regional Growth*.

The Buffalo First-Tier Suburbs Network might eventually develop a series of MOUs among suburban leaders to confirm their commitment to make vacant property revitalization a policy priority.

In the short term (within the next six months) the first-tier suburban agenda could be a means to coordinate existing development incentives to target vacant properties consistent with the principles set forth in the proposed *Erie-Niagara Framework for Regional Growth*.

Recent research by Robert Puentes from the Brookings Institution highlights the experience of similar networks of suburban public officials. Mayors and city council members from Cleveland suburbs formed the Northeast Ohio First Tier Suburbs Consortium in 1996. Seven groups have followed in their footsteps. In 2002 the National League of Cities officially formed a First Tier Suburbs Council for its members to network, discuss common needs, and articulate the unique challenges and opportunities that municipalities adjacent to central cities confront (see *Unifying Voices, Confronting Challenges—A Resource Guide for Developing Regional Collaborations of First Tier Suburbs* (December 2005); see also the web site for NLC’s First Tier Suburbs Council at [www.nlc.org/inside\\_nlc/committees\\_councils/465.cfm](http://www.nlc.org/inside_nlc/committees_councils/465.cfm)).

### ● LEADERSHIP ACTION THREE: Erie-Buffalo Vacant Property Coordinating Council

Successful implementation of the vacant property revitalization strategies set forth in this report will require the cooperation of Buffalo, Erie County, the surrounding towns and cities, and New York state agencies, along with strong partnerships beyond government. Models, information-sharing, and coordination with neighboring jurisdictions, including Niagara County and Toronto, would also be instrumental, both in establishing the regional vision and coordinating council, and in carrying out the Living Laboratory recommended in Leadership Action Four.

A regional vacant properties coordinating council for Erie-Buffalo (and possibly Niagara County as well) is the logical first step toward building consensus around a shared vision for revitalizing vacant properties. The NVPC study team suggests that the three organizational sponsors of this assessment report—LISC-Buffalo, the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth at University at Buffalo, and the Amherst Industrial Development Agency—initiate the Council. Foundation funds and public/private funds could cover the expenses of the Council’s first year or two. The Coordinating Council’s initial priorities should include helping to build Erie County’s involvement in and capacity for addressing vacant properties. Erie County should definitely play a larger role or eventually become a leader of the Coordinating Council; however, the revitalization of vacant properties has not yet become a pressing county priority.

Based on a similar successful model for the Cleveland region, membership should start with local government officials from the city, the suburbs, and the county or counties, such as the mayors, county executives, and their key staff, (tax collectors, judges, municipal attorneys, planners, building officials, housing and redevelopment authority directors, and so forth). Representatives from nonprofit, civic, and private-sector organizations could play critical roles in shaping the Council’s approach to a regional framework for vacant property policies and programs.

Buffalo is rich in potential partnerships that can help build the regional capacity to address vacant properties. Leading institutions with local expertise on vacant properties include the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth at University at Buffalo, LISC-Buffalo, and Partners for a Livable Western New York, as well as important knowledge centers such as University at Buffalo, other academic institutions, and the Cornell Cooperative Extension Association. These public and nonprofit organizations would need to engage numerous housing groups, private housing and commercial developers, and local entrepreneurs in the acquisition, repair, and reuse of vacant properties. The challenge is how to provide a regular forum for bringing together all of these potential entities and resources.

The Council’s primary goal is building the regional capacity to tackle vacant properties by providing joint oversight and implementation of various vacant property initiatives and strategies set forth in this report. Preliminary steps could include creation of a county or regionwide Vacant Properties Work Plan based on the City of Buffalo’s recently adopted *Facilities and Vacant Land Management Plan*. The Coordinating Council’s Work Plan should definitely integrate and



refine the recommendations found here in *Blueprint Buffalo*. Some strategies can be implemented through a phased approach as capacity is strengthened. For example, certain approaches can be pilot tested in Buffalo and then expanded countywide.

The Coordinating Council should make the implementation of a comprehensive real property information system one of its first priorities, as many of the other strategies will depend on it for accurate and updated information. After the information system is in place, the Coordinating Council may eventually work with the City to take Buffalo's land banking program to the regional scale. The Council would also be a logical leader on brownfield and greyfield redevelopment activities such as those recommended in Strategy Four.

The VP Coordinating Council's vacant property strategies and leadership actions should ideally become part of the policy recommendations set forth in the proposed *Erie-Niagara Framework*. Given the fragmentation of local government land use powers and the historical and political tensions surrounding intergovernmental collaboration, the *Erie-Niagara Framework* will provide the first cohesive regional vision for future growth and development. The VP Coordinating Council can ensure that its strategies become an integral part of the Framework.

Coordination of the VP Council's Work Plan with implementation of the *Erie-Niagara Framework* makes sense. The Coordinating Council should consider these possible joint activities:

**Reforming comprehensive plans and zoning codes to facilitate vacant properties revitalization.** The townships and the County should make recommendations for reforming outdated zoning codes to facilitate infill development and mixed-use projects. For example, recent zoning revisions by the Town of Amherst provide a potential model for other municipalities in the region. Elsewhere, the recently revised City of Dayton, Ohio's zoning code identifies certain neighborhoods and characteristics that are ideally suited for infill development and revitalization.

**Convening a regional dialogue on the Framework's vision and goals.** A useful model is Northeast Ohio's *Voices with Choices*, a regional collaboration to revitalize the economy in Northeast Ohio. In September 2005, over 900 Northeast Ohio residents gathered in Akron for the largest meeting of its kind in the nation focused on regional revitalization. See the *Voices with Choices* web site at [www.voiceschoices.org/](http://www.voiceschoices.org/).

#### ● LEADERSHIP ACTION FOUR: National Model and "Living Laboratory" of Vacant Property Revitalization

The very depth and breadth of Buffalo's challenges present an opportunity to become a national model and a living laboratory for policy innovation. A Japanese proverb presents itself as particularly apt: "Barn's burnt down, now I can see the moon."

Imagine Buffalo as the place that attracts experts from around the world to design and build new, community-driven models for revitalization. Imagine Buffalo as the place that attracts investors and residents searching for new ideas about commerce, capital investment, and a higher quality of life. Imagine Buffalo as the nation's first **Living Laboratory** for vacant property revitalization.

Molding the Buffalo of today into a Living Laboratory will take bold action and transformative leaders. For the past 25 years Buffalo and Erie-Niagara officials have been tinkering around the edges of revitalization. They have relied on the safe, traditional approaches to redevelopment with modest results. They have commissioned dozens of studies that make similar policy recommendations based on similar assumptions. Despite good intentions, decline and decay persist within the city of Buffalo, and now



**"It is one of the happy incidents of the federal system that a single courageous state may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country."**

**—Justice Louis Brandeis, *New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann*, 1932**

vacant properties and abandonment have a foothold in Cheektowaga, Tonawanda, and other first-tier suburban communities (Esmonde, 16 Aug. 2006).

The Buffalo **Living Laboratory** will invite new ideas, take bold action, and require transformative leadership that can

- ▶ engage citizens in rebuilding their own homes and neighborhoods,
- ▶ redefine the built environment of the city to match its current and future populations,
- ▶ rely on the *Erie-Niagara Framework* to engender a new spirit of regional collaboration, and
- ▶ take strategic risks, recruit superior staff, and exhibit a willingness to test new ideas.

### ***State Leadership to Charter the Buffalo Regional Living Laboratory***

Strong and innovative state leadership will be necessary to ensure the long-term success of regional and local actions set forth in this report. The vacant property strategies implemented by the city, county, and other regional partners will require institutional support to encourage the permanent, transformative change the Buffalo-Niagara region desperately needs.

Only strong state leadership can meaningfully advance the Buffalo region as the nation's first Living Laboratory for Vacant Property Revitalization. With an infusion of energy and resources from the new governor along with legislative support from the region's state and federal legislative delegations, New York State would officially charter the Living Laboratory. The Living Laboratory would facilitate a collaborative, transdisciplinary enterprise that includes broad participation of public, private, and non-profit leaders. State policies would allow local governments, universities, and business to experiment with alternative, community-driven redevelopment approaches that transform blighted neighborhoods into new mixed-use villages.

University at Buffalo, along with other local universities and colleges, would engage faculty and students to design and test new policies and document the results from this revitalization laboratory. Lessons learned from pilot projects could be applied to other regions of the state with serious vacant property problems—perhaps one day leading to a network of Living Laboratory regions throughout New York. Officials from other states and perhaps other countries might participate in the Regional Living Laboratory so they can share their expertise and also take back new ideas to their own communities.

While the notion of a Living Laboratory might seem far off, with swift state action and supportive regional and local partnerships, the Living Laboratory could realistically open its doors by January 2008. Discussions on state legislation that would officially designate the Buffalo and eventually the Erie-Niagara region as a Living Laboratory for Vacant Property Revitalization could happen in time for the 2007 legislative session. More research would be necessary to identify the optimum legal structure and sources of funds for its initial launch. Perhaps the authorizing charter could create a Living Laboratory



Fund to which private business along with regional and national foundations could contribute grants and gifts to support its work in Buffalo.

### **Living Laboratory Management Framework**

One initial question is what entity would oversee such a broad regional initiative. The local institution would need the respect and trust of its partners so it can facilitate collaboration across the region and help coordinate the vacant property leadership actions of the city, the suburbs, and the region. The authors of this report propose that the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth act as the institutional home for the Living Laboratory. The activity of inviting and supporting innovative practices for the purpose of advancing knowledge and expertise is consistent with a university's mission. Moreover, the Institute appears to be in a good position to bridge the political, academic, and policy worlds. First and foremost, the Institute would act as the convener, coordinator, and manager of the Living Laboratory.

The Living Laboratory would have an advisory board or board of directors (depending on the nature of its legal status) that would include the regional and local government officials leading the charge of their own vacant property initiatives (e.g., the mayors, town supervisors, etc.) along with directors or deputy directors of critical state agencies, (e.g., Division of Economic Development, Empire State Development, the BuildNow NY program, Division of Environmental Remediation, Division of Housing and Community Renewal, etc). Perhaps the governor would appoint a special designee to co-chair the advisory board with two or three members of the state legislature. Regional directors of relevant federal agencies (e.g., HUD and EPA) and perhaps even members of Congress would serve in some capacity. Business, industry, and civic leaders would also serve on the Living Laboratory advisory board along with nonprofit organizations.

### **Programs and Projects for the Living Laboratory**

Foremost to the Living Laboratory ethos are the goals of designing and testing new approaches to revitalization. The Living Laboratory would incubate policy innovation and pilot projects that create new models of regulatory integration, and would serve as a catalyst for new programs and projects to revitalize distressed regions throughout the nation and abroad. Here are a few preliminary ideas to consider:

**Coordination and Integration of Economic Revitalization Resources.** New York State offers local governments and industry dozens of economic development incentives and tax breaks, such as the Enterprise Zones and the Brownfields Opportunity Areas. Regional and local governments provide yet another layer of programs and policies. The Living Laboratory could provide a base from which to search for ways to integrate these revitalization policies and consolidate the duplicative and myriad redevelopment incentives and redevelopment agencies. State officials, working with policy experts from University at Buffalo, local governments, and business leaders, could devise models that streamline the administrative reviews and paperwork. State and local agencies might allocate resources that adhere to the *Erie-Niagara Regional Framework* and the City of Buffalo's *Facilities and Vacant Land Management Plan*. Perhaps a large number of state housing and economic revitalization resources within the region would get additional benefits or bonus points if they were used as part of an official Living Laboratory project or program.

### **Performance-Based Regulatory Standards.**

Participants in the Living Laboratory might want to identify and test the feasibility of more performance-based regulatory and development standards, such as state environmental cleanup standards for brownfields redevelopment or special state rehabilitation codes. Performance-based models do not dramatically change the level of protection, but permit the government to work with property owners, the private sector, and nonprofit groups to forge creative solutions to intractable regulatory barriers. U.S.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JR. LEONARD

EPA experimented with a similar approach called Project XL (environmental excellence) whereby regulators negotiated new standards that were tailored to a particular project. In exchange, the developer provided enhanced or supplemental environmental benefits. From 1995 through 2003, over 50 projects were implemented to create new policies and practices, such as the testing of smart growth principles, alternative compliance monitoring, process modifications for pollution prevention and recycling, and building the capacity for management support and involvement. One of the Project XL success stories was the redevelopment of the old Atlantic Steel complex in Atlanta that has been transformed into a new-urbanist, mixed-use village.

Given Buffalo-Niagara's existing expertise with brownfields redevelopment, the Living Laboratory could adapt the lessons from Project XL and Atlantic Steel by modifying existing state environmental, housing, and economic development programs to a more performance-based model such as the Atlantic Station Greenstar Plan ([www.atlanticstation.com/concept\\_greenstar.php](http://www.atlanticstation.com/concept_greenstar.php)). The Living Laboratory could also test these approaches with state and local building codes and local land development permit processes.

**Revitalization Authorities.** Another area for the Living Laboratory to explore is new models for redevelopment authorities. Recent discussions about the possible merger of the Industrial Development Agencies within Erie County raise the larger and long-term question of whether a merger of these IDAs perpetuates a model that no longer fits the conditions of the region. In light of this discussion and the recommendations found in this report on land bank authorities and urban land trusts, perhaps the Living Laboratory could make the design of new revitalization authorities one of its first priorities. They may want to take a close look at such multi-purpose entities as the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh ([www.ura.org](http://www.ura.org)), which includes brownfields redevelopment and vacant housing and the Genesee County Land Bank Authority ([www.thelandbank.org](http://www.thelandbank.org)).

**Emulating the International Building Exhibition Model.** For decades the state governments, universities, and foundations in Germany's rust belt regions have chartered several International Building Exhibitions (IBE, pronounced Ee-ba) to spotlight creative environmental project designs. For 10 years, Emscher Park in the Ruhr Valley was a special focus for innovative policies that have sparked the revitalization and rebirth of the region ([www.epa.gov/brownfields/partners/emscher.html](http://www.epa.gov/brownfields/partners/emscher.html)). These IBEs provide the essential ingredients necessary for incubating pilot projects to test new policies and new designs. More than traditional design competitions, IBEs provide policy frameworks that integrate economic redevelopment, arts, and culture. As part of a new IBE framework, since 2002 four international interdisciplinary teams have been studying and documenting the process of shrinking cities in Detroit, Manchester/Liverpool, Ivanovo (Russia), and Halle/Leipzig (Germany) (see [www.shrinkingcities.com](http://www.shrinkingcities.com)).

Buffalo's Living Laboratory could borrow and adapt various elements from the successful IBE model (further detail on possible approaches is contained in the *Action Plan*):

- ▶ **The "Right-Sizing Buffalo" Design Competition.** Building on the IBE experience in Germany, University at Buffalo and the city could sponsor an international design competition that brings together the most talented designers, planners, and policy experts to collaboratively craft a potpourri of strategies for right-sizing Buffalo neighborhoods with projected population and job growth and existing levels of property abandonment. Major themes of the competition could include green infrastructure, landscape urbanism, and green building design.
- ▶ **"Retrofitting Commercial Corridors" Design Competition.** Another design competition could focus on the underused or neglected commercial zones that plague first-tier suburbs along with the city of Buffalo. Many communities across the country are transforming tired malls and decaying shopping centers into vibrant mixed-use villages with housing and retail along with public schools, libraries, and town halls. Why not bring talented architects and New Urbanist designers from these successful projects to Buffalo through a competition that also includes the nation's first design competition for form-based codes? The New Millenium Group of Western New York, a citizen group committed to focused regional growth and urban design, is already exploring form-based codes; they could team up with Partners for a Livable Western New York or the First-Tier Suburbs Network.
- ▶ **Green Business Attraction Strategy.** Just as some regions have created new market niches in their business base by offering incentives to high-tech or bio-tech businesses, Buffalo could encourage green-

building designers, architecture firms, and construction companies to establish offices in a Buffalo Green Business Corridor, offering tax incentives and site relocation assistance to businesses in the growing green-building sector, along with resources for testing and perfecting green building techniques. Such businesses—with their high tolerance for risk and challenge and their focus on environmental remediation and enhancement—are ideal partners for the brownfield/greyfield sites, reclaimed land, and older buildings that will make up the bulk of the Living Laboratory’s focus areas.

### **Document Results—Share New Models**

A major part of the Living Laboratory is documenting the experience itself and the results. Important insights can be learned from testing new programs and policies that do not always generate the anticipated result or benefits. The Living Laboratory must encourage a certain level of risk-taking so that it can truly invent innovative approaches to revitalizing vacant properties. University at Buffalo and other members of the Living Laboratory Advisory Board could enlist the expertise of documentary film makers (perhaps even convene a film making competition as well) to tell the story of the Living Laboratory—its successes and its failures. Beyond documenting the experience, the media of filmmaking, photography, storytelling, and the arts are powerful ways to share the lessons of revitalization.

If the Living Laboratory can create new models that change Buffalo, then why not use the same approach for revitalizing Upstate New York? If you can right-size Buffalo, then why not set a positive course for the rebirth of Rochester, Syracuse, and other Upstate cities that struggle with vacant properties? If you can right-size Western New York, then why not Western Massachusetts or other regions struggling with decay and blight caused by vacant properties? Repairing one window is the first step to repairing them all. ●

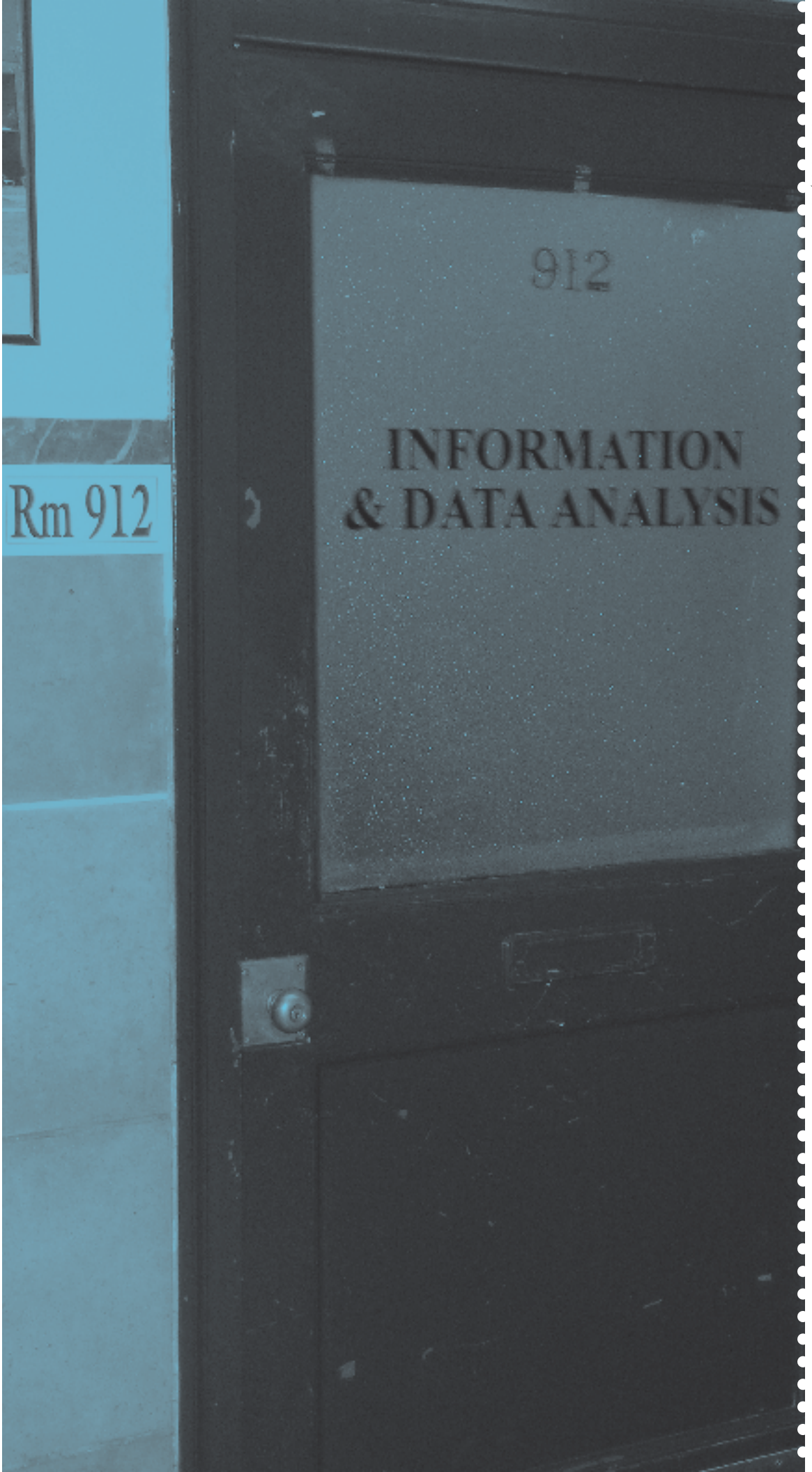
## **Philadelphia’s Urban Voids 2006 Design Competition**

### **Ground for Change** ([www.vanalen.org/urbanvoids](http://www.vanalen.org/urbanvoids))

**The Urban Voids international design competition** is part of the Philadelphia LandVisions project to generate imaginative, long-term solutions for the city’s 900-plus acres of vacant land distributed among 40,000 vacant properties. The City Parks Association is leading the project, in partnership with The Pennsylvania Environmental Council, the Philadelphia Horticultural Society, and The Reinvestment Fund. Urban Voids is partially funded by the National Endowment of the Arts. Divided into three phases, the project seeks to integrate community visioning and the city’s ecology in a design competition to create new design alternatives for the future of vacant properties in Philadelphia.

Community visioning sessions, completed in May 2005, engaged residents and other stakeholders in Philadelphia using small group discussions and keypad voting technology. The Public Community Forum gathered information on how residents envisioned Philadelphia’s future. The River Corridors session was used to instigate discussion on how to best integrate the river corridors with recreational, residential, and commercial uses. The final session focused on how vacant lands can be used to transform Philadelphia’s neighborhoods by capitalizing on their environmental, social, or economic assets.

The second and third phases invited entries from around the world to imagine new possibilities for creating a relationship between ecology and the built environment using Philadelphia’s vacant properties and the information gathered at the visioning sessions. Over 200 entries from 25 countries were received. In Phase III, five finalists were asked to cultivate the strategies for implementing their ideas by preparing a site-specific design proposal and further engaging neighborhood community groups. The winning design, *Waterwork*, incorporates ecological, social, economic, and built-environment components to explore historical and contemporary assets of Philadelphia.



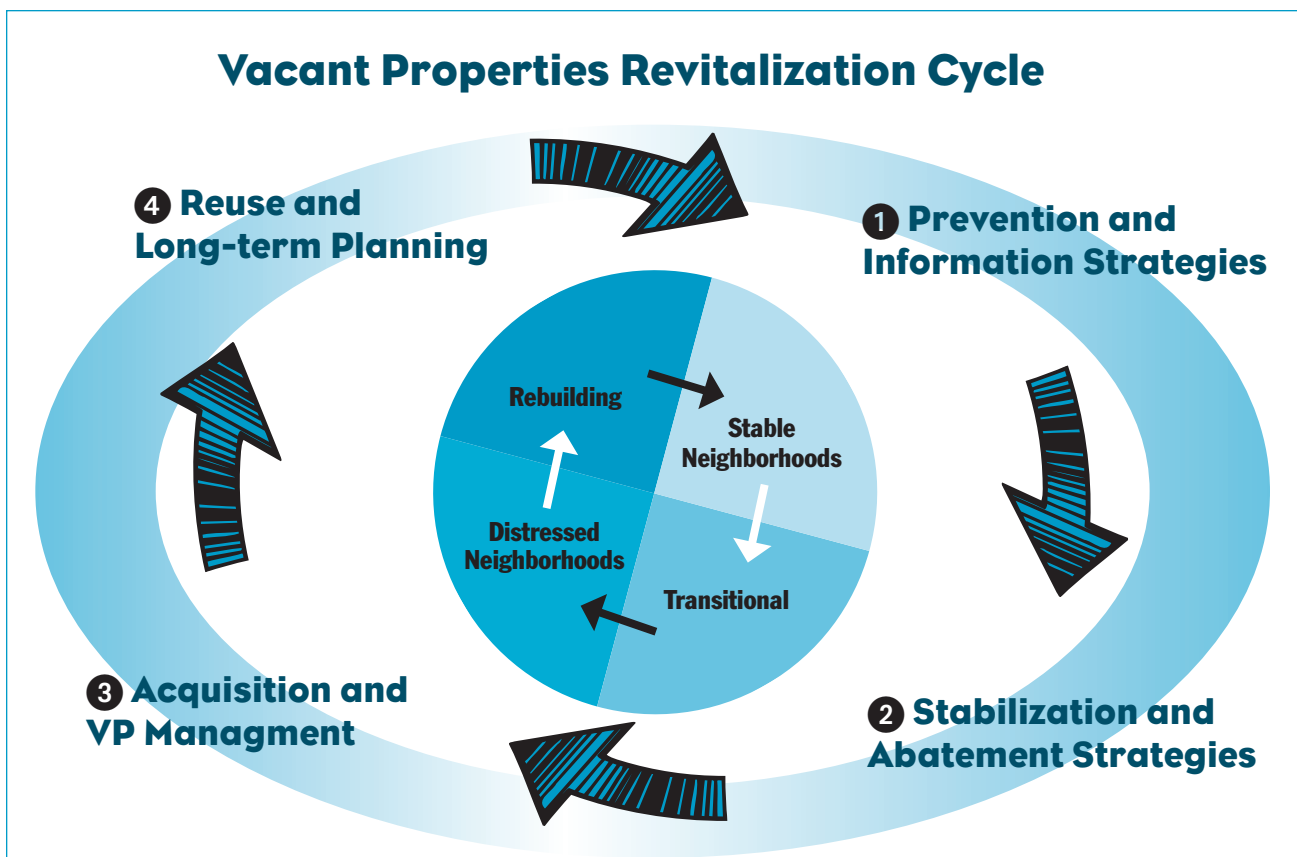
## Action Plan: Key Strategies

**EFFECTIVE VACANT PROPERTY INITIATIVES** have a holistic action plan that contains an array of strategies and tools. Blueprint Buffalo tailors certain strategies to the vacant property conditions of each community and neighborhood. Those relatively stable neighborhoods with modest levels of abandonment could benefit from preventive measures such as aggressive code enforcement and access to rehabilitation resources. Neighborhoods with significant numbers of decaying and abandoned buildings will need stronger measures, such as demolition and land banking. The action plan must also identify the respective roles and responsibilities of the community, business sectors, government agencies at all levels, and nonprofit organizations.

Building on its technical assistance work with other cities, the NVPC team believes that four sets of strategic actions are essential to a comprehensive and effective approach to vacant properties in the Buffalo-Niagara region:

### ● STRATEGY ONE: Regional Real Property Information System

An effective regional real property information system (RPIS) is critical to support all of the recommendations and actions set forth in this blueprint. A network of information systems is also an important first step toward implementing regional and citywide comprehensive land use plans, such as those proposed by the *Framework for Regional Growth* and the City of Buffalo's Good Neighbors Planning Alliance, to re-



# Blueprint Strategies

## Roles and Responsibilities

Buffalo  
 First-Tier Suburbs  
 Counties  
 Nonprofits  
 Universities  
 State

### Develop a Regional Real Property Information System

Examine Existing Resources	●	●	●	○	●	○
Designate Key Characteristics	●	●	●	●	●	○
Establish an Identity	●	●	●	○	●	○
Involve Community Partners	●	●	●	●	●	○
Ensure Broad Access and Ease of Use	○	○	○	○	●	○
Conduct Property Inventories	●	●	●	●	●	○
Support Foreclosure Prevention Programs	●	●	●	●	●	○
Support Regional/Local Land Use Planning	●	●	●	●	●	○

### Institute Comprehensive Code Enforcement

Create a Citywide Vacant Properties Enforcement Unit	●	○	○	○	○	○
Institutionalize and Expand the Role of the Buffalo Housing Court	●	○	○	●	○	○
Expand and Enhance Suburban Code Enforcement	○	●	○	○	○	○
Form a Regional Consortium of Code Enforcement Officials	●	●	●	○	○	○

### Establish Right-Sizing and Greening Policies and Practices

Establish a Multi-Purpose Land Bank Authority or Program	●	○	●	●	○	●
Develop and Manage a Citywide Green Infrastructure Initiative	●	○	○	●	●	○
Design a Network of Resident-Driven Neighborhood Reinvestment Plans	●	○	○	●	●	○

### Create Effective Greyfields and Brownfields Redevelopment Framework

Inventory and Map Available Commercial and Industrial Land	●	●	●	○	●	○
Streamline and Coordinate Existing Economic Development Incentives, Programs, and Policies	●	●	●	○	○	●
Reform Existing Zoning and Land Use Plans	●	●	●	○	●	○
Regionally Coordinate New Commercial/Retail Development Policies	●	●	●	○	○	●
Leverage Major Institutions as Anchors for Redevelopment	●	●	●	●	●	○
Institutionalize and Expand the Erie-Buffalo County Brownfields Redevelopment Team	●	●	●	○	○	○
Enhance Existing Brownfields Programming with a Land Banking Component	●	●	●	○	○	●

**KEY** ● Leadership Role ● Major Player

direct investment into existing communities. The goal of such plans would be to focus existing resources on the neighborhoods with the greatest potential for successful revitalization, while relieving growth pressures on the region's fringe.

Although the RPIS would rely on several databases maintained by local and county governments, the new, comprehensive RPIS would be best developed and maintained by a regional, nongovernmental entity specializing in data frameworks, such as University at Buffalo's Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth. NVPC has observed the development of numerous similar data systems throughout the country, notably the Neighborhood Information System at the University of Pennsylvania ([cml.upenn.edu/nis](http://cml.upenn.edu/nis)), and the Northeast Ohio Community and Neighborhood Data for Organizing (NEO-CANDO) at Case Western Reserve University ([neocando.case.edu/cando/index.jsp](http://neocando.case.edu/cando/index.jsp)). Not only are these institutions well-equipped to develop data systems with state-of-the-art software and user interfaces, but as educational institutions they also have a broad user orientation that can help government practitioners "think beyond the box" about the possibilities for how the system will be used. Since an academic institution has as its primary purpose the effective use of research through communication and training, housing the RPIS at a university will virtually assure that the system will be designed with many users in mind, and that training modules will be developed to empower users to take advantage of the system with a minimum of preparation.

As in many other urban areas, opportunities to develop new information technology or upgrade existing information systems in Buffalo and the region are constrained by limitations of public agency staff and funding. But opportunities exist for the city and inner-ring communities to share resources with University at Buffalo or a similar partner to design and implement a vacant property information system at low cost and with a relatively low commitment of public agency staff time. This section contains summary information about vacant property information systems, along with recommended next steps:

## Using the RPIS to Address Mortgage Foreclosure

**GIVEN THE HUGE INCREASE** in mortgage foreclosure and the public costs that occur when many people lose their homes, the RPIS could be used to support programs for helping committed homeowners avoid foreclosure. The various elements of a program should include information to home buyers on how to avoid predatory loans, how to avoid defaulting, how to work with lenders on loss mitigation if default occurs, and how to defend a mortgage foreclosure. Current programs in Buffalo need expansion and significantly more resources to deal with the anticipated surge in loan defaults and foreclosure.

In the design and development of a comprehensive RPIS, Buffalo and Erie County should track existing mortgage foreclosures, both tax and mortgage, their location, their relationship to types of sales or transfers, their relationship to types of loans and to loan servicing and trends over time. Such data would be critical to the city and nonprofit groups in targeting programs to neighborhoods most in need of assistance. Moreover, any land banking program will depend on such information to identify those tax delinquent properties ideal for acquisitions and reuse.

In areas particularly vulnerable to high foreclosure rates and abandonment, Buffalo's Department of Inspection Services should work closely with the Housing Court and community development organizations such as LISC to develop a program to track and inspect properties identified in *lis pendens* filings and mitigate the harm to both the property and the neighborhood. The costs of securing the property and abating public nuisance conditions should be taxed to the property so that those with a legal interest bear them.

- ▶ Examine **existing information resources** and **designate key characteristics** of the necessary data.
- ▶ **Establish an identity.**
- ▶ Involve **community partners.**
- ▶ Ensure **broad access and ease of use.**
- ▶ Conduct **property inventories.**
- ▶ Design and deploy the RPIS to support **foreclosure prevention programs** and **regional/local land use planning.**

## ● STRATEGY TWO: Comprehensive Code Enforcement

Communities rely on numerous legal and administrative systems to prevent, abate, and acquire vacant properties. Local governments rely primarily on code enforcement and nuisance abatement actions to control abandonment and dereliction:

- ▶ **Code enforcement** (administrative citations, criminal prosecutions, and civil actions against property owners to address substandard building conditions);
- ▶ **Nuisance abatement** (demolition of unsafe buildings and the assessment/recovery of abatement costs through administrative hearings procedures).

Each action has slightly different goals and legal procedures. Local government officials must follow different legal procedures and often work across multiple departments within each jurisdiction to accomplish each action. Certain actions may even require coordination among city, county, and town officials. Vulnerable to bureaucracy, overlapping agendas, and conflicting requirements, these systems can break down at crucial junctures. For this reason, many communities cannot effectively address the problems of vacant properties. In fact, such system failures can make the conditions substantially worse.

Effective vacant property programs coordinate code enforcement approaches across local government departments. These coordinated programs offer a range of appropriate remedies to address all types of problem properties. For example, in relatively stable neighborhoods, routine housing inspections and aggressive code enforcement programs are often sufficient. In neighborhoods with properties that present imminent threats to public safety, local officials must respond with stronger remedies, such as criminal prosecution or nuisance abatement. Many communities often struggle to target these remedies to address the wide variety of vacant property problems that exist within a region or neighborhood.

Buffalo, like many urban areas, has substantially more abandonment in the inner city compared with its first-tier neighbors (Tonawanda, Cheektowaga, and Amherst). These older suburban communities are potential recipients of the vacancy “virus” as it has the capability to quickly spread outward. Buffalo’s first-tier communities have isolated pockets of vacant properties that require different code enforcement approaches than the urban core cities. Despite the differences, Buffalo and its surrounding cities and towns could greatly benefit from redesigning these legal and regulatory procedures so they more effectively address the region’s wide variety of vacant property problems.

The following recommendations attempt to identify strategies that might be more appropriate for the city of Buffalo and those that may have more benefit for adjacent communities. The NVPC team also made suggestions for potential countywide reforms and programs. Any jurisdiction within the Buffalo-Niagara region (as well as throughout Western New York) could adapt any of these approaches to address the particular category of vacant property facing their community.

The City of Buffalo, as part of its citywide VP initiative, should undertake the following actions:

- ▶ Create a special **citywide vacant properties enforcement unit** to coordinate and streamline Buffalo’s existing and new approaches to vacant properties. The unit would work closely with the Buffalo Housing Court to pursue civil judicial actions for complex code cases, and to enhance the Hous-



ing Court’s community-based receivership program with elements that specifically address vacant properties.

- Institutionalize and **expand the role of the Buffalo Housing Court** and its suite of vacant property programs.

Buffalo’s first-tier suburbs should undertake complementary actions as part of its first-tier suburbs VP agenda:

- Expand and **enhance suburban code enforcement** approaches to contain and prevent the spread of decay and property abandonment. Initially, the suburban code enforcement effort would involve the designation of local vacant properties program coordinators and the establishment of vacant properties registration programs. As in the city, suburban jurisdictions would pursue civil judicial actions for complex cases (or work with the city unit to pursue these on a fee-for-service basis). Suburban townships could also work together to create a vacant properties repair and revitalization fund, perhaps through the First-Tier Suburbs Network described on page 15.
- Form a regional consortium of code enforcement officials to develop alternative code enforcement strategies and enhance existing tools/programs.

### ● STRATEGY THREE: Right-Sizing and Greening the City

Buffalo-Niagara policy makers, business leaders, and nonprofit organizations must take aggressive actions to contain and remove the significant blight in inner-city Buffalo to establish a healthy foundation for regional reinvestment. Once surplus housing stock and infrastructure is decreased, policies and programs for attracting more people back to Buffalo’s core communities are more likely to succeed.

Addressing the challenge of right-sizing Buffalo involves delicate trade-offs with deep implications for the city’s character and the daily lives of its residents. No demolition-redevelopment strategy can proceed in the United States without the humbling reminder of the mistakes made during “slum clearance” in the 1960s and early 1970s. Crucial concerns for social equity, citizen involvement, and historic preservation must be reflected in any right-sizing effort in Buffalo. Fortunately, neighborhood residents and responsible property owners have been watching the drive toward right-sizing, and there is substantial public support for a land-banking approach to redevelopment in the city. To avoid the mistakes of the past,

## The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society

**THE PENNSYLVANIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY** (PHS) through its nationally recognized program Philadelphia Green ([www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org/phlgreen/index.html](http://www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org/phlgreen/index.html)) has redeveloped hundreds of vacant lots as pocket parks and community gardens. As part of the city of Philadelphia’s Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, PHS has perfected a management model that organizes and empowers community and neighborhood groups to clean, prepare, landscape, and maintain these sites.

A 2005 University of Pennsylvania study of Philadelphia’s New Kensington neighborhood found that greening vacant lots increased sale prices of homes near the lots by as much as 30 percent. That would translate into a \$12 million gain in property value for this Philadelphia neighborhood. As the study demonstrates, having an array of strategies for greening abandoned neighborhoods has been an effective element of Philadelphia’s Neighborhood Transformation Initiative. Green infrastructure also facilitates the holding of vacant land as interim green use for the communities’ benefit until these properties can be eventually redeveloped, according to **Susan Wachter**, author of *The Determinants of Neighborhood Transformation in Philadelphia—Identification and Analysis of the New Kensington Pilot Study* (2005).

neighborhoods and citizens must drive the land-banking and green infrastructure initiative in a meaningful way. Creating a land bank demands leadership and commitment. Now is the time to prepare and design the land bank so that it can take action before the level and intensity of abandonment get worse.

The NVPC team recommends the following actions to right-size and reinvest in the city:

- Establish a **multi-purpose land bank authority or program in Buffalo** (and eventually Erie County) to “right-size” the city by decommissioning surplus public infrastructure and acquiring truly abandoned properties (e.g., tax-delinquent or seriously blighted sites) in certain strategic neighborhood. The land bank would be charged with implementing the City’s *Facilities and Vacant Land Management Plan*, and acquiring abandoned properties through eminent domain or an expedited property tax foreclosure policy.
- Develop and manage a **citywide green infrastructure initiative** that acquires, assembles, and reuses vacant properties for open space, parks, greenways community gardens, and urban agriculture.
- Empower residents and property owners to design a network of **neighborhood reinvestment plans** that will stabilize residential and commercial properties in neighborhoods that have sustained the most decay.

#### ● STRATEGY FOUR: Greyfields and Brownfields Redevelopment

The Buffalo-Niagara region contains many underperforming and vacant commercial plazas, as well as dozens of large abandoned industrial properties. Although no current inventory exists to track the precise number and location of such sites in the Buffalo-Niagara region, local officials and residents generally know which properties pose problems and which properties present opportunities for reinvestment.

The NVPC study team focused on two aspects of commercial-industrial vacancy: 1) the suburban retail markets, which need to prevent market vacancies from evolving into chronic and long-term retail vacancy and warehousing; and 2) the brownfields programs and activities within the core industrial neighborhoods of Buffalo and Tonawanda.

During the study visit the local sponsors of the NVPC assessment sought specific guidance on the commercial retail dynamics within the first-tier suburban communities of Amherst, Tonawanda, and Cheektowaga. Residents were seeing more and more empty storefronts and long-term vacancies in strip commercial areas and former big boxes. While routine market forces and retail practices account for some of the vacancy, local leaders were concerned that increases in market vacancies could create a self-fulfilling prophecy of economic downturns in suburban communities, and in turn lead to a preponderance of chronic “problem” properties.

Buffalo’s brownfields legacy, compounded by regional decline and suburban sprawl, does not reflect poor planning, failing environmental regulation, or political incompetence. Brownfield sites today are visible reminders of the once-vital and now transforming industrial markets that touch Buffalo and dozens of other cities throughout Upstate New York. While the city of Buffalo and Erie County have a ten-year track record of successful brownfields redevelopment, few large parcels (five acres or more)

**Robert Shibley, professor of planning and architecture and director of the Urban Design Project at the University of Buffalo, reports a 28 percent commercial vacancy rate for the entire city of Buffalo, with vacancies in many architecturally significant downtown buildings (Stromberg, Oct. 2005).**

## Coordination of Brownfields and Greyfields Redevelopment in Amherst

**WITH GRANT FUNDS FROM THE STATE**, the Amherst IDA is conducting a brownfields assessment along Sheridan Drive to evaluate how brownfields redevelopment incentives could spur revitalization of this older commercial corridor. Because the area was once home to gas stations and auto dealers and repair shops, the study would address possible contamination under the now-nearly vacant shopping centers and retail strips. Revitalization of the Sheridan Drive area is consistent with Amherst's recently revised master plan to redevelop older areas.

of land are currently clean and ready for redevelopment in the city. Many of the contaminated sites are located in South Buffalo, rendering the waterfront underused and unattractive. As Buffalo's northern neighbor, Tonawanda shares many of the characteristics of Buffalo's brownfields legacy, and features huge, abandoned industrial sites.

When it comes to the city and the suburbs, local leaders and commercial developers operate in separate environments. For several generations, zoning's separation of land uses segregated industries primarily along the water in Buffalo and sent commercial/residential uses to the surrounding suburbs. The Buffalo-Niagara region could greatly benefit from joint strategies that streamline existing economic development programs and more closely link greyfields and brownfields redevelopment strategies across jurisdictional boundaries.

Overlapping programs and policies make the reuse of greyfields and brownfields especially challenging. One local development company recently identified nearly 100 economic development programs that clients could potentially use. Many of these state and local incentives have narrow objectives and specific requirements that inhibit innovative revitalization. Redevelopers often confront strict state environmental cleanup standards and processes. Banks and other lending institutions worry about the inherent risks of redeveloping aging buildings and properties with the perception of contamination.



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PHOTO COURTESY OF ZEP ADAMS

Many commercial lenders are also reluctant to support mixed-use projects because they do not fit the traditional retail lending portfolio. Attracting and retaining the right mix of anchoring retail and smaller businesses for major redevelopments is a precise balancing act. Some communities within the region might support a thriving retail market, others may not.

The NVPC recommends that regional leaders, along with developers, institute a “wellness approach” to commercial and retail vacancy, using a variety of policies and programs to prevent and contain market vacancy problems. Swift intervention should be applied to neighborhood or community retail complexes before they become chronic vacant properties. The city and region should institutionalize and extend its existing approaches to brownfields and should integrate the economic redevelopment of greyfields/brownfields with the neighborhood revitalization of residential properties. Here are a few ideas to consider:

- ▶ **Inventory and map available commercial and industrial land** throughout the region, either through the new regional Real Property Information System or through a parallel system designed to interface with the RPIS.
- ▶ Streamline and coordinate **existing economic development incentives, programs, and policies** to better integrate the specific redevelopment needs of brownfields and greyfields, and to reflect current market realities.
- ▶ **Reform existing zoning and land use plans** to facilitate commercial and industrial reuse.
- ▶ Coordinate **new commercial/retail development policies** throughout the region to focus on matching markets with redeveloped and reusable properties.
- ▶ Leverage **major institutions (e.g., universities, hospitals, and schools)** as anchors for redevelopment and revitalization.
- ▶ **Institutionalize and expand the Erie-Buffalo County Brownfields Redevelopment Team.**
- ▶ Enhance existing **brownfields programming with a land banking component**, either as part of the proposed land bank authority in Strategy Three or as a separate but complementary entity. ●

## Conclusion

**N**OW IS THE IDEAL TIME for leaders to act. Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown and his cabinet are receptive to the message of targeting vacant properties. Federal and state leaders are finally giving Buffalo and Upstate New York the attention it deserves. Residents and neighborhood groups are demanding action. Leaders from the region's inner-ring suburbs are also poised to take steps to stabilize vacant properties and prevent blight from spreading further.

Buffalo's sister communities—such as Cleveland and Dayton in Ohio, Genesee County in Michigan, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—are testing innovative vacant property programs that show great promise. Buffalo could learn from and easily adapt these model practices to fit local conditions. *Blueprint Buffalo* gives the mayor and regional leaders a policy framework they can craft as a catalyst for the renaissance of the city and the region.

Without a citywide and regional strategy, however, regional settlement patterns are unlikely to change. Buffalo cannot hold its own indefinitely against the undertow of sinking property values and decreasing population. The incidence of vacancies and their attendant ills—from vandalism and unlawful occupancy to crime and health hazards—will continue to creep out into the close-in suburbs. And beyond the city core, low-density land uses will likely prevail, leading to higher suburban infrastructure costs, disappearing boundaries between town and country, increasing pressure on farmlands and natural areas, and a scattered population that contributes little to Buffalo's reputation as “The City of Good Neighbors.”

### A New Window

Buffalo and its first-tier suburbs can start with virtually any of the strategies suggested in this report, provided they are applied from the basis of regional collaboration and a sound regional agenda. Like the first encouraging signs of reinvestment in a neighborhood, the first signs that Buffalo and nearby suburbs are working together to address vacant properties will lead to a supportive environment for more collaborative solutions. Whether through prompt establishment of a new Regional Real Property Information System, initiation of a citywide Code Enforcement Unit, or convening of a First-Tier Suburbs Network and Regional Vacant Property Coordinating Council, Buffalo's initial actions can surely lead to more systemic, lasting change to address and prevent vacant properties.

Consistent, strategic investments, made on the basis of regional collaboration and a sound regional agenda, can actually turn around the neglect of neighborhoods, cities, and counties. Starting here in Buffalo. ●

**“Many cities in New York State are in a state of crisis. But many of you have heard me say, a crisis is a terrible thing to waste.”**

**—State Attorney General Elliott Spitzer**

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**The National Vacant Properties Campaign's** mission is to help communities prevent abandonment and reclaim vacant and abandoned properties. The Campaign focuses on properties – homes, factories, stores, and vacant lots – that are not legally occupied, show signs of neglect, or pose a public nuisance.

The Campaign is pursuing four core activities:

- ▶ developing a national network of vacant property practitioners and experts;
- ▶ providing tools and research;
- ▶ developing persuasive arguments for property reclamation; and
- ▶ building the capacity of local, regional, and national practitioners and decision-makers through technical assistance and training.

The National Vacant Properties Campaign is a project of Smart Growth America, Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), and the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech. The Campaign is funded by the generous support of the Fannie Mae Foundation, the US Environmental Protection Agency, the Ford Foundation, and the Surdna Foundation.

For more information visit the web site at **[www.vacantproperties.org](http://www.vacantproperties.org)**



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