

LOTS OF LOTS

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An Inventory and Assessment
of Vacant Lots in
the City of Buffalo

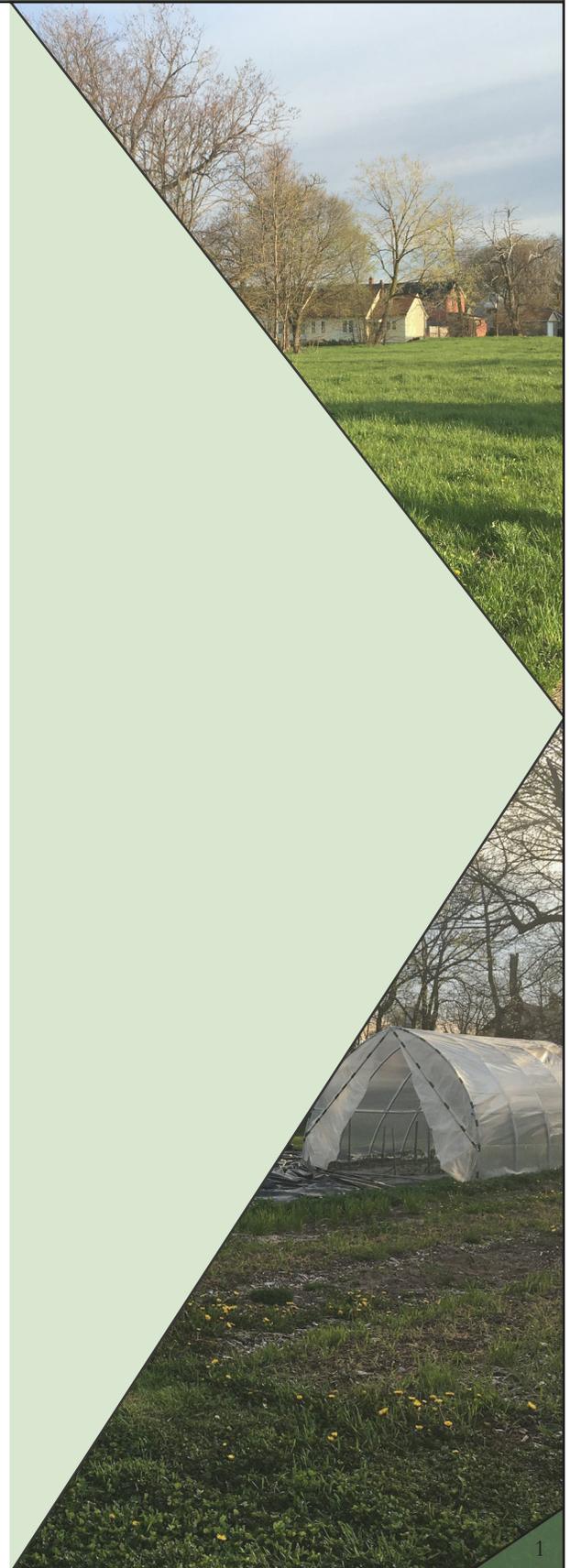
Planning
Practicum
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Executive Summary

In the past decade, the City of Buffalo has seemingly reinvented itself as a reemerging Rust Belt city and its resurgence has amassed notoriety on a national level. A booming housing market, niche neighborhoods like the Elmwood Village and North Buffalo, and an expansive redevelopment of Canalside have put the city of Buffalo on the map. Known for its historical value, as an intellectual and cultural center, and as an eclectic hub for artists, the city of Buffalo is finally being recognized as a place worthy of visiting or calling home. While many of these positive changes are inspiring, we cannot disregard what has not changed: the number of vacant lots and their negative impact on the neighborhoods in which they exist. As a city, we do ourselves a great disservice if we ignore the community value that vacant lots could offer to the people that live in neighborhoods that have faced systematic disinvestment.

There have been many credible efforts made to decrease blight and reuse vacant lots throughout the city of Buffalo. Nonprofit organizations like Grassroots Gardens of Western New York (GGWNY), Habitat for Humanity Buffalo (HFHB), and People United for Sustainable Housing (PUSH) have spent decades creating purpose and value through the reuse of vacant lots. In total, these three organizations have put forth their efforts wholeheartedly to remediate over 470 vacant lots in the city of Buffalo. However, due to the city's resurgence and increased marketability, the "value" of publicly-owned vacant lots has increased dramatically. The inflated cost of vacant lots has become financially unfeasible for nonprofit organizations, greatly limiting their ability to acquire publicly-owned vacant lots. Consequently, this conundrum of vacant lot acquisition has stifled the progress being made to revitalize the city's most disinvested neighborhoods.

Project Purpose

The purpose of this vacant lot study originated from discussions with Habitat for Humanity Buffalo and Grassroot Gardens of Western New York. These nonprofit organizations have strong ties to the community through their work which has been primarily focused in vacant lot reuse. Over the past few years, both organizations have found it increasingly difficult to acquire vacant lots due to the rising costs. In the past under previous policies, vacant lots were available to nonprofits for a nominal fee. Without a financially feasible pathway to acquire vacant lots, these organizations are forced to reconsider their capacity to reuse vacant lots in Buffalo's many distressed neighborhoods.

The evidence-based approach used to create this report will answer the following questions:

- How did the City of Buffalo develop a vacant lot problem?
- What non-government community organizations seek to acquire vacant lots and what is their community-based mission and purpose?
- How many vacant lots are there, who owns them, and how is the supply of publicly-owned lots managed?
- Is the demand for vacant lots relative to the cost of acquisition?
- What are other cities doing with their vacant lots and what is their lot acquisition process?
- How can we fix this situation so that it benefits both the City of Buffalo and its communities?

Vacant land has long been viewed as a challenge or issue in Buffalo and across the nation. In recent years an emerging perspective has driven change for other Rust Belt cities including Cleveland, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Detroit, and others. Strategic plans and programs in these cities are driven by the idea that vacant land can be utilized as an opportunity or an asset for the cities. These cities view vacant lots as an available land resource for communities that can provide essential amenities through sustainable, affordable, and resourceful strategies. These strategies may also retain the value of vacant lots for future communities through effective land banking and other community-based policies.

Executive Summary

Buffalo State Senior Urban Planning Practicum

In January 2020, the Senior Planning Practicum course tasked students with producing a report based on an inventory of vacant lots and an analysis of current policies and best practices. As part of Buffalo State College's Urban and Regional Planning program, students were required to utilize GIS data to create an inventory and assess vacant lots in the city of Buffalo, review current policies that determine how these lots are or can be used, and examine what other cities have done to reuse vacant lots. The students, as a group, outlined the report and assigned tasks, individually and collaboratively, and worked independently to produce all of the components found in the report. With the assistance of Professor Jason Knight, Habitat for Humanity Buffalo, and Grassroots Gardens of WNY, students in the Planning Practicum course envisioned and created this comprehensive report.

Summary of Findings

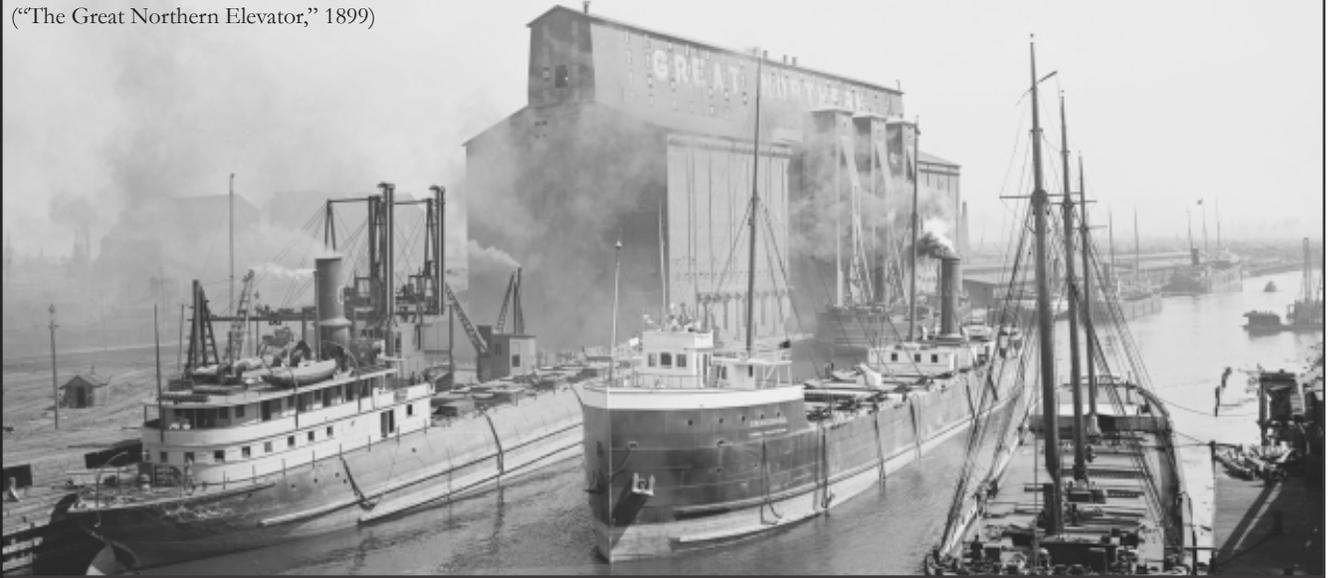
The vacant lot inventory and analysis found that the number of vacant lots in the city of Buffalo has continuously increased over the last 20 years. In 2019, the number of publicly-owned vacant lots surpassed 7,800. Although well-intentioned plans exist to mitigate the loss and blight created by the growing number of vacant lots, there has been insufficient action to adequately reuse many of the vacant lots. In short, the reuse of vacant lots in the city of Buffalo remains outpaced by the creation of more vacant lots by demolitions. Additionally, the majority of vacant lots exist in neighborhoods that have faced systematic disinvestment at the hands of public and private sector practices such as redlining. This is particularly acute in many neighborhoods on the East Side of Buffalo. These neighborhoods also hold the highest rates of concentrated poverty in the city of Buffalo. Other cities in the U.S. that have experienced a similar over-supply of vacant lots have developed strategic and collective initiatives to mitigate the challenge of vacant lots. It may behoove leadership in the City of Buffalo to reevaluate the current vacant lot system in order to develop an effective initiative that transforms the local vacant lot challenge into an opportunity and an asset.



Vacant Land in Buffalo

The story of Buffalo's rise and decline is not unique, as many other "Rust Belt" cities can relate to a similar narrative. From the Industrial Revolution, many north-eastern cities emerged as manufacturing hubs that supported large populations, and grew economically prosperous. And while this period of growth continued for nearly a century, the Great Depression marks a turning point from growth to decline. Although most cities were able to recover from this period of financial fear, many industrial centered cities have still yet to return to their former glory, despite their efforts.

("The Great Northern Elevator," 1899)



The Rise

During the mid-19th century and the early 20th century the City of Buffalo experienced a period of great prosperity and economic growth. This was a result of its geographical and water-based transportation advantages, such as the Erie Canal, the Great Lakes, and Niagara Falls. As Buffalo's industrial businesses boomed, employment was plentiful, and the city's population skyrocketed. After the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, the city quickly emerged as the world's leading grain port, and in just 10 years, from 1830 to 1840, population took a massive leap from 8,668 to 18,213. However, growth did not stop there. From 1840 to 1880, the population multiplied nearly nine times, and then more than tripled over the following 40 years, from 1880 to 1920 (Figure 1).

Starting as an entrepot city, a place for trade and shipment of goods, Buffalo was able to quickly expand its economy. The city's first milestone towards economic expansion was in 1842, when Joseph Dart brought the grain elevator, a steam powered machine that transferred wheat from cargo ships to silos, and reshaped Buffalo's skyline. This was revolutionary for the birth of industrial Buffalo. With the grain elevator, wheat was able to be transported more efficiently, which largely benefited the transportation industry in the city and led to continued prosperity city wide (Glaeser 2007). During the 1840s nearly two million bushels of grain moved from boat to barge each year, making Buffalo a city of growth and overwhelming industrial prosperity. Then by 1901, the city had been coined "The City of Light", for its electrical abundance delivered by Niagara Falls, which lured many companies into the city (Glaeser 2007).

By the early 20th century, so much wheat was traveling through Buffalo, that it seemed only logical to start milling it. Rather than unloading grain from lake freighters then loading canal boats or railroad cars with that same grain, Buffalo began milling Midwestern grain into flour that was then shipped worldwide. Soon economic prosperity, and electrical abundance from Niagara Falls, sparked other industries interest in Buffalo, and factories began to multiply along the Lake Erie waterfront (Glaeser 2007 & Thomas 2007).

Vacant Land in Buffalo

The steel industry followed Buffalo's milling industry, and businesses moving into the city, like Lackawanna Steel and Iron Company, further expanded the economy by increasing employment opportunities. Once again, Buffalo's water-based transportation advantages made materials easily accessible for factory production. To produce steel; iron, from the Lake Michigan area; coal, from Pennsylvania; and electricity, from Niagara Falls; were all utilized to build economic prosperity in the city (Glaeser 2007).

After the construction of the Erie Canal, growth seemingly sparked overnight, and there was no doubt that Buffalo's factories filled the city with vitality and wealth. However, how long would this population boom and economic prosperity last? In 1900, with the city's manufacturing successes, and abundance of employment opportunities, Buffalo was the eighth largest city in the country (Thomas 2007). However, the 1920s marked the last real growth period, then by the 1930s Buffalo's population growth began to level off. With its population peaking in 1950 at 580,132, by 1960, the city's population was declining rapidly (Glaeser 2007 & Figure 1). While deindustrialization is associated with the massive population decline in the city, other factors, such as poorly developed policies and racial tension, are largely to blame for the city's rapid decline.

The Decline

An advantageous geographical location, with regards to the Erie Canal and Niagara Falls, can be credited for the rapid population growth and economic prosperity that Buffalo experienced in the early 20th century. However, a shift in transportation technologies, racial segregation, and political leaders' inadequate use of federal funds, led to massive decline and wide spread poverty in the city (Bartolotta 2011). Evident in (Figure 2), the city's population began its decline in 1960, and by the year 2000, it had lost nearly half of its population. Between 2010 and 2018, the city continued to lose population, although at a less severe rate. Like many other cities that have been commonly referred to as "Rust Belt cities," a once bustling manufacturing hub took a turn towards decline when the manufacturing industry crumbled, and many were left unemployed. The industrial and manufacturing failure that is Buffalo has left the city with the mere skeleton of vitality, as vacancy and abandonment plague the city's most impoverished neighborhoods.

Along with deindustrialization, Buffalo's decline can be attributed to the increase in automobile ownership, which led to suburbanization and sprawl; as well as, failed government programs, which promoted racial segregation and hindered investment in the city. In the mid-20th century, discriminatory practices such as redlining and blockbusting drastically segregated the city and left the African American community unable to build equity or wealth through homeownership (Bartolotta 2011). With white flight setting in, the African American population grew considerably within the city. Considering the disadvantages African Americans faced in the housing market and workforce, Buffalo developed a reputation of high poverty. In 2009, the city poverty rate was the second highest in the nation, just behind Detroit (Silverman 2013).



With high poverty and crime rates, fear of the city only worsened issues associated with white flight. Many government programs encouraged an “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” attitude amongst the wealthy and middle class (Bartolotta 2011). Government programs like the G.I. Bill of 1944 and the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, drove the wealthy and middle class out of the city and into the suburbs, where affordable mortgages and personal security was sought after (Bartolotta 2011). While many wealthy and middle class families did benefit from these new mortgage lending policies, such benefits depended largely on the color of their skin. These policies left African American families excluded from suburbs, and unable to obtain loans, even in urban neighborhoods. The Federal-Aid Highway Act worsened effects produced by exclusionary practices.

Highway building in the mid-1900s not only contributed to suburbanization by increasing the mobility of wealthy and middle class white families, but it also physically isolated disadvantaged African American communities. Many white suburban families had the ability to drive to and from the city without needing to see the city’s blighted African American neighborhoods, a predominant “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” attitude was developed. It was this attitude that led to the massive neglect among certain neighborhoods in the city, and allowed African American community members to be limited to residency in the city due to their lack of car ownership, inadequate public transportation, and exclusionary zoning practices in the suburbs. Once a predominantly white community was established in the suburbs, and a predominant African American community was established in the city, discriminatory practices such as redlining and blockbusting formed neighborhoods of condensed poverty and massive disinvestment.

These practices are largely to blame for the shockingly clear racial borders on the West and East Side of the city. While the banks’ practice of redlining, refusing mortgages to “high-risk” areas that were labeled red on a reference map, contributed to disinvestment in select neighborhoods; realtors’ practice of blockbusting, restricted the emergence of diverse neighborhoods, which then led to drastic segregation and condensed poverty. Although the practice of blockbusting was punishable by a fine in 1964, this was rarely enforced. Instead, realtors continued to reap profitability by instilling fear among white homeowners, and convincing them that an African American family moving into their neighborhood would decrease their property value. Therefore, realtors would benefit from the white homeowner selling cheap, and the black buyer purchasing at an inflated price (Bartolotta 2011).

Racial tension in the city of Buffalo has been prevalent, and is a factor in the city’s overall decline and vacancy epidemic that began in the mid-20th century, and continues into the 21st century. Early efforts to revitalize Buffalo can be seen in the objectives of the Urban Renewal program. The goal of this program was to clear the slums and blighted areas that overwhelmed the inner city. However, the program was a massive failure, and only worsened Buffalo’s socio-economic hardship. While Urban Renewal may have begun with good intentions, the unintended consequences disadvantaged Buffalo’s African American population, yet again. Rather than creating opportunity for new development, bulldozing slum and blight displaced many. Of the population that was displaced in the city, 80% of them were African Americans. Many African Americans who resided in the Ellicott district lost their homes to the bulldozer, and chose to relocate to adjoining neighborhoods like the Fruit Belt, a predominantly German-American neighborhood, rather than to public housing projects (Bartolotta 2011).

The unintended consequences of three main government interventions, the Federal Highway Act, the Federal Housing Administration’s redlining practices, and Urban Renewal, each contributed to the overall disinvestment and decline of Buffalo, While these interventions negatively shaped many neighborhoods in the city, redlining maps and the selected investment they supported, developed the city’s current resurgence neighborhoods.

Vacant Land in Buffalo

The Resurgence

However, after years of decline and disinvestment, the city claims to be making a comeback with development emerging left and right. As new luxury apartments, luxury office space, and trendy breweries are built seemingly overnight, of course people would assume Buffalo is on the rise. And with a shockingly expensive convention center proposed, many would also assume Buffalo is financially stable. The Media tells an exciting story of a city that had once experienced such drastic decline and disinvestment, but is now on the brink of a massive comeback, often referred to as a resurgence. They cannot resist but to run with this story; however, the depiction of a rising Buffalo is largely one sided. They form a narrative that all of Buffalo is experiencing this so-called resurgence, when in reality, many neighborhoods are pushed to the side and forgotten. Then the puzzling question remains, if the city's population is still declining, who are these new luxury apartments and offices being built for?



The Media

The media has Buffalonians believing their city is truly on the rise, and has most likely fooled many into thinking the population is too. With stories of new bars, events, and amenities, it becomes difficult not to get excited; and now, it appears employment opportunities might be less limited too. In most recent years, 2000 to 2020, the city has seen a huge spark in investment with over \$5.5 Billion put into the region; as well as, \$1 Billion pledged to the area from New York State through the Buffalo Billion initiative, which supports an annual competition among entrepreneurs. With the initiative's goal of bringing new ideas and jobs to the area, the Buffalo Billion initiative awards an entrepreneur, each year, funds to headquarter their business in Buffalo. Along with this, the grand opening of a massive downtown medical campus, and Tesla pledging to open a factory in the area, it seems like Buffalo may finally be the city of vitality and economic prosperity that it once was (Speier 2018).

Vacant Land in Buffalo

The abundance of new “trendy” consumer spots has also contributed to Buffalo’s excitement of the city’s so-called resurgence. Perhaps the most drastic transformation, in recent years, has been the city’s downtown neighborhood. Areas in this neighborhood include; Canalside, with its kayak rentals, restaurants, lit up grain elevators, concerts, and summer festivals; Silo City, with its sculpture like grain elevators, art exhibits, restaurant, and festivals; and of course RiverWorks, an urban concert and festival venue that offers a brewery, restaurant, boat docks, floating tiki bars, a zip line, ropes courses, roller derby, ice hockey, and more (Meltzer 2018 & Freehill-Maye 2018). The list goes on, and is not limited to downtown Buffalo. Other neighborhoods that have experienced this resurgence can be identified as “the wedge.” Starting with downtown, and working its way up Delaware, investment has touched Chippewa, Allentown, the Elmwood Village, and even parts of the West Side, but has not dared to cross Main Street.

While Buffalonians should not feel wrong for getting excited about all the new and exciting things that the city has to offer, a deeper look into what is actually happening city wide is necessary. The Media has painted a picture that only shows Buffalonians half of the city’s neighborhoods, and leaves the other half to be easily forgotten amongst the excitement. They have made it easy for Buffalonians to only see the resurgence, and to forget about the other struggling nonwhite neighborhoods. Through the use of strategic wording, and data that alludes to an increasing population, the Media has created the illusion that Buffalo is a hotspot with rising property values, and an increased millennial population.

(“Open Skating,” 2019)



Vacant Land in Buffalo

The Reality

The Media has carefully selected the information it wants to share with the public, but the truth can be found in straightforward US Census data collected from years 2000, 2010, and 2018. As seen in (Figure 2), population might be declining at a slower rate, but it is certainly not increasing, and new development has not solved the city's vacancy problem. According to (Figure 3), the vacancy rate remained constant at 15.7% in 2000 and 2010, then shot up to 16.1% in 2018. With this high vacancy rate, it should be clear that the city's current population cannot support a housing stock volume that was originally built for a population twice as large. Furthermore, as new housing is added in some places in the city, especially the seemingly never-ending development of luxury apartments, demand in other parts of the city simply has not increased.

Buffalo has not only seen an increasing vacancy rate from 2000 to 2018, but nearly half of the city's neighborhoods have experienced high increases in their percentage of vacant lots. As indicated in (Figure 4), neighborhoods on the city's East Side, that are known to be areas with the highest concentration of minorities, particularly black residents, have seen the greatest increase in vacant lots. Conversely, in predominantly white neighborhoods, the number of vacant lots has actually decreased. The concept of the "wedge" can be supported with the data seen in (Figure 4), as these neighborhoods mainly hug Delaware Avenue, and have recently seen the most new development. But while some progress in the city's vacant lot issue can be seen in the "wedge" neighborhoods, the issue worsens at a significantly higher percentage in other disadvantaged neighborhoods (Figure 4).

Although some appear to have benefited from this so-called resurgence, the city as a whole still remains largely disadvantaged, compared to the nation. With a national median household income of \$61,937 in 2018, Buffalo's median household income is nearly half of that (Figure 5). Then similarly, in 2018 Buffalo's percentage of families with income below poverty level of 23.7%, was over twice the national percentage of 9.3% (Figure 6). This suggests that Buffalo's attempt at increasing quality job opportunity among its population has failed, and that much of the city continues down the road of financial hardship. So while the Media claims that Buffalo is transforming back into a city of economic prosperity, opportunities are only offered to a portion of the city's population (Figure 7).

As median house value rises, the disadvantaged portion of the population becomes unable to afford adequate housing, which further impoverishes the population; and nonprofit organizations become unable to afford vacant lots at their inflated costs, which prevents their ability to administer reuse tactics. Therefore, it becomes evident that the city's resurgence is not equitable. White neighborhoods are flooded with new breweries and luxury apartments, while non-white neighborhoods are left with a growing inventory of vacant lots, and little funding to adopt reuses strategies.



Vacant Land in Buffalo

Figure 1

POPULATION RISE BUFFALO, NY

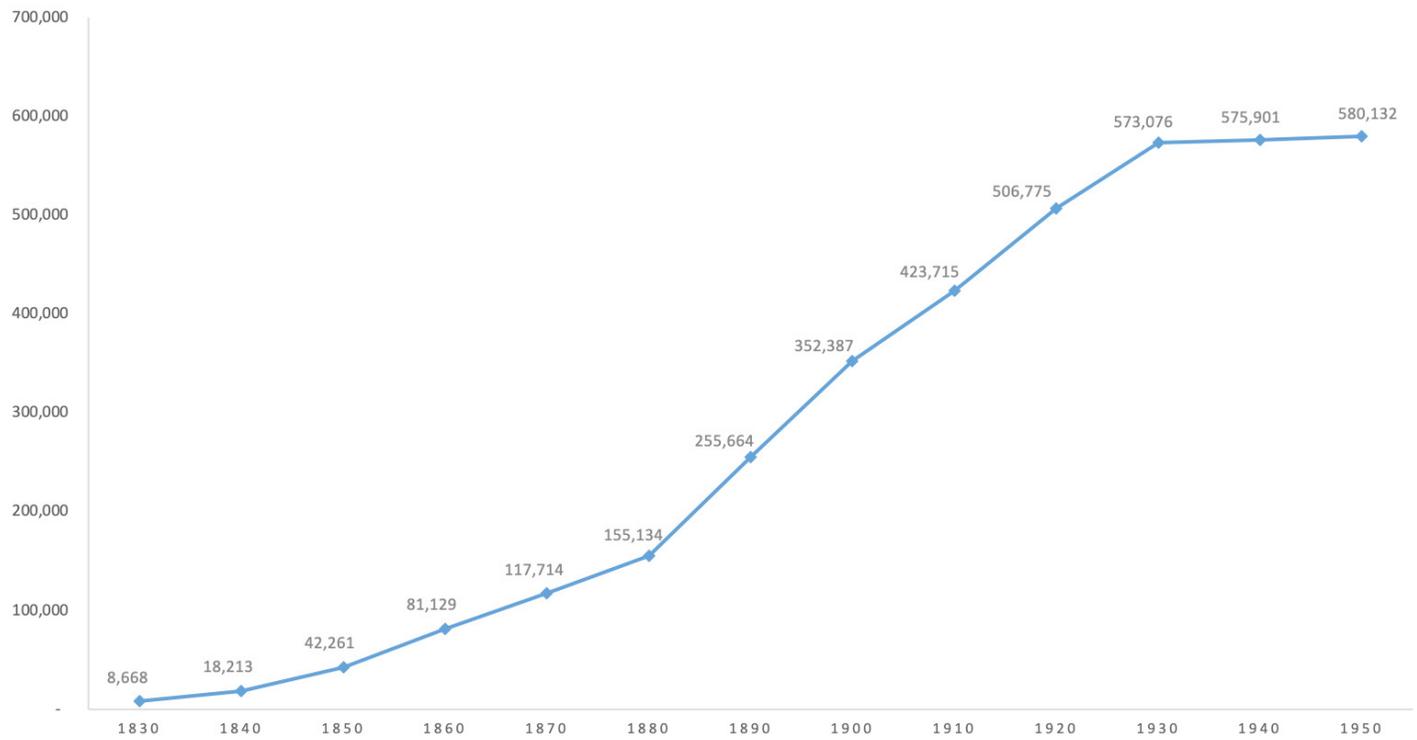
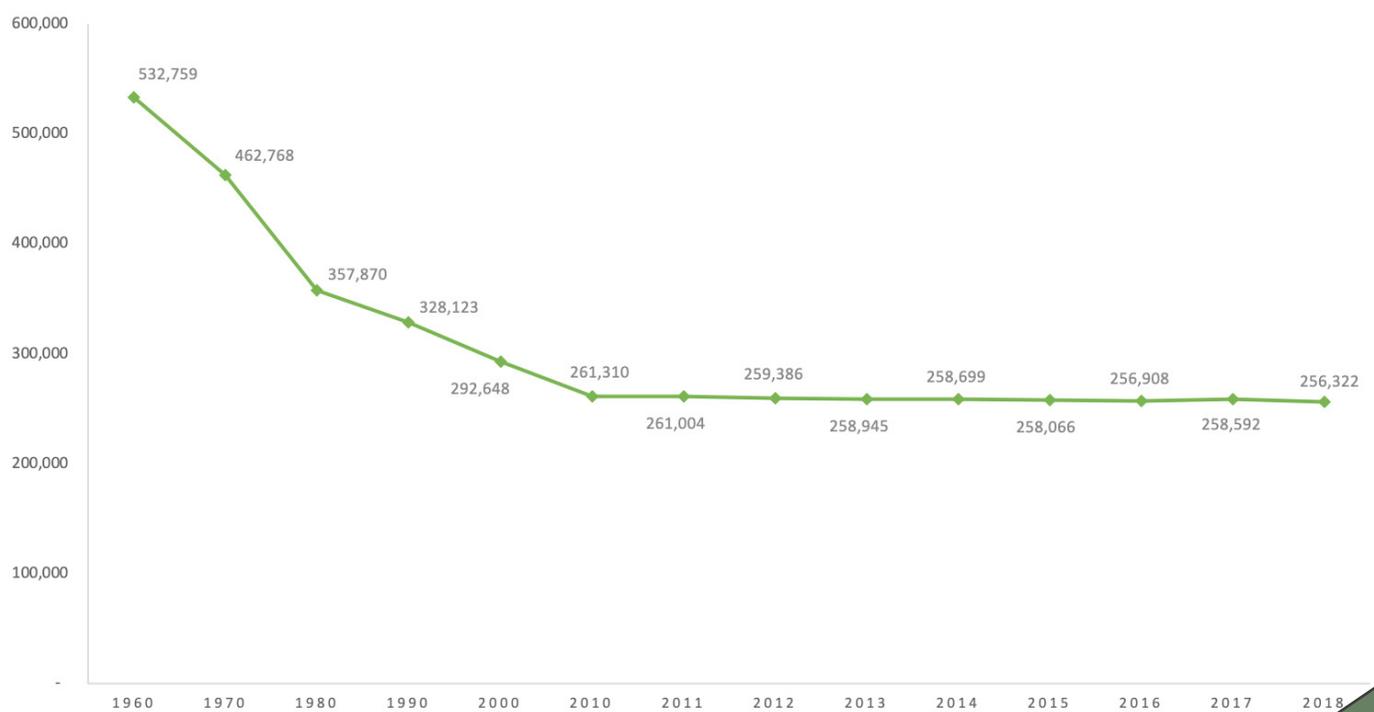


Figure 2

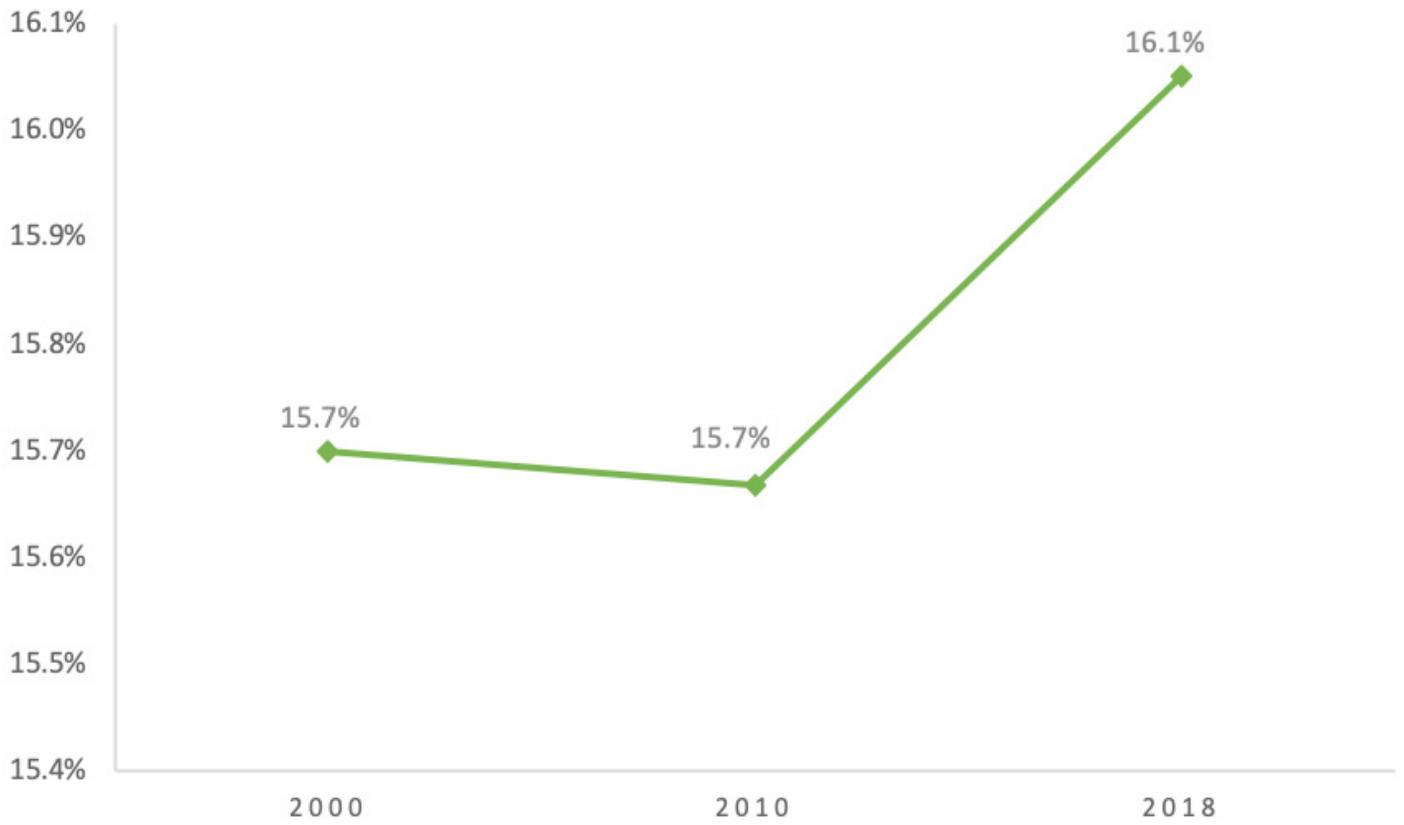
POPULATION DECLINE BUFFALO, NY



Vacant Land in Buffalo

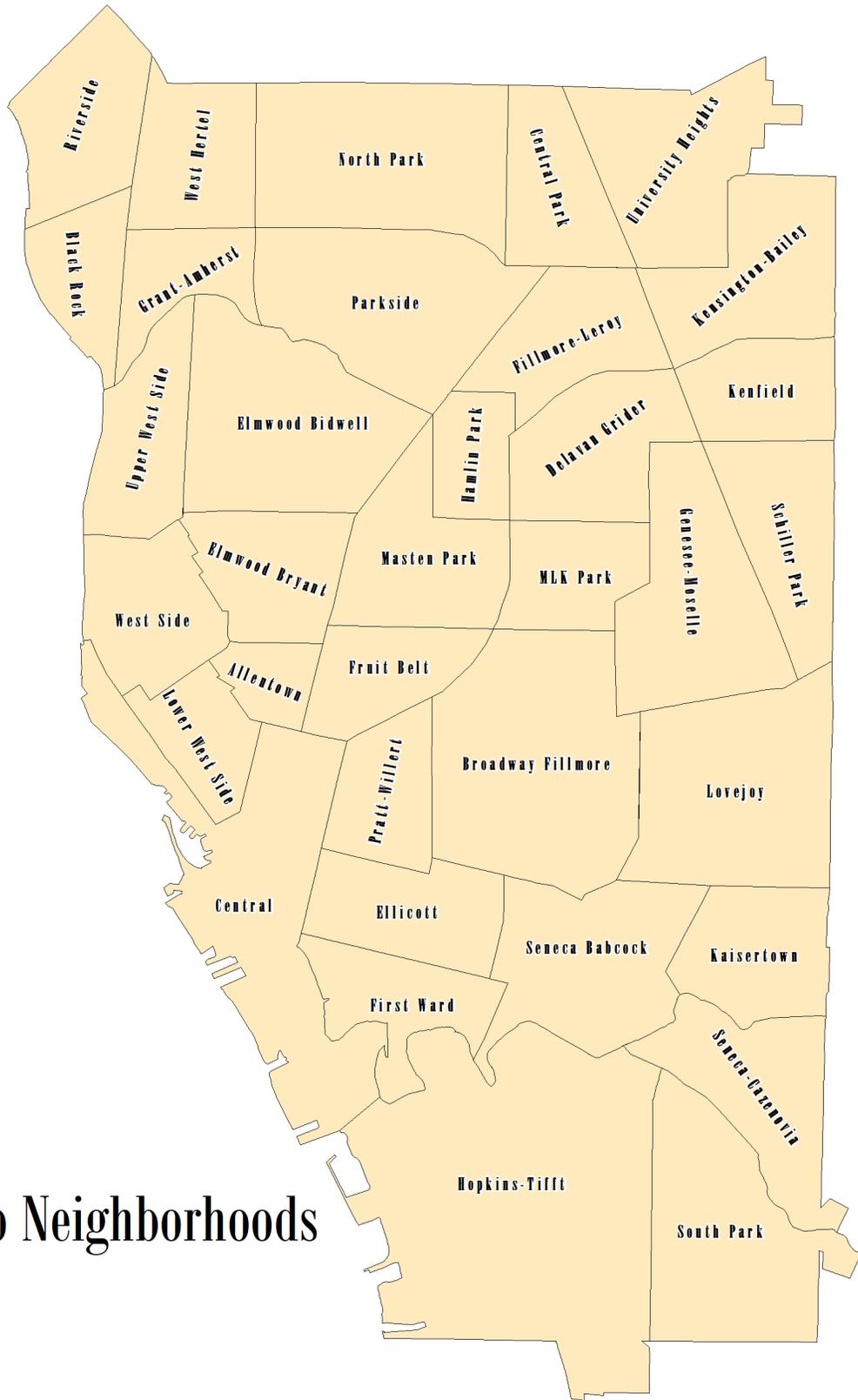
Figure 3

VACANCY RATE BUFFALO, NY



Vacant Land in Buffalo

Map 1

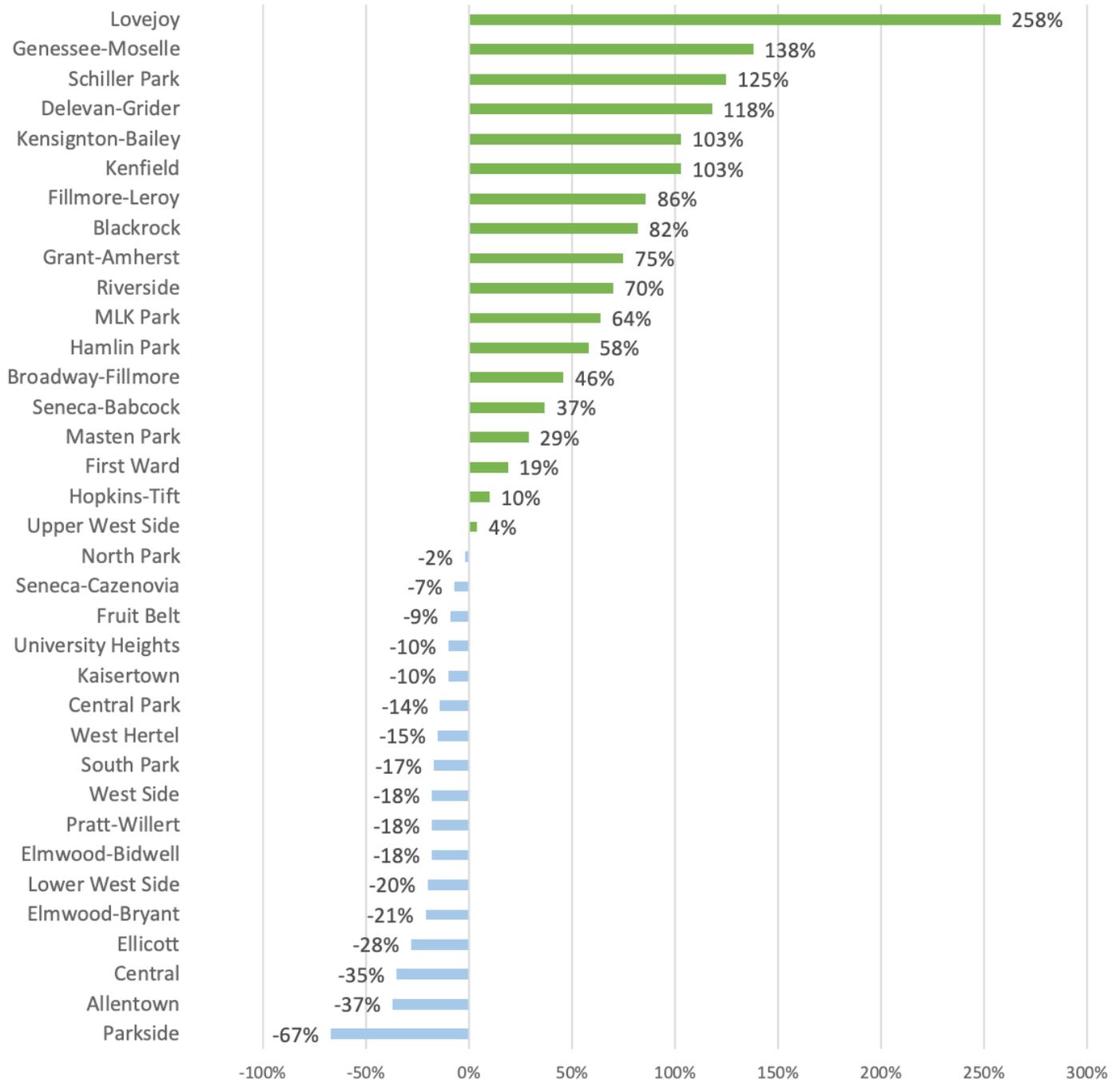


Buffalo Neighborhoods



Vacant Land in Buffalo

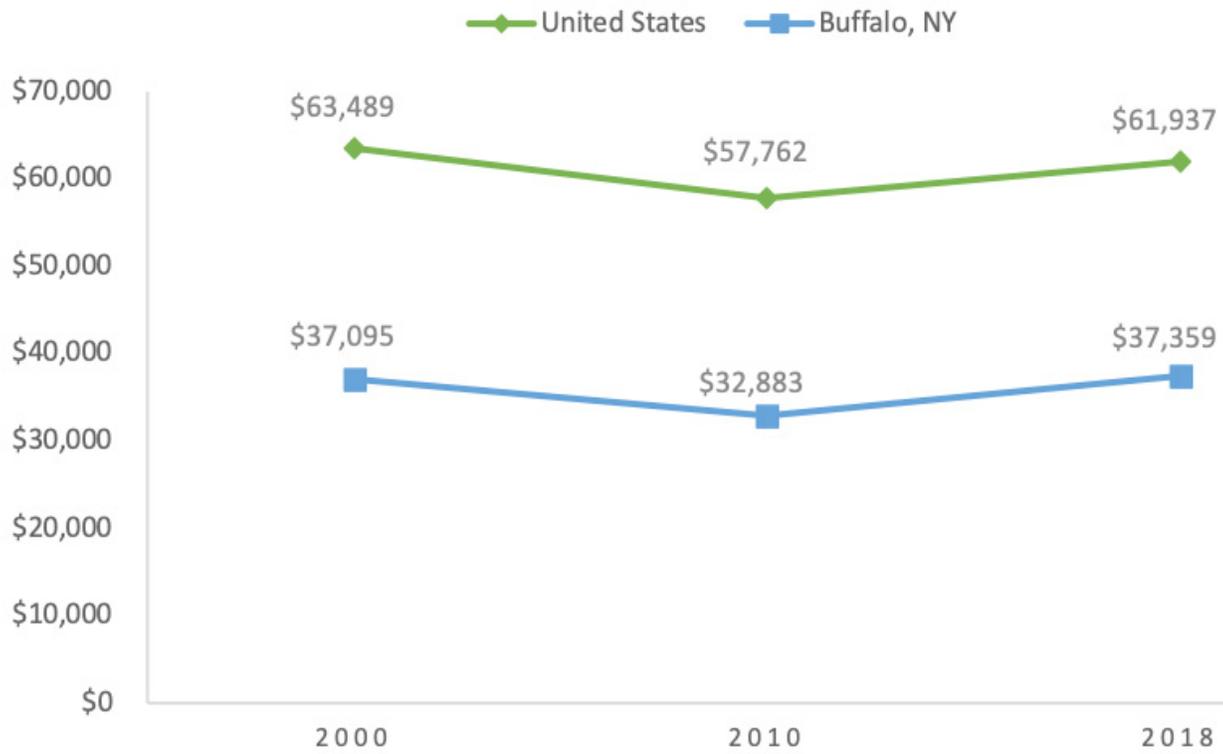
Figure 4 **Change in Publicly-owned Vacant Lots by Neighborhood, 2006-2019**



Vacant Land in Buffalo

Figure 5

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME 2018 DOLLARS



Vacant Land in Buffalo

Figure 6

FAMILIES WITH INCOME BELOW POVERTY LEVEL

■ United States ■ Buffalo, NY

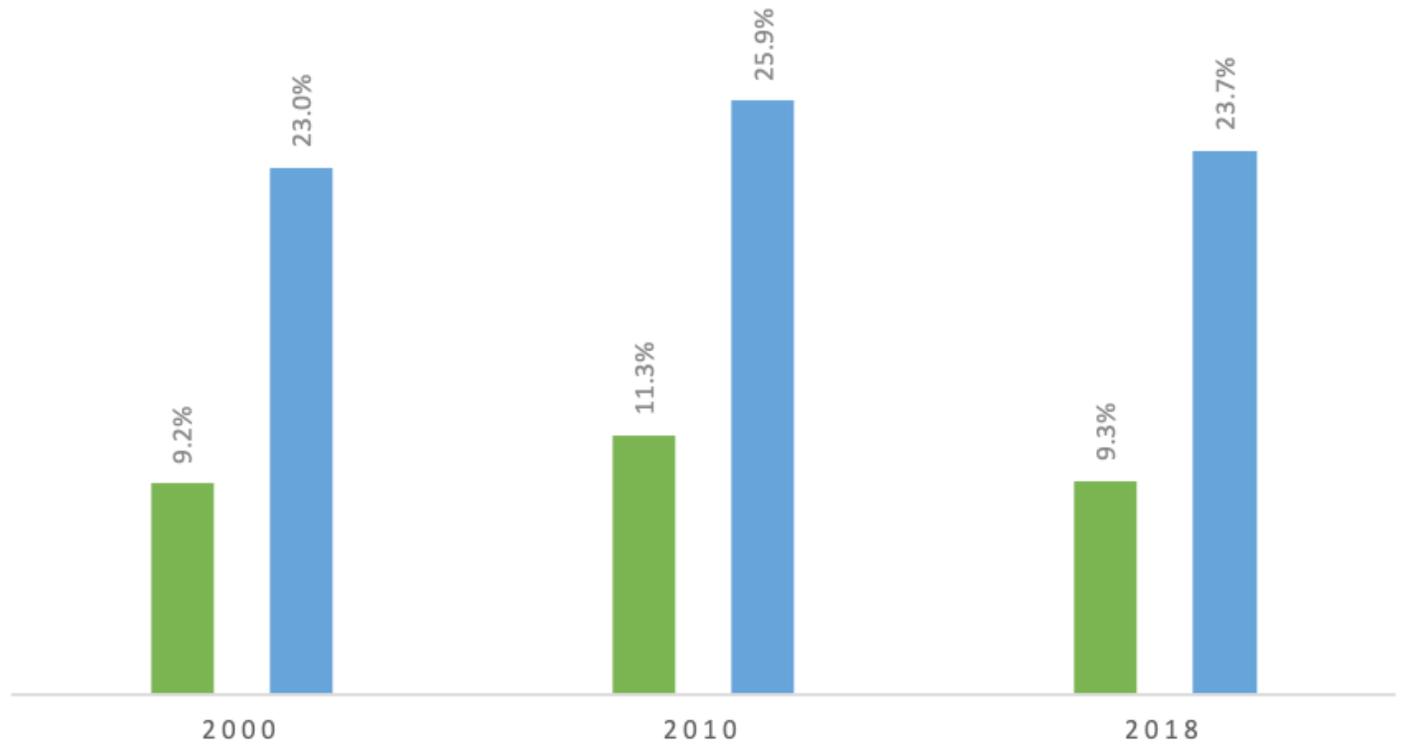
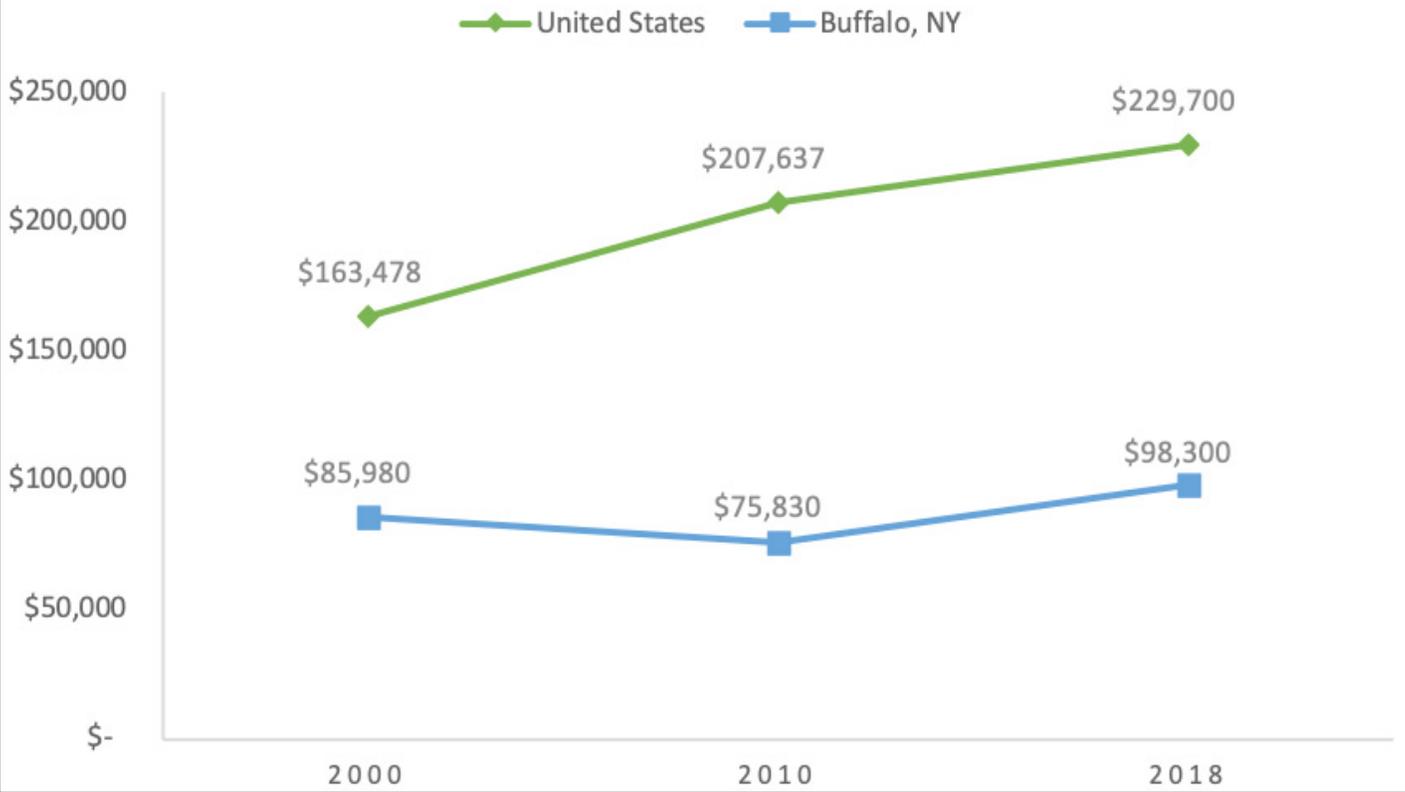


Figure 7

MEDIAN HOUSE VALUE 2018 DOLLARS



Nonprofits and Vacant Land

The city of Buffalo has a network of nonprofit organizations that are heavily involved in vacant lot reuse. The ability to acquire low cost vacant lots is essential to the efficacy of these nonprofit organizations. Neighborhood revitalization through community-based vacant lot reuse is the shared goal among Habitat for Humanity Buffalo, Grassroots Gardens of Western New York, People United for Sustainable Housing, Fruit Belt Community Land Trust, and Buffalo Erie Niagara Land Improvement Corporation. These locally-based nonprofit organizations rely heavily on the availability of vacant lots to create beneficial outcomes for community residents and the city. Map 2: Nonprofit Organization Locations, 2019 shows the current lots held by each organization in Buffalo's 35 neighborhoods. Each of these organizations aim to create equitable, resourceful, and healthy outcomes for residents in many different neighborhoods across Buffalo.

Habitat for Humanity Buffalo

Habitat for Humanity Buffalo, Inc. (HFHB) is a local branch of Habitat for Humanity International, and has been operating as a nonprofit corporation in Buffalo since 1985. Its vision is to create a world in which everyone has a decent place to live (Habitat for Humanity Buffalo [HFHB], n.d.). HFHB works mainly to provide affordable housing to lower income families, through community partnerships and support. HFHB works to build and rehabilitate homes on vacant lots, or from vacant properties within the Buffalo area. Through the homebuyer program, HFHB volunteers and partners work with low income families to construct homes. 500 hours of sweat equity from the family is required, and helps to create relationships within the neighborhood and community throughout the process. Once the home is completed the family repays a 30-year interest-free mortgage to HFHB, which helps to fund future HFHB homes. Another aspect of HFHB is its ReStore program and locations. These are two retail stores in Buffalo that sell household furniture and building supplies, that were either donated or salvaged from vacant properties, at an affordable price (HFHB, n.d.).

Habitat for Humanity Buffalo has maintained the same goal for over 30 years, to provide affordable housing to low income families across the city of Buffalo and surrounding suburbs. HFHB works toward this goal by providing housing that will not burden the new homeowners financially. The organization plans to build 20 homes per year by 2020, all of which will be built sustainably. This new goal maintains commitment to community and environment while providing affordable homes. According to discussions with HFHB leadership, in order to achieve this goal of 20 sustainable homes completed per year, HFHB will need to acquire and purchase properties and lots at an increased rate than previous years.

In 1985, HFHB was established by community members on the idea that everyone in Buffalo deserved an affordable and decent place to live (Cooper, 2012). In over 30 years HFHB has completed over 330 homes, close to 10 homes per year during the organization's tenure in Buffalo. Historically, many of these lots or properties were donated to the organization by community members. In the more recent years, the number of donations by the community has decreased significantly according to HFHB's Executive Director. This change has required HFHB to begin purchasing lots and properties from the City of Buffalo in order to continue building affordable homes.

In 2019, HFHB completed its first home in the town of Cheektowaga. This home symbolized the beginning of a partnership between HFHB and the Town of Cheektowaga in providing affordable housing for the community there. As of early 2020, HFHB has approximately 30 properties in the organization's inventory and 15 properties in contract for acquisition. Each year HFHB commits to a number of families, requiring the organization to continue purchasing and acquiring properties from municipalities or donors in order to keep up with demand for affordable homes.

Nonprofits and Vacant Land

Habitat for Humanity Buffalo is committed to financial transparency by making all financial reports, tax returns and annual reports accessible on the organization's website. HFHB remains a non-profit corporation and relies on donors and partnerships, as well as its own revenues, to accomplish its mission. HFHB receives volunteer services from over 5,000 individuals annually, and has created working relationships with institutions like M&T Bank, BlueCross BlueShield of WNY, and Bank of America (Habitat for Humanity Buffalo, n.d.). HFHB receives financial support in the form of corporate sponsorships, fundraising, donations, and grants. In 2018, this financial support amounted to just over \$1.6 million. For that same year, revenue from ReStore locations, sale of homes, and investment income resulted in \$4 million in revenue. Expenses for HFHB totaled just over \$3 million in 2018. These expenses include sale costs and fees, the discount on interest-free mortgages, program services, and administrative costs (HFHB, 2018).

Habitat for Humanity Buffalo's Homebuyer Program allows families between the 30% and 60% median income range in Buffalo to become new homeowners after acceptance to the program and completion of program requirements. In order to qualify for the program, families must complete financial forms and 500 hours of sweat equity (Cooper, 2012). Sweat equity is the term HFHB uses to describe the exchange of worked hours for homebuyer program qualification. Families can fulfill these requirements by working on HFHB home construction sites, working at either ReStore location, or by taking financial wellness courses through HFHB. To maintain commitment to affordability, HFHB finances homes for families based on a predetermined mortgage cost of 22% of their monthly household income. HFHB uses this rate of 22% to ensure that families are not mortgage burdened. HFHB also provides these mortgages as interest-free 30 year mortgages, furthering its commitment to making homeownership available to more families in Buffalo.



Nonprofits and Vacant Land

In the past, HFHB has been able to acquire lots at nominal fee from the City of Buffalo through the Urban Homestead Program. This low cost acquisition created a sustainable system for HFHB to acquire, build, and sell homes to new homeowners. Some costs in this process remain fairly constant, like closing fees and construction costs. Another constant value in the process is the 22% affordability rate. Amid the current market and policy changes in Buffalo, HFHB has seen a drastic change in costs of building and providing homes. This difference is seen specifically in the acquisition cost of lots and properties. Through discussion with HFHB leadership, the absence of policies allowing for low cost vacant lots and property acquisition was mentioned to have been a cause of increased costs of building homes. HFHB remains focused on providing homes that are affordable to families and is unwilling to compensate for this change by raising its affordability rate. This change in recent years has prompted HFHB to work in coordination with P.U.S.H. and the Town of Cheektowaga to continue its mission of providing affordable homes.

Habitat for Humanity Buffalo's completed projects have had a substantial financial impact on local tax revenue. Since 1985 HFHB homes have added more than \$12.6 million to local tax roles (HFHB, n.d.). By building on vacant lots, HFHB has saved taxpayers and the City of Buffalo any repair or maintenance costs associated with owning vacant lots, on top of adding revenue to local tax roles.

Habitat for Humanity Buffalo works to put families into affordable homes, and create connected communities through the process. By building homes in proximity to one another and requiring sweat equity hours, new homeowners create relationships that help to build a sense of community in neighborhoods. Families working together to build homes, while also building connections and relationships has a tremendous impact on those neighborhoods and homeowners.

HFHB completed its 300th home in 2018, at 42 Wende Street. The home also honored a 25-year partnership with local business Valu Home Centers. This home was a part of a collaborative effort to revitalize an area near Bailey and Genesee Avenue in Buffalo's Genesee-Moselle neighborhood known as Bailey Green (Habitat for Humanity Buffalo, n.d.).



Grassroots Gardens Western New York

Grassroots Gardens of Western New York (GGWNY) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that works to provide knowledge, power, and resources to grow healthy food, heal systematic harm, and strengthen connections through community gardens in the cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls. GGWNY currently facilitates community gardens as well as learning gardens, which are located on or near public schools in Buffalo and Niagara Falls. GGWNY values include equity and justice, community leadership, fostering connections, stewardship, and restorative practices. Many GGWNY gardens are located in neighborhoods in food deserts, making its gardens a crucial resource for many residents. The main goal of the work done by GGWNY is to create a network of connections through community gardening (Grassroots Gardens of Western New York [GGWNY], n.d.).

GGWNY's current strategic plan encompasses specific five year goals to work towards its vision. The goals include reaffirming focus on people and community, continuing support for its network of community gardens, strengthening commitment to stewardship, redouble efforts to tell the GGWNY story, work towards equitable operations, and value and strengthen partnerships while being open to new opportunities (Grassroots Gardens Strategic Planning Committee, 2017). In recent years as a commitment to stewardship of community gardens, GGWNY has established itself as a land trust with help from the Land Trust Alliance (GGWNY, n.d.).

Nonprofits and Vacant Land

Grassroots Gardens of WNY is the nonprofit organization that developed as a result of a merger between two community garden focused organizations in the Buffalo-Niagara region (Grassroots Gardens, n.d.). Grassroots Gardens Buffalo and Greenprint Niagara were both founded with the intent to reuse vacant lots as a way to promote community gardening and relationships in the organizations' respective cities. Grassroots Gardens of Buffalo (GGB) was incorporated in 1995, when a group of community members and activists in the Buffalo area recognized an opportunity for community gardens on vacant land within Buffalo. Working to educate and facilitate community gardens, Grassroots Gardens Buffalo was responsible for creation of 30 gardens by 2010. In 2010, GGB extended its capacity and reach to the community by adding professional staff. Greenprint Niagara began its work in 2012 in the city of Niagara Falls, with a vision to create community gardens and green reuse of vacant lots within the city. By 2016, Greenprint Niagara and GGB had recognized an opportunity to merge, benefiting overall operational resources and the ability to achieve goals.

GGWNY began working towards Land Trust Accreditation in 2016, as it prioritized the ownership of the community gardens it had maintained for over 30 years (Grassroots Gardens Strategic Planning Committee, 2017). As of 2020, Grassroots Gardens of WNY operates over 100 community gardens. Two of these gardens are under full ownership of GGWNY. The remaining number of gardens are located on lots leased by the City of Buffalo and City of Niagara Falls, or on Buffalo and Niagara Falls Public School properties. By securing ownership of its gardens, GGWNY is helping long standing community gardens to remain in place regardless of shifting markets in Buffalo.

GGWNY does not require any annual fee or financial requirement to participate in its community gardening initiatives, instead GGWNY cultivates and manages gardens through a system of partnerships, donations, and volunteers. With Len-Co Lumber, Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper, C.J. Krantz Organics, the City of Buffalo Department of Public Works, and the University Heights Tool Lending Library, GGWNY is able to build and maintain gardens with community members and volunteers. Through the collective efforts of these partnerships and volunteers, GGWNY provides community assets in the shape of community gardens.



Nonprofits and Vacant Land

GGWNY works directly with community members, neighborhood residents, and schools to build and manage community gardens throughout the cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls. Applications for new garden locations are submitted to GGWNY by potential Lead Gardeners. These applications require that at least one person volunteers to act as Lead Gardener of the location along with a minimum of five other gardeners committing to steward the garden for 5 years. These individuals act as the committee that coordinates garden maintenance and communication between GGWNY and all gardeners. Applicants are also required to attend at least one GGWNY volunteer opportunity, including an adequate garden design, and a set of guidelines for the community garden (GGWNY, n.d.).

New community gardens leases are secured by GGWNY in coordination with the City of Buffalo or City of Niagara Falls, or from private owners. GGWNY is responsible for communication of lease terms between the landowner and community residents (GGWNY, n.d.). Once the lease has been approved, GGWNY provides education and programming to new gardeners and leaders. Community gardeners have opportunities to learn processes like raised bed setup, garden design, and seed starting. GGWNY also provides education on healthy gardening in Buffalo for residents new to the process (Rolston, 2011). GGWNY also facilitates material support, plant orders, hydrant access, and provides tools and equipment.

GGWNY operates its gardens to build a network of relationships throughout the communities in which gardens are located. Relationships are built and grow through seasons of gardening with neighborhood residents, school students and staff, and GGWNY leaders. Many of GGWNY locations are in areas of Buffalo and Niagara Falls that are considered to be food deserts, meaning a lack of accessible and adequate healthy food resources in the area (GGWNY, n.d.). Community gardens cultivated by GGWNY make immediate impacts on these neighborhoods by providing healthy sources of food and promoting overall wellness through gardening (Rolston, 2011). For low-income families, community gardens also provide a reliable source of food for the growing seasons. The benefits of community gardens produced by GGWNY help to create healthy and connected neighborhoods across the cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls.

The Grassroots garden at 221 Hutchinson Ave was established in 2019. The Hutchinson Block Club currently maintains this location (GGWNY, n.d.). The garden currently acts as a food producing community garden, and serves the surrounding residents. The lot on which this garden is located is owned by the City of Buffalo. The garden is located in the Kensington-Bailey neighborhood in Buffalo.

People United for Sustainable Housing (PUSH)

People United for Sustainable Housing (PUSH) of Buffalo is a locally-based nonprofit organization and headquartered on the West Side of Buffalo. PUSH Buffalo was created in 2005 by Aaron Bartley and Eric Walker as a community-organized effort to revitalize neighborhoods and increase the supply of affordable housing. From these initial goals, PUSH Buffalo has since expanded its work to include its sub-organizations Buffalo Neighborhood Stabilization Company (BNSC), PUSH Green, PUSH Blue, the Grant Street Neighborhood Center, and tenant advocacy programs (People United for Sustainable Housing [PUSH], n.d.).

The BNSC was established in 2009 to build PUSH Buffalo's organizational capacity and accomplish the goal of developing affordable housing. At that time, it became clear that the lack of and demand for affordable housing was outpaced by the potentially diminishing supply of vacant lots available to BNSC at a reasonable cost. In the last 10 years, BNSC acquired 50 vacant lots which have all been remediated through a passive reuse strategy. The organization is also working to develop a strategic plan to have in place to develop these vacant lots into affordable housing. Currently, it is in the phase of obtaining public input from the community as to exactly how these vacant lots should be reused. BNSC has a vital role in the organization of PUSH as the department responsible for the acquisition, remediation, maintenance, and management of vacant lots and housing until the next phase of development. (PUSH, n.d.).

Nonprofits and Vacant Land

PUSH Buffalo makes its annual report easily accessible to the public through the organization's website. The annual report includes the organization's financial report including all of its funding sources and operating expenses. PUSH Buffalo's funding sources include income from grants, contributions, tenant income, and passthrough income (PUSH, n.d.).

In order to ensure that the housing that PUSH Buffalo creates remains affordable, the organization must be able to acquire vacant lots and properties at a nominal cost. As is the case with all of the nonprofit organizations involved in the creation of affordable housing, the cost of vacant lots and properties must remain affordable in order for PUSH Buffalo to create affordable units. Every vacant lot that PUSH Buffalo has been able to transform has had long-term benefits for the community and the local economy (PUSH, n.d.).

The net-zero house at 10 Winter Street is a PUSH project that was funded by a Green Development HUD grant. This PUSH development offers a sustainable housing option that has a zero carbon footprint that produces as much energy as it consumes annually. Under PUSH management, this residential property will only be available to low-income households and preserve affordability in a neighborhood that has a growing market demand. The Winter Street house is an ideal example of community-based development that prioritizes the needs of community residents and sustainability goals (Taylor, 2011).



Fruit Belt Community Land Trust

The Fruit Belt Community Land Trust (FBCLT) is a community-based nonprofit organization that has focused its efforts in the East Side neighborhoods of Buffalo in close proximity to the Buffalo Medical Campus. The FBCLT states that its mission is “to create permanently affordable housing and generate community wealth through collective ownership of land in the historic Fruit Belt neighborhood” (Fruit Belt Community Land Trust [FBCLT], n.d.).

The FBCLT was established in 2017 in an effort to develop a community-based land control mechanism that would preserve affordability of vacant lots surrounding the Buffalo Medical Campus. As the Buffalo Medical Campus began to expand in the last few years, many Fruit Belt residents feared inevitable displacement as a result of increasing property values. As a community land trust, the organization is able to acquire vacant lots and maintain affordability through deed restrictions (Magavern et al., 2017).

Nonprofits and Vacant Land

According to the FBCLT website, since 2017, the organization has grown to include over 100 members and has had 5 properties under development. In the last 3 years, the FBCLT has raised over \$875,000. Most of their funding came from New York State's Community Land Trusts Capacity Building Initiative which awarded the organization with an \$800,000 grant in October of 2019 (Williams, 2019) The FBCLT will use the funding to acquire additional vacant lots in order to preserve affordability and prevent displacement of residents in the Fruit Belt community.

According to the FBCLT website, the organization's primary method of vacant lot acquisition is to purchase lots from the city of Buffalo. Initially, in 2017, the FBCLT acquired only 4 vacant lots. In 2018, they acquired 20 more lots and made an agreement with the city of Buffalo to acquire over 50 lots over the following 5 years. At the same time, a neighborhood-wide moratorium was enacted and market-value sales of lots were put on hold. The moratorium allowed the land trust to organize, strategize, and raise funds in order to acquire more lots. The land trust hopes to acquire at least 200 vacant lots over time for the purpose of providing affordable housing in the Fruit Belt neighborhood (Doig, 2020).

The FBCLT acquires vacant lots and properties for community-based development. With the community-owned land, the organization creates housing that is permanently affordable and community gardens that improve the quality of life in the Fruit Belt neighborhood.

The FBCLT provides a pathway to homeownership for community residents that meet income criteria. The land control mechanism made possible by the FBCLT creates an opportunity for residents to become homeowners. This asset-building capacity not only directly benefits the community but it also benefits the city of Buffalo. In place of the costly maintenance and wasted infrastructure of vacant lots, homeownership provides a stream of local tax revenue and personal property maintenance (Partnership for Public Good [PPG], 2016).

Buffalo Erie Niagara Land Improvement Corporation (BENLIC)

Buffalo Erie Niagara Land Improvement Corporation (BENLIC), the region's land bank, was formed in 2012 as one of New York State's first land banks under the "2011 Land Bank Act". BENLIC is a nonprofit corporation was created by government leadership in the city of Buffalo and Erie County in an effort to mitigate the negative impacts of distressed properties and vacant lots (Silverman, 2015). The primary purpose of BENLIC is to acquire and sell vacant lots and tax-delinquent properties and stabilize neighborhoods of persistent disinvestment. Local officials in an 11-person board from the cities of Buffalo, Tonawanda and Lackawanna, and municipalities in Erie County, form the leadership that dictates which properties BENLIC should acquire (Buffalo Erie Niagara Land Improvement Corporation [BENLIC], n.d.).

BENLIC is responsible for the management of their acquired vacant lots and abandoned properties in municipalities throughout Erie County. The BENLIC Board of Directors includes 11 directors which is made up of leadership from various municipalities throughout the region. Since the organization's establishment in 2014, BENLIC has acquired a total of 121 properties and has sold 60 properties. The corporation has had a total investment of \$6.1 million throughout this time and has been active in 19 out of 42 Erie County municipalities. In 2017 and 2018, BENLIC reached the \$1 million sales mark as a result of property sales.

In July 2011, the Land Bank Act became law in New York State. BENLIC empowers local communities to determine its level and location of land bank involvement in neighborhood revitalization and stabilization work (NYS Land Banks, 2014) through the Home Rule & Local Land Use Authority. Many of the acquired properties had a range of uses from affordable housing, to open space, to commercial development (NYS Land Banks, 2014). BENLIC offers side-lot applications for vacant lots that are adjacent to an individual's property. This Land Bank typically only acquires residential properties, and prices all homes at fair market value. This leaves many vacant lots available for out of town investors at the auction.

Nonprofits and Vacant Land

BENLIC holds the power to “super bid,” under Article 16 of New York State Not-for-Profit Corporation Law (“The Land Bank Act”). This power can cut off any other investor or bidder at the auction, in order to grab the property they want on auction day. Buffalo’s foreclosure process is subject to a new law that interferes with NYS foreclosure laws. In the past, the foreclosure process took 6 months for the vacant properties to be set up for auction. When it reaches the auction, the back taxes and all the lien holds are still present. Some of the various costs that the BENLIC face during the time period in which the corporation holds the title are closing costs, insurance premiums, marketing costs, property tax payments, utility costs, capital improvements, BENLIC administrative fee, and any other miscellaneous costs. Under NYS Bill A08156, the City has the ability to take the title of the property free of accrued back taxes, demolition, maintenance fees, closing costs, insurance premiums, claims, liens, mortgaged charges and estates of any kind. Bypassing the State and County liens and taxes that the city usually waits for a buyer to pay off, the City can obtain the title immediately, benefiting the municipality and making it easier for a nonprofit or the land bank to grab afterward. Back taxes get erased is beneficial towards the city and the Land bank because, for many tax-foreclosed properties, they accumulate more back taxes that overcome the fair market value. Currently, nonprofit organizations and the land bank can acquire distressed properties that have unpaid taxes and liens at a reduced cost.

BENLIC can consider acquiring property that are at least three years behind in tax liens. The process BENLIC maintains to acquire and sell property is as follows. They identify the property parcel through the municipality and acquire the lots through tax auction or donation. They make an evaluation of the property through a BENLIC inspector. They market the property as they list it for sale. BENLIC attached a work of scope required of the property and they find a buyer who agrees to conditions and gives an appropriate offer. The Board of Directors accepts the offer and gives the buyer an year to complete the repairs. This promotes investment back to the vacant homes or lots that have been previously disinvested. BENLIC collaborates with elected officials, building inspectors, assessors and staff planners to guide a property through the foreclosure process (BENLIC, n.d.).

BENLIC obtains most of their funding through the Land Bank Community Revitalization Initiative, which is managed by the NYS Office of the Attorney General. The funding for this initiative was as a result of the 2008 housing crisis and the settlements that the banks were financially responsible. The organization has also received grant funds to proceed with their daily operations and projects. Other sources of revenue comes from property sales, donations, and various grants (BENLIC, n.d.).

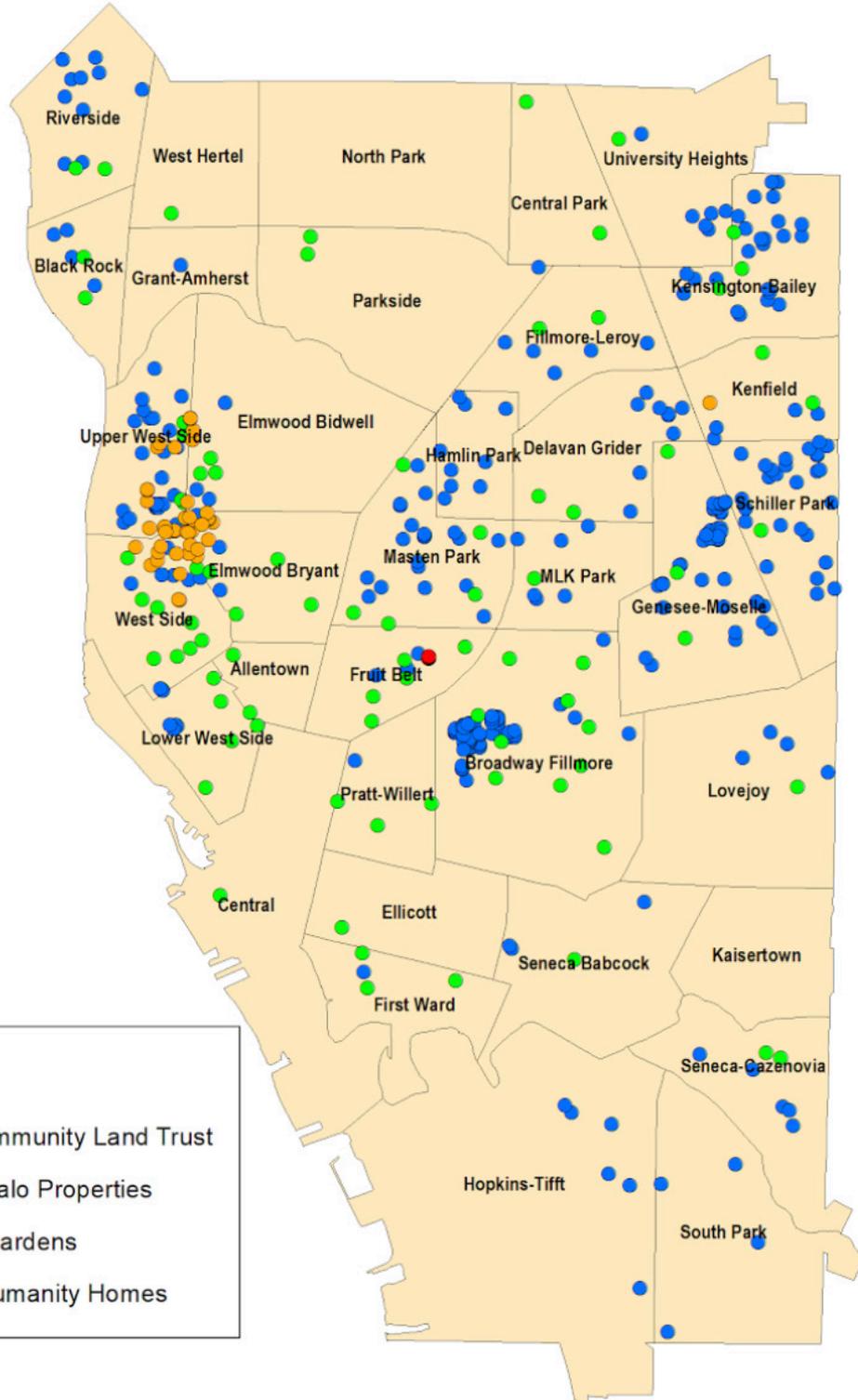
BENLIC supports the growth of the affected abandoned properties to develop a list of community relief strategies that can address current problems in the city. A vacant lot from the BENLIC can be transformed in many ways, from becoming a source of available space to residential homes, commercial development, or blue-green infrastructure. BENLIC may also transfer properties to a nonprofit organization to use for community-based purposes. A successful land bank is based on their narrow focus and goals with their transparency and accountable transactions.

BENLIC works to reduce the amount of vacant properties in neighborhoods by transferring the property to a potential buyer, in order to bring a net-positive to the community. BENLIC rehabilitates many properties in their inventory that have been left neglected previously. Rehabilitation of properties provides opportunity for growth in property value, and subsequently the tax base. BENLIC has collaborated with nonprofit partners like Habitat for Humanity Buffalo and the Bailey Green initiative, to reuse vacant lots and properties for overall community benefit. According to the official BENLIC website, some of the benefits that BENLIC aims to encourage include increased tax revenue, reduced maintenance costs for municipalities, streamlined tax foreclosure process, and the promotion of affordable housing (BENLIC, n.d.).

Nonprofits and Vacant Land

Map 2

Nonprofit Organization Locations by Neighborhood, 2019



Legend

- Fruit Belt Community Land Trust
- P.U.S.H. Buffalo Properties
- Grassroots Gardens
- Habitat for Humanity Homes

N



0 0.5 1 2 Miles

Inventory of Vacant Land

Defining Vacant Lots

In order to assess and understand the supply of vacant lots in the city of Buffalo, it is necessary to first define the term “vacant lot.” However, a universal definition of a vacant lot does not currently exist and varies widely between municipal governments and non-profit organizations. The zoning ordinance of the City of Buffalo defines a vacant lot as “any parcel of land which is not improved by a structure. This term does not include active parking lots” (City of Buffalo Code § 216-66). For the purposes of this study, we will define a vacant as any parcel of land, privately- or publicly-owned, that lacks a viable structure or purpose. In addition, this study will exclude any parcel of land in which a building or structure currently exists, regardless of the state of the structure. With this exclusion and simplification, the study is able to evaluate only vacant lots which are ready to be repurposed.

Public vs. Private Vacant Lot Ownership

For the purposes of this report, a publicly-owned parcel is any site that is owned by a governmental or government-related entity, which represents and is funded by the public. Entities include: state or local government, government departments (including community development and public works), transit agencies, school districts, and public institutions of higher learning. Publicly-owned parcels, or “public sites,” “public land” and “surplus land,” can include: vacant parcels, parcels with existing community or public facilities with redevelopment potential, or land being purchased by a public agency for the development of community or public facilities (Abu-Khalaf et al., 2017).

Data

Real property data in shapefile format was provided by the Erie County Department of Environment and Planning for 2006, 2012, and 2019 and used to create an inventory of vacant lots in the city of Buffalo. These three years were chosen to be investigated to show the state of vacant lots in the city of Buffalo just before, just after, and almost a decade following the 2008 Housing Crisis. These parcel layers contain the following attribute fields used to create maps: street address, municipality, class, property description, calculated acreage, owner(s), and mailing address of primary owner. Neighborhood and Council District boundary layers were created by the City of Buffalo Office of Strategic Planning. These layers were used to create maps of the Buffalo neighborhoods and Buffalo Common Council districts.

Inventory of Vacant Land

Methods

All maps completed for the purpose of this report were created using ERSI's ArcGIS application and its tools and applications. In order to maintain the definition of vacant lots used for this report, Erie County parcels layers were queried to identify parcels with classification codes 311, 312, 330, 331, 340, 341, and 350. Definitions of each of these codes referenced from the New York State Tax Assessor's Manual are shown in Table 1: NYS Tax Assessors Manual Property Type Classification Codes.

To identify publicly-owned lots within the City of Buffalo, the new layers containing only the codes listed above for each year were queried to exclusively include owners listed as the City of Buffalo Perfecting Title, Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency (BURA), Buffalo Economic Renaissance Corporation (BERC), Buffalo Neighborhood Revitalization Corporation (BNRC), and Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority (BMHA). These layers then became the "Publicly-Owned Lot" layers used for the mapping and statistical analysis for each year investigated.

All Buffalo Common Council and Neighborhood maps were created by overlaying the newly created publicly-owned layers onto respective geographic boundary layers. To summarize statistics and symbolize geographic boundaries, a field describing the corresponding Common Council district and neighborhood name was added for each lot. Statistics derived from these layers were used to create many tables and charts displayed and mentioned throughout this report.

Table 1

NYS Tax Assessors Manual Property Type Classification Codes*

311	Residential Vacant Land
312	Residential Vacant Land Including a Small Improvement
330	Vacant Land Located in Commercial Area
331	Commercial Land with Minor Improvements
340	Vacant Land located in Industrial Areas
341	Industrial Vacant land with Minor Improvements
350	Urban Renewal or Slum Clearance

*Retrieved from <https://www.tax.ny.gov/research/property/assess/manuals/prclas.htm#vacant>

Inventory of Vacant Land in Buffalo

According to parcel data obtained from Erie County during the years 2006, 2012, and 2019, the number of vacant lots increased substantially, despite the overall narrative of a strengthening housing market. Table 2: Vacant Lots in Buffalo shows a trend in which the number of publicly-owned lots has increased at a higher rate than the number of overall vacant lots in the City of Buffalo. The number of publicly-owned vacant lots has grown to become a larger percentage of the total number of lots in the City of Buffalo since 2006. This number was about 6% of the total lots in 2006. In 2012 the number had risen to 7%, and the greatest increase was seen in 2019 when almost 9% of lots within the city of Buffalo were vacant publicly-owned lots. Figure 9: Buffalo's Publicly-Owned vacant Lots by Type, 2019 shows the current number of residential, commercial, industrial and urban renewal lots that were publicly-owned as of 2019. Map 3: Publicly-Owned Lots by Sector, 2019 shows the 2019 locations of publicly-owned vacant lots, taking into consideration the north, south, east, west and central sectors of the city.

Figure 10: Total Residential Lots vs. Publicly-Owned Residential Lots compares the number of total residential lots to the number of publicly owned vacant residential lots in the city of Buffalo. While the city saw a decrease of 2,105 total residential lots, it increased its number of publicly-owned vacant lots by 2,493 residential vacant lots. Put another way, as the number of total residential lots in the city decreased, the total number of publicly-owned vacant lots increased substantially.

Inventory of Vacant Land

Neighborhood Breakdown

The city of Buffalo consists of 35 different neighborhoods within 44.6 sq. miles. Since 2006, all 35 neighborhoods have seen a varying number of publicly-owned vacant lots. Some neighborhoods have seen a decrease in the number of vacant lots, while others have seen a tremendous increase. The statistics for each of the 35 neighborhoods are shown in Table 3: Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots, by Neighborhood.

Between 2006 and 2019, 17 neighborhoods saw a decrease in the number of publicly-owned vacant lots. Despite the encouraging numbers in some areas, there were more neighborhoods that experienced an increase in the number of publicly-owned vacant lots than those seeing a decrease. Of those 17 seeing an increase, nine neighborhoods experienced an increase of at least 75% over the 13 year span between 2006 and 2019. Neighborhoods such as Delevan-Grider, Schiller Park, Lovejoy, and Kensington-Bailey saw the number of vacant lots within their community double between 2006 and 2019. Maps 4, 5, and 6 show the number of publicly-owned vacant lots in each neighborhood for 2006, 2012, 2019. These maps are symbolized in five categories for each year to show the range in the number of vacant lots between neighborhoods.

Although some neighborhoods saw a high rate of increase, many neighborhoods were already facing adversity in 2006. For example, Broadway-Filmore was home to 1,713 publicly-owned vacant lots in 2006, yet it increased in 2019 by 46% to 2,496. Genesee-Moselle also captured a large number of these lots in 2006. The numbers there increased from 665 lots to 1,581 lots in 2019. Table 4: Five Buffalo Neighborhoods with the Highest Number of Publicly-owned Vacant Lots, 2019 neighborhoods with the most lots, and how many acres the lots in these neighborhoods amounted to in 2019.

Council District Breakdown

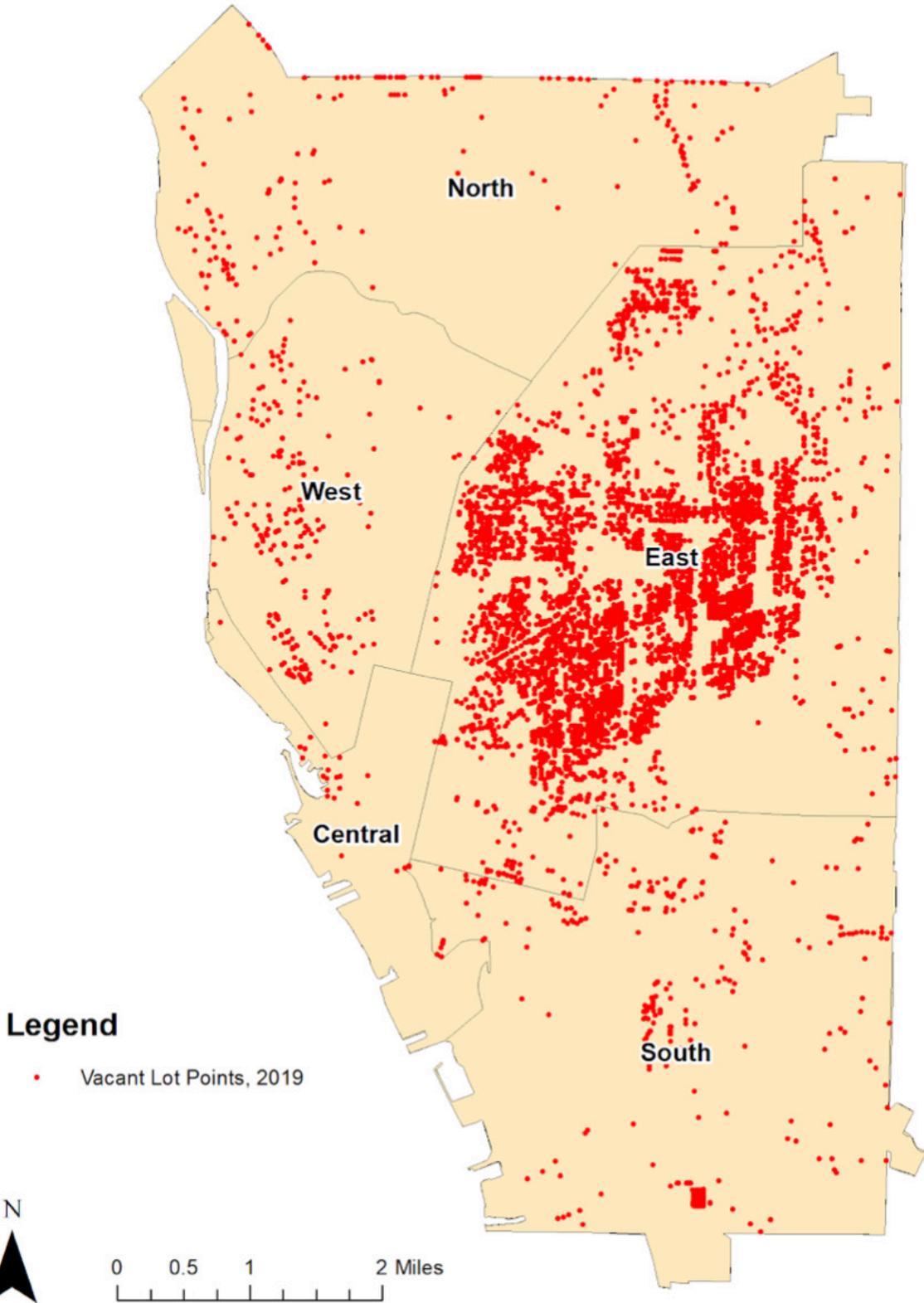
The City of Buffalo's Common Council consists of 9 districts. These districts act as the legislative body alongside the Mayor's Office. Table 5: Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots, by Buffalo Common Council District below shows the number of publicly-owned vacant lots in each council district for 2006, 2012, and 2019. The districts that contained the most lots were consistently the Ellicott district, Fillmore district, and Masten district. In 2019, these three districts accounted for 88% of the total number of publicly-owned vacant lots. Figure 11 shows the 2019 overall distribution of publicly-owned vacant lots between all 9 districts. Maps 7, 8, and 9 show the number of publicly-owned vacant lots became more concentrated in the districts representing the East Side from 2006, to 2012, and 2019.

Summary of Inventory of Vacant Land

The total increase in publicly-owned vacant lots from 2006 to 2019 amounted to 45%. Since 2006, the lots have been disproportionately concentrated on the East Side of the city of Buffalo, primarily within five specific neighborhoods. These five neighborhoods are also represented within three Common Council districts. The significant increase in the number of publicly-owned vacant lots has not spread to areas of the city unaccustomed to the issue. In fact, it has doubled down on the same areas that have seen high numbers of vacancy for over a decade. Few communities have had any significant decrease in the number of vacant lots within their neighborhood and Common Council district. While some areas of the city might consider a publicly-owned vacant lot a rarity, other areas are used to the view.

Map 3

Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots, by Sector, 2019



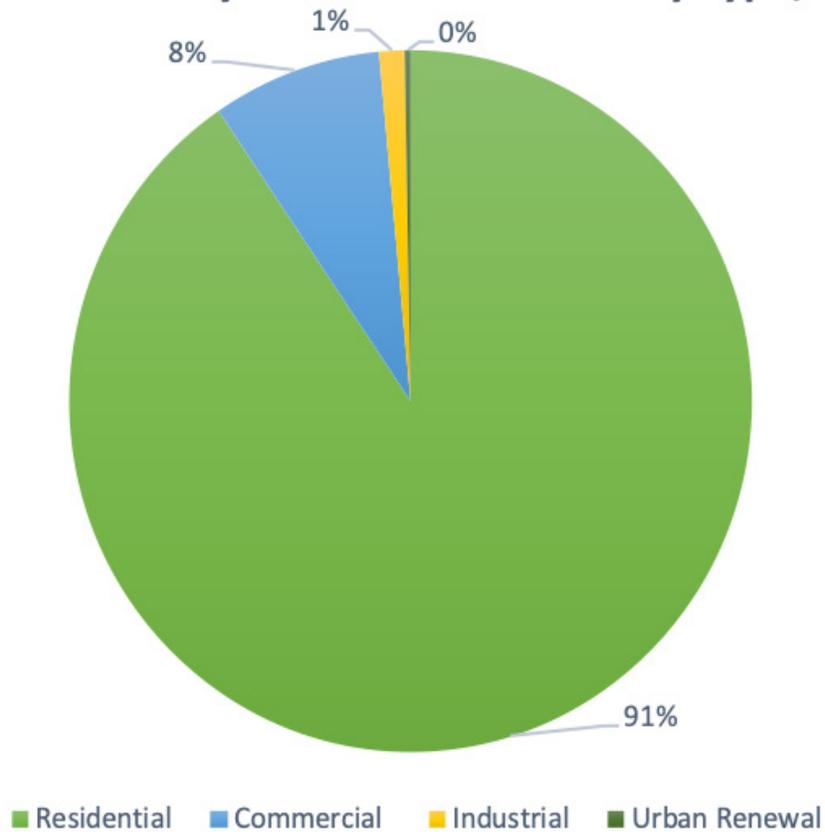
Inventory of Vacant Land

Vacant Lots in Buffalo						
Year	Residential	Commercial	Industrial	Urban Renewal	Total	
2019	13,718	2,616	492	32	16,858	
2012	13,119	2,769	456	30	16,374	
2006	11,043	2,748	488	24	14,303	
City of Buffalo Held, Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots in Buffalo*						
Year	Residential	Commercial	Industrial	Urban Renewal	Total	
2019	7,145	634	93	22	7,894	
2012	5,743	732	69	20	6,564	
2006	4,652	691	76	17	5,436	

*City of Buffalo Perfecting Title, Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency, Buffalo Economic Renaissance Corporation, Buffalo Neighborhood Revitalization Corporation, Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority

Figure 9

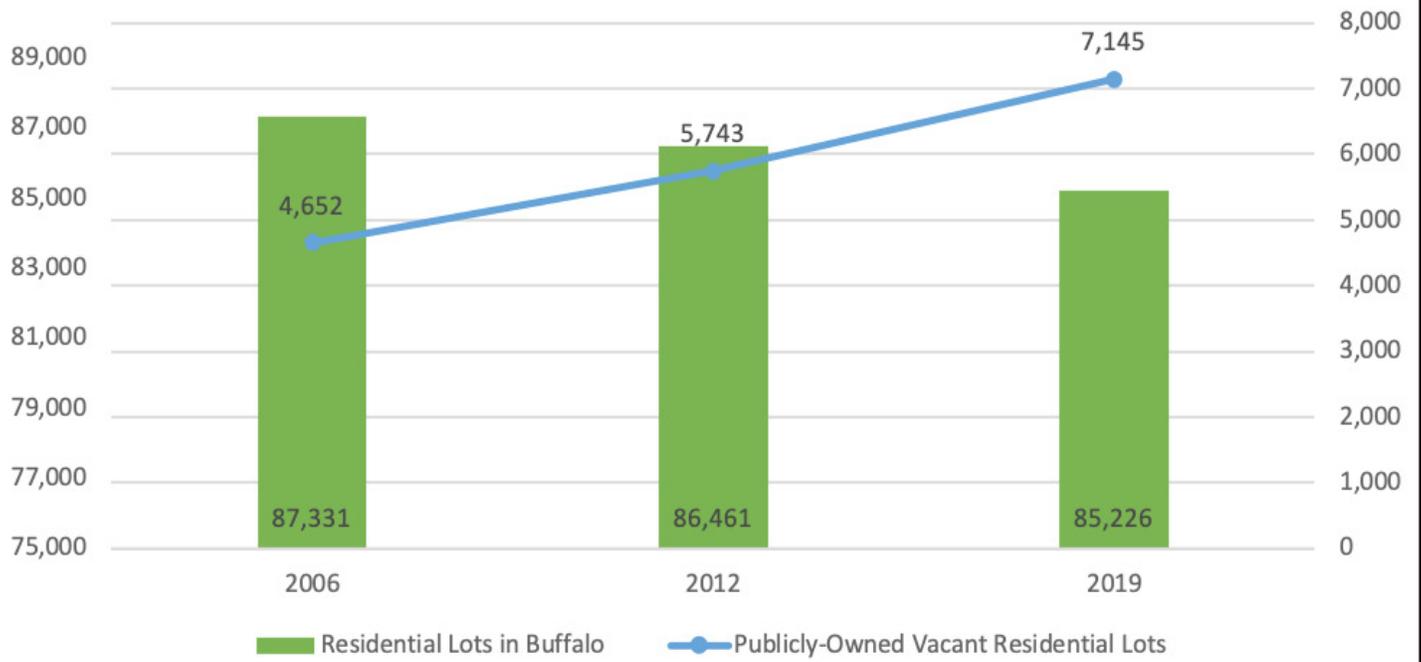
Buffalo's Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots by Type, 2019



Inventory of Vacant Land

Figure 10

Total Residential Lots Vs. Publicly-Owned Vacant Residential Lots



Inventory of Vacant Land

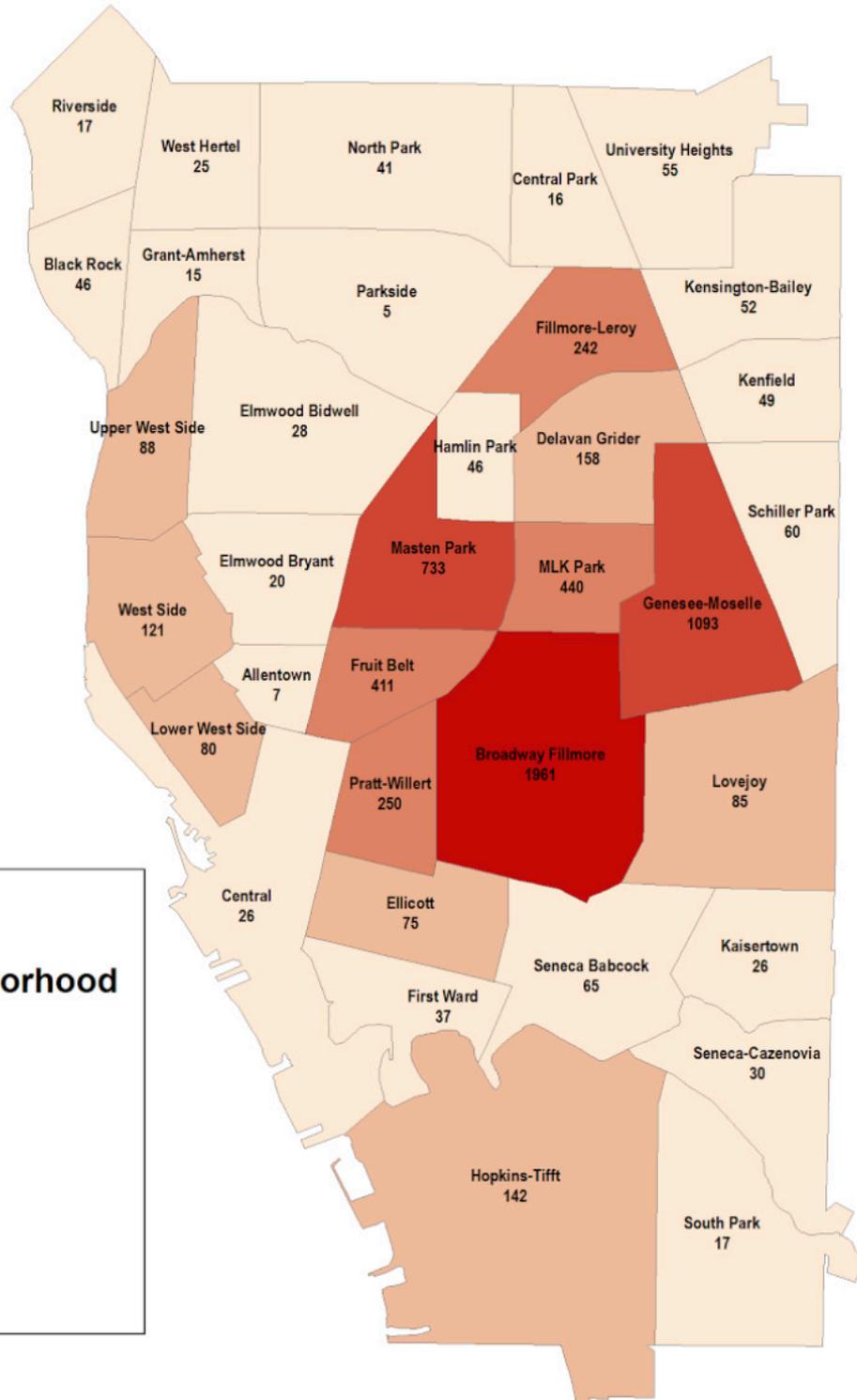
Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots, by Neighborhood

Table 3

Neighborhood	2006	2012	2019	Numerical Change	Percent Change
Allentown	11	7	7	-3	-37%
Blackrock	22	46	40	18	82%
Broadway-Fillmore	1,713	1,961	2,496	783	46%
Central	34	27	22	-12	-35%
Central Park	21	16	18	-3	-14%
Delevan-Grider	104	158	227	123	118%
Ellicott	120	75	87	-33	-28%
Elmwood-Bidwell	22	28	18	-4	-18%
Elmwood-Bryant	19	20	15	-4	-21%
Fillmore-Leroy	145	242	270	125	86%
First Ward	37	37	44	7	19%
Fruit Belt	409	411	374	-35	-9%
Genessee-Moselle	665	1,093	1,581	916	138%
Grant-Amherst	8	15	14	6	75%
Hamlin Park	33	46	52	19	58%
Hopkins-Tift	147	142	161	14	10%
Kaisertown	28	26	25	-3	-10%
Kenfield	35	49	71	36	103%
Kensington-Bailey	30	52	61	31	103%
Lovejoy	45	85	161	116	258%
Lower West Side	71	80	57	-14	-20%
Masten Park	661	733	852	191	29%
MLK Park	326	440	535	209	64%
North Park	42	41	41	-1	-2%
Parkside	6	5	2	-4	-67%
Pratt-Willert	308	250	254	-54	-18%
Riverside	10	17	17	7	70%
Schiller Park	32	60	72	40	125%
Seneca-Cazenovia	27	30	25	-2	-7%
Seneca-Babcock	49	65	67	18	37%
South Park	18	17	15	-3	-17%
University Heights	55	55	50	-5	-10%
Upper West Side	56	89	58	2	4%
West Hertel	26	25	22	-4	-15%
West Side	101	121	83	-18	-18%

Map 5

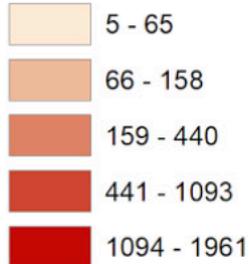
Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots, by Neighborhood, 2012



Legend

Lots per Neighborhood

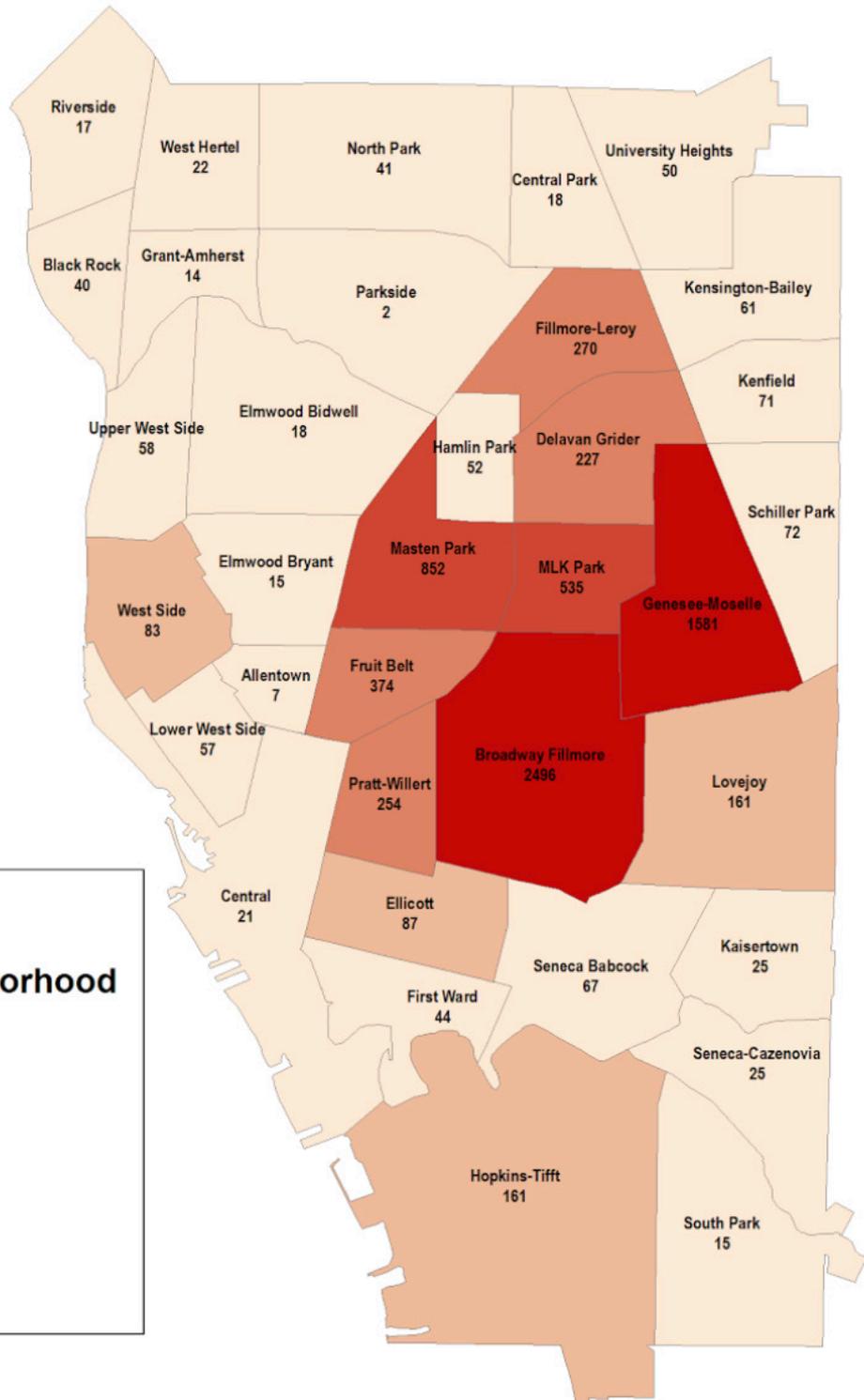
Count_



Inventory of Vacant Land

Map 6

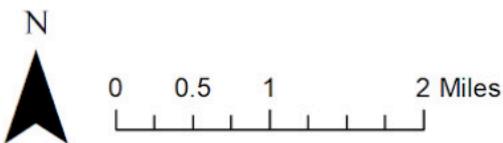
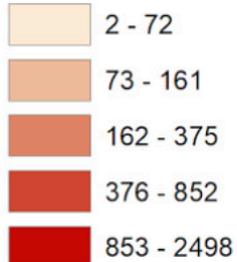
Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots, by Neighborhood, 2019



Legend

Lots per Neighborhood

Count_



Inventory of Vacant Land

Five Buffalo Neighborhoods with Highest Number of Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots, 2019

Neighborhood	2019 Lots	Percent of Total Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots	Acres Accumulated by Lots
Broadway-Fillmore	2,496	32%	202.25
Genessee-Moselle	1,581	20%	132.58
Masten Park	852	11%	74.96
MLK Park	535	7%	54.35
Fruit Belt	374	5%	26.35
Remaining 30 Neighborhoods	2,056	25%	435.38

Table 4

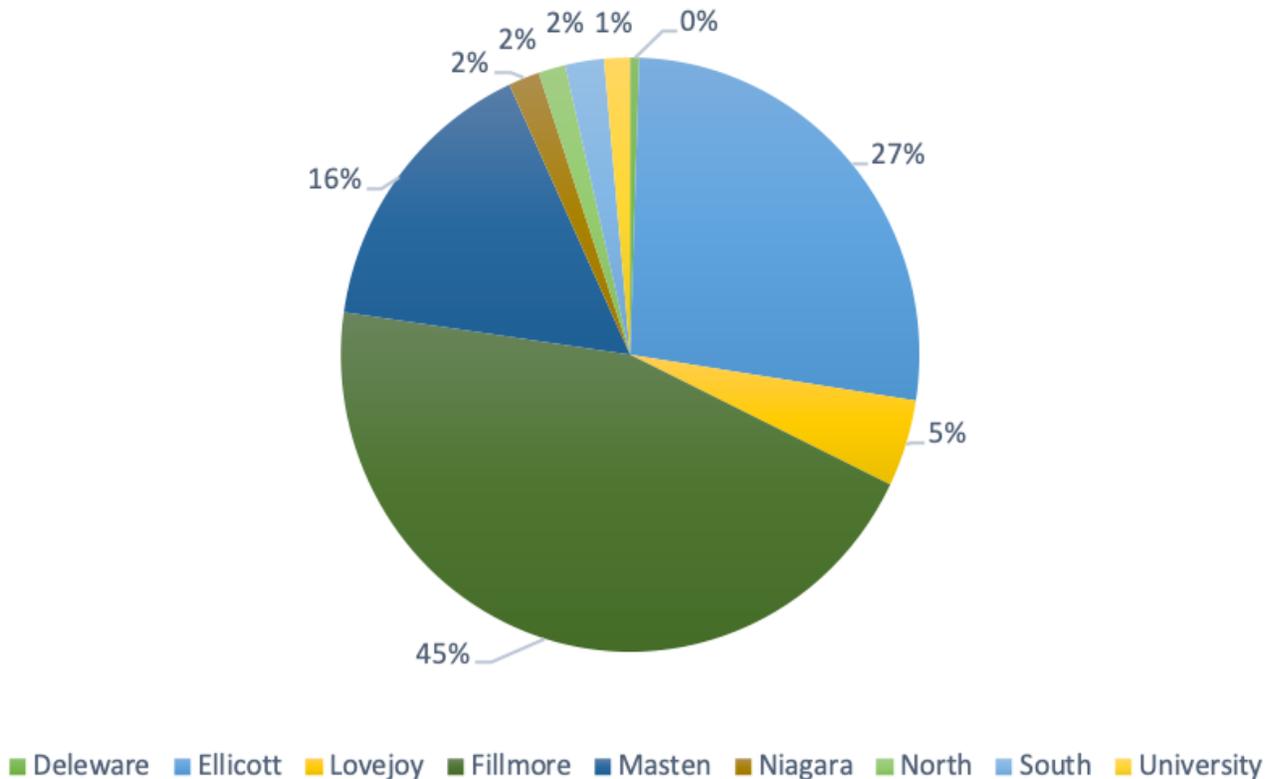
Table 5

Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots, by Buffalo Common Council District

District	2006	2012	2019
Deleware	42	42	40
Ellicott	1,951	1,988	2,129
Lovejoy	220	325	373
Fillmore	1,942	2,585	3,559
Masten	779	1,027	1,252
Niagara	153	193	137
North	96	143	119
South	159	154	171
University	94	107	114

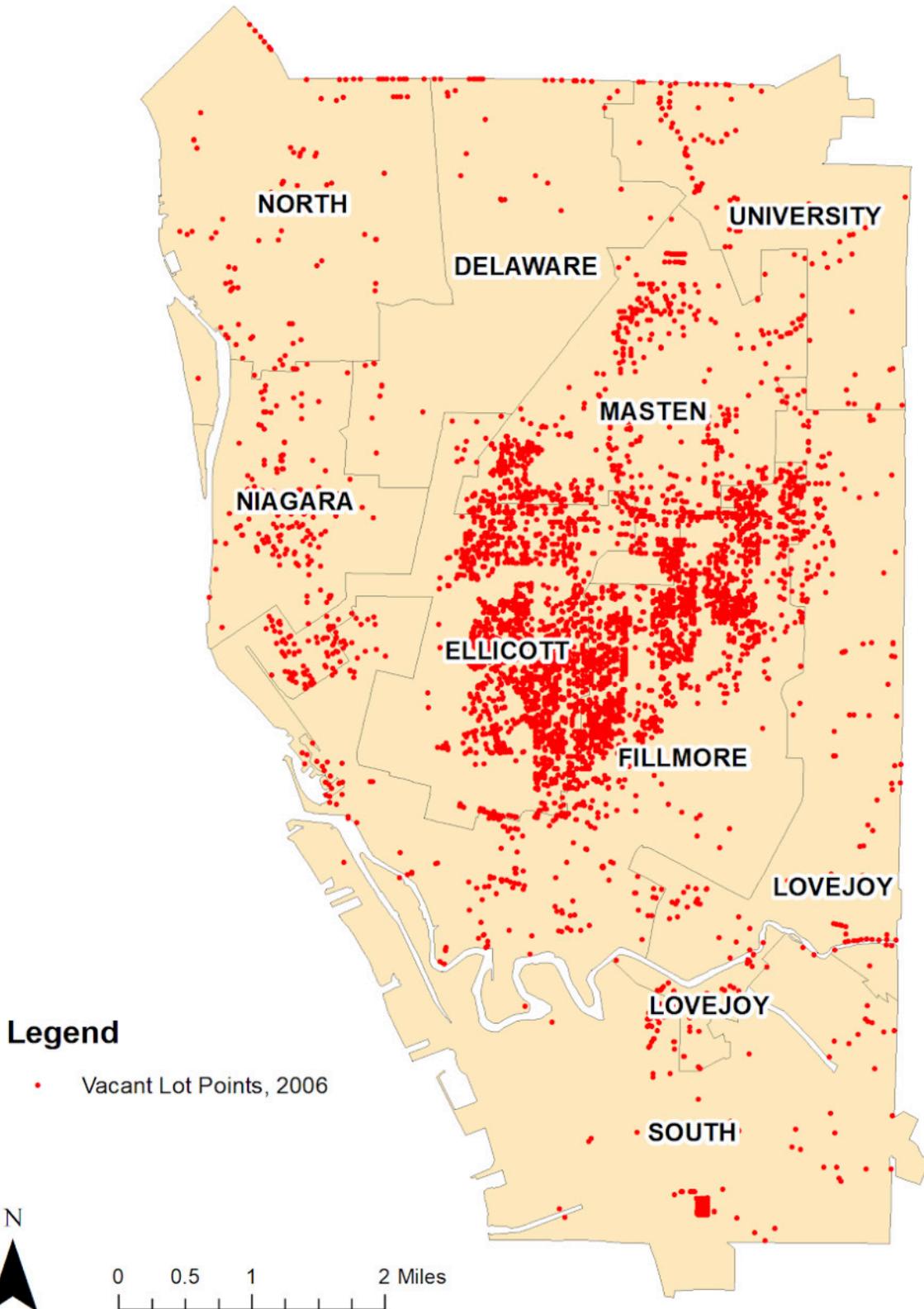
Figure 11

Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots, by Council District in 2019



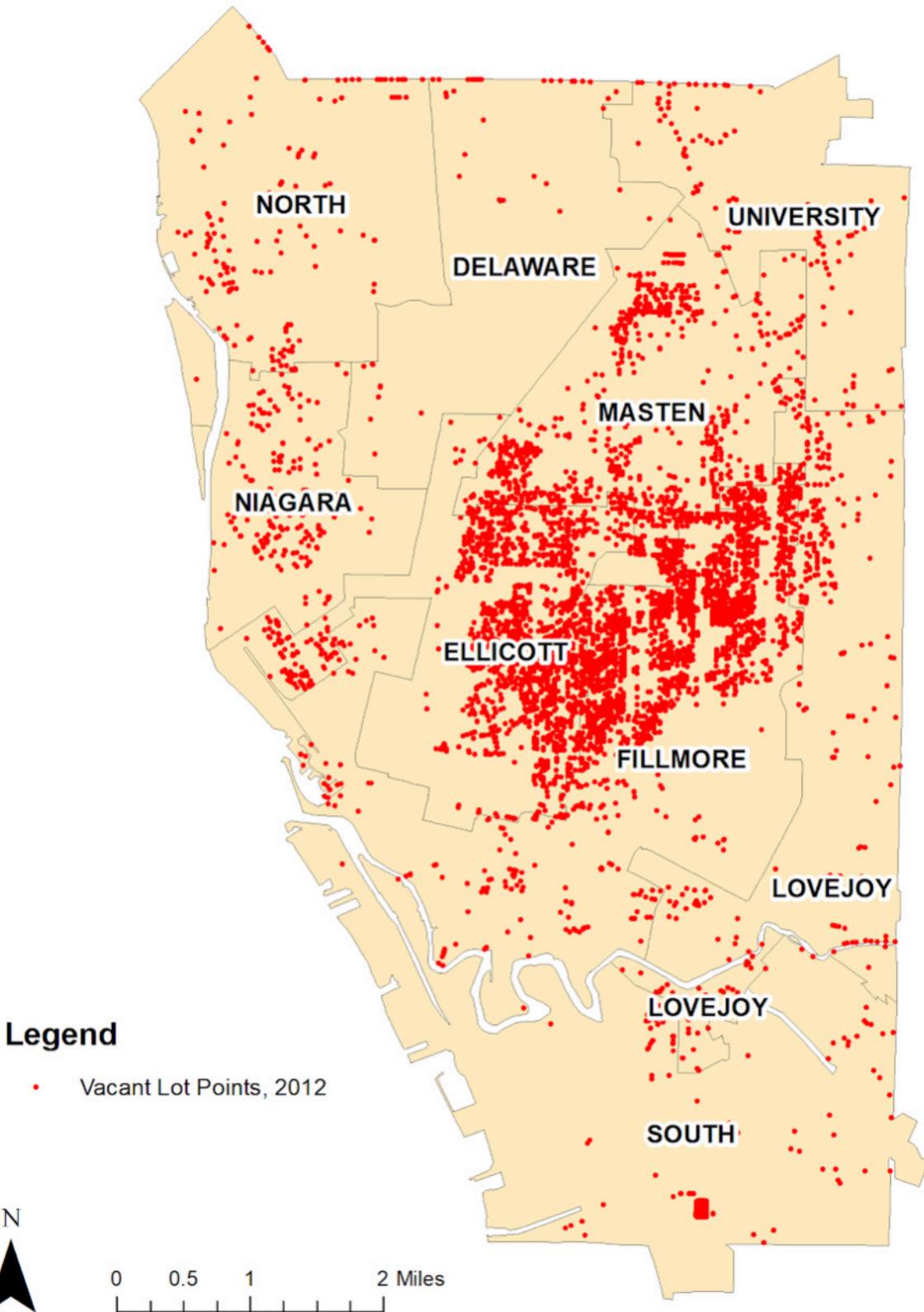
Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots, by Council District, 2006

Map 7



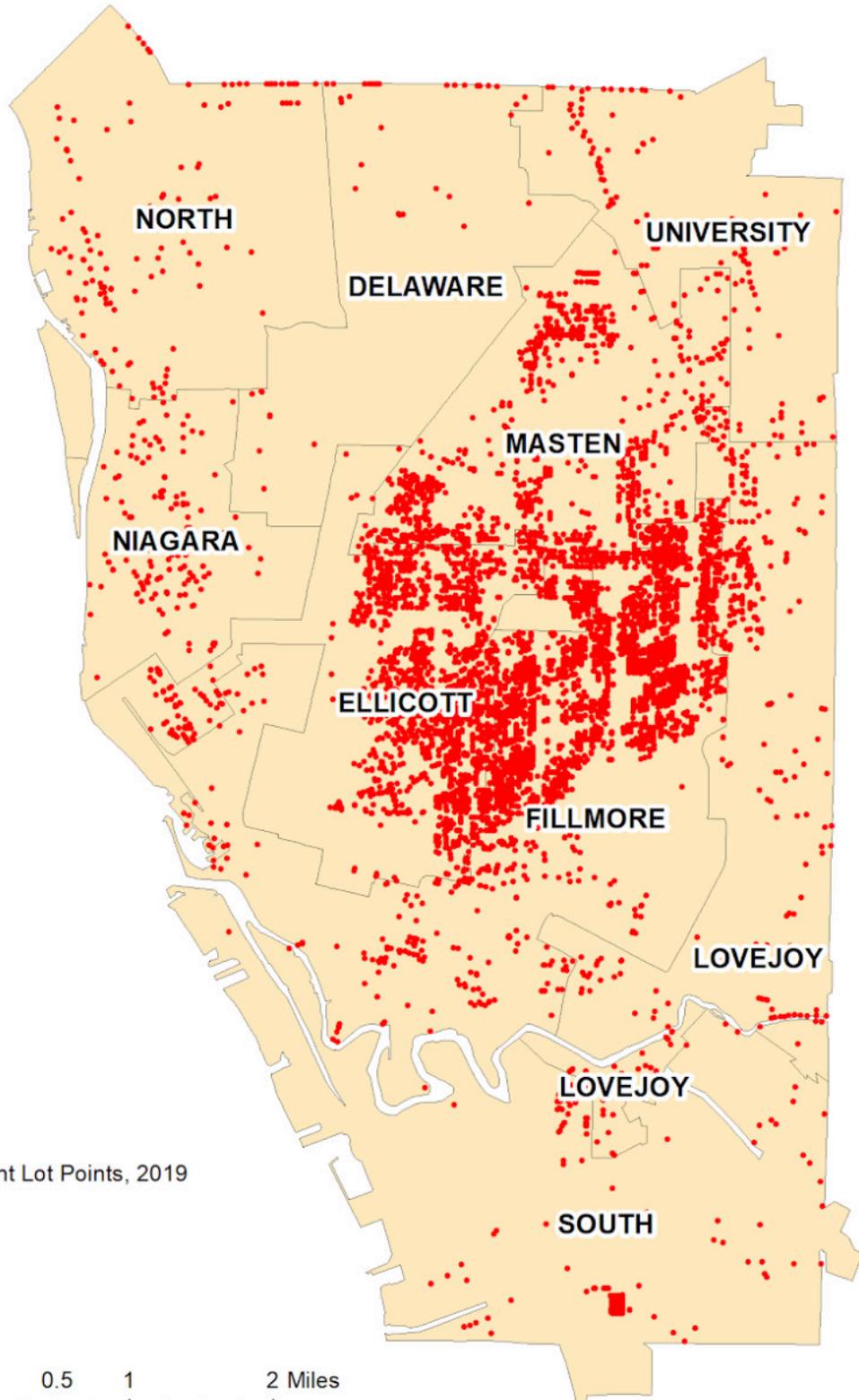
Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots, by Council District, 2012

Map 8



Publicly-Owned Vacant Lots, by Council District, 2019

Map 9



Legend

- Vacant Lot Points, 2019



0 0.5 1 2 Miles

The 21st century ushered in a time of new and bright ideas in Buffalo. Planning for more resourceful and desirable communities became a priority nationwide and some examples are seen in the plans executed in our region. *Queen City in the 21st Century* was the first comprehensive plan written for the city of Buffalo since the late 1970s and became a foundational piece for the future of the city. Following *Queen City in the 21st Century*, a number of plans, programs and strategies were written for the future of Buffalo. The *Urban Homestead Program*, *Blueprint Buffalo Action Plan*, and *Buffalo Housing Opportunity Strategy* among others, are important pieces that have played a part in the identifying and addressing publicly-owned vacant lots.

Queen City in the 21st Century (2006)

As of 2006, the City of Buffalo has been operating under *Queen City in the 21st Century: Buffalo's Comprehensive Plan*. Vacant lots and the opportunity that goes along with them is mentioned a few times in the plan. Under Part One: Challenges, Resources and Context, data and statistics from the early 2000s were used to highlight housing and vacancy issues. The plan states that in 2000, approximately 10,000 residential lots were determined to be vacant (Office of Strategic Planning [OSP], 2006). This number did not delineate from privately-owned or publicly-owned lots. These statistics were listed under 1.4 Community: Housing and Neighborhoods, which then continued to describe the affordable housing issue facing the City. Other issues mentioned included that the City “must demolish and redevelop vacant and abandoned properties that cannot be renovated or reconfigured” (OSP, 2006).

Under Part One: Challenges, Resources, and Context 1.5: Environment, vacant residential properties are mentioned as an opportunity for providing green infrastructure within the city (OSP, 2006). More specifically, the plan provides a map of parcels that are suggested to be used for green infrastructure over time. In the map itself, lots shown as opportunity are labelled as residential vacant, commercial vacant, industrial vacant, urban renewal and slum clearance, parking lots, junkyard, and billboards (OSP, 2006). The plan continues to describe the ultimate reality that many of these lots will be redeveloped for other uses.

In Part Two: Policies, Priorities and Programs 2.4 Rebuild Neighborhoods, the number of vacant lots is a desperate issue in need of attention (OSP, 2006). A plan consisting of four parts explains the creation of the Good Neighbors Planning Alliance (GNPA), economic development, demolition of current structures, and new construction of housing or rehabilitation (OSP, 2006). Under the GNPA, 11 planning alliances were created in order to plan for their communities. Plans created through these planning alliances were intended to be submitted to City of Buffalo departments for approval (OSP, 2006). GNPA plans were expected to consider several tasks. Of these tasks, included is the undertaking to “shed the excessive number of city-owned vacant properties.” Later mentioned, another goal of the GNPA plans is to “redevelop vacant land and property with infill housing or another appropriate use” (OSP, 2006).

The comprehensive plan again mentions the need to demolish structures and redevelop the remaining vacant land, under its Manage the Housing Stock section (OSP, 2006). Specific projections from this section include that 1,000 dilapidated or abandoned housing units will be demolished each year until overall housing vacancy reaches 5%. These projects were intended to meet annual and 10-year targets (OSP, 2006). When considering plan implementation, under community preservation goals, vacant land management was originally allotted \$3,800,250 annually (OSP, 2006).

Buffalo's Plans, Programs, and Strategies

Urban Homestead Plan (2005)

In 2005, the City of Buffalo Common Council approved amendments to the 1974 *Buffalo Urban Homestead Program* to put in place the *Urban Homestead Program*. This program's goal pertaining to publicly-owned vacant lots was to incentivize construction of new housing stock in the city of Buffalo (Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency [BURA], 2005). Homesteading individuals or families would be able to acquire publicly-owned vacant lots for the cost of \$1 plus closing fees. The *Urban Homestead Program* was to be overseen by the BURA in coordination OSP, as well as other partnerships within the City of Buffalo (BURA, 2005). The *Urban Homestead Program* encompassed vacant lots owned by the City of Buffalo, BURA, and HUD. For the lots to be eligible for homesteading, the City of Buffalo would work in conjunction with BURA, OSP and the City of Buffalo Planning Board to determine a list of lots eligible (BURA 2005). These lots needed to be in designated Urban Renewal or Comprehensive Code Enforcement (CCE) areas. CCE areas were created to further the Livable Communities Initiative, which focused on improvement of housing programs (OSP, 2006). Once lots were selected and added to the Homestead program list, potential homesteaders were able to submit plans for review to the BURA and OSP. Once approved, new homesteaders would need to comply with two requirements. A structure would need to be erected in 12 months of purchase and as a secondary requirement, inhabited within 36 months (BURA, 2005). Under the 2005 *Urban Homestead Program*, 179 vacant lots were transferred from City to private ownership between the years 2009 and 2014 (BURA, 2015).

In December of 2016, the City of Buffalo Common Council moved to terminate the previous Urban Renewal Areas that allowed for *Urban Homestead Program* designation within those areas (Buffalo Common Council, 2015). The resolution would allow for vacant lots already designated by the *Urban Homestead Program* to remain eligible but would not allow for new vacant lots to undergo determination by BURA or OSP. These previously designated properties were determined to remain eligible, until the current *Urban Homestead Program* was replaced with a new *Homestead Program* under the Buffalo Green Code (4-H). However, a new homesteading program has yet to be adopted by the City of Buffalo.



Blueprint Buffalo Action Plan (2006)

In 2006, *Blueprint Buffalo Action Plan* was completed as a collaborative plan between local forces and national researchers. Authors Joseph Schilling, of the Virginia Tech Metropolitan Institute and, Michael Clarke and Anthony Armstrong of Local Initiatives Support Corporation-Buffalo (LISC) worked together to create regional strategies and local tools for reclaiming vacant properties in the city and suburbs of Buffalo. With support from the National Vacant Property Campaign (NVPC), research and analysis were conducted to create a new perspective on vacant properties. Buffalo was selected by NVPC to receive funding for this plan, from a pool of 50 other applicant communities. The plan encompasses vacant property issues and opportunities in the surrounding suburbs of Cheektowaga, Amherst and Tonawanda. Local voices within the plan included the Amherst Industrial Development Agency, the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth, University at Buffalo (now the UB Regional Institute), as well as Partners for a Livable Western New York and the City of Buffalo Director of Strategic Planning.

The end goal of this action plan was to create a functional process in which local organizations and policymakers could use to remediate vacant properties within Buffalo and its region. Importance was placed on a regional approach, as opposed to smaller scale initiative in regards to the issues associated with vacant structures. For the purpose of this action plan, vacant properties included those with vacant structures standing, and entirely vacant lots absent a structure. *Blueprint Buffalo Action Plan* focused on the valuable opportunity that vacant properties provided the region, in terms of potentially new homes, businesses, and creative assets. In addition, they provide a shared interest for the region to become more collaborative in planning (Kromer et al., 2006).

As a product of research, outreach and collaboration, Blueprint Buffalo ultimately offered four leadership actions and four key strategies for Buffalo and the region to help begin remediation of vacant properties (Kromer et al., 2006). The action plans are specific policy based actions that can be implemented in the region, whereas key strategies are consistent concepts necessary to keep in mind with all policies in the region.

Leadership Actions (Kromer et al., 2006)

1. Launch a citywide vacant properties initiative led by the City of Buffalo Mayor and OSP
Blueprint Buffalo Action Plan outlines that in order to successfully combat the issues tied to vacant properties, a citywide initiative should be passed within six months to ensure success as a city. By not passing a citywide initiative, authors feared that Buffalo would fall to becoming reactive versus proactive. The initiative suggested that forces from City Hall direct the initiative by gathering with local partners and organizations could work in collaboration to create an effective initiative for all players involved.
2. Develop a first-tier suburban vacant property agenda led by officials and stakeholders in first tier suburbs
3. Create an Erie-Buffalo vacant Properties Coordinating Council as a way to collaborate and create working relationships within the region
Outlined by this strategy, is the difficulties that the city and region will face if there is an absence of a Vacant Property Coordinating Council. NVPC recommended that local partners LISC-Buffalo, the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth, University at Buffalo, and the Amherst Industrial Development Agency create the council. These three organizations would then be able to provide guidance and continue to grow the Vacant Properties Coordinating Council, to include other key representatives.
4. Establish Buffalo-Niagara as a Vacant Property Living Laboratory through policies put in place by the NYS Governor and local officials
This leadership action focused on the policy changes that would need to occur to allow for different organizations and researchers to find the best way forward for the Buffalo-Niagara region. Legislation would need to be passed and supported by local, state and federal officials in order to create a working environment allowing for unconventional and evolving processes pertaining to vacant property remediation.

Buffalo's Plans, Programs, and Strategies

Key Strategies (Kromer et al., 2006)

1. Regional Real Property Information System

A Regional Real System Information System would provide a database to Buffalo and Erie County with information on potential and current vacant properties. *Blueprint Buffalo Action Plan* stresses the importance of this tool as the cornerstone of progress for vacant properties. A well functioning Regional Real Property Information System would likely include broad access to the information listed. Information listed could range from property values, a condition survey and images.

2. Comprehensive Code Enforcement

Comprehensive Code Enforcement provides the City of Buffalo with tools and resources to address vacant properties in the city. By utilizing these resources as assets, the City of Buffalo could create a citywide vacant properties unit that would work specifically on code enforcement and nuisance abatement. This unit would act as a proactive force, as compared to the primarily reactive actions taken by the Clean and Seal Team, Abandoned Buildings and Demolition Team, and Buffalo Vacant Properties Maintenance Program.

3. Right-Sizing and Greening the City

Right-Sizing and Greening are strategies utilized by many cities with a similar situation. Vacancy has been combated in other Rust Belt cities by land banking and creating green infrastructure. With intent to remove dilapidated vacant structure, Buffalo should use these strategies to attract new residents to historically core neighborhoods. With a shrinking population, creation of a comprehensive green infrastructure plan would provide opportunity for vacant lots to be used as parks and greenways.

4. Greenfields and Brownfields

Greenfield and Brownfield redevelopment can be discouraging for many commercial businesses due to the processes required. By streamlining and creating a cohesive redevelopment program, Buffalo can encourage reuse of these vacant properties.

The *Blueprint Buffalo Action Plan* offered leadership actions and key strategies to the City of Buffalo and immediate areas that were intended to combat the number of vacant properties within. Along with management, inventory and remediation recommendations, there were systematic and oversight recommendations mentioned as well. Many recommended strategies and actions were intended to be implemented in conjunction with the current comprehensive plans and programs (Kromer et al., 2006). These programs ultimately were not implemented by the City of Buffalo OSP, Mayor's Office or other departments in taking measures to alleviate the number of vacant properties.

5-in-5 Demolition Plan (2007)

In 2007, Mayor Byron Brown's administration approved the *5-in-5 Demolition Plan*. The purpose of this initiative was to reduce the public health and safety threats to the community and create a marketable environment for neighborhood and economic development (Department of Administration, Finance, Policy and Urban Affairs [DAFPU], 2007). Brown used goals set by the *Queen City in the 21st Century Plan* to use as guidelines for this program, including the demolition of 1,000 vacant units per year or 500 vacant or dilapidated structures per year (DAFPU, 2007). Ultimately, the program sought to decrease the 15.7% vacancy rate in 2000 to 5% in 5 years (DAFPU, 2007). The *5-in-5 Demolition Plan* projected that it would use state, federal and city funds in the process, while also lowering the cost of demolitions overall (DAFPU, 2007). The 2007 *5-in-5 Demolition Program's* overall goal was to demolish 5,000 vacant structures in 5 years. Over the last decade, the *5-in-5 Demolition Plan* was successful in the demolition aspect of this initiative. However, the abundance of vacant lots created have yet to be repurposed, undermining the actual intent of the program.

Homestead Plan (unadopted 2015)

Under the adoption of the 2016 *Buffalo Green Code*, BURA developed a new version of a homestead program in 2015 that was intended to be adopted with the *Buffalo Green Code*. Like the 2005 *Urban Homestead Plan*, the purpose was to reduce abandonment, promote affordability, and decrease inventory of publicly-owned lots (BURA, 2015). In order to achieve these goals, homestead boundaries were to be redrawn to reflect a more current market and neighborhood makeup (BURA, 2015).

While introducing the program's purpose, BURA stated that the City of Buffalo had spent close to \$100 million in demolition projects, and at that time in 2015 had about 6,200 vacant lots on hand (BURA, 2015). The plan acknowledges that the previous version encouraged reuse of lots, while also describing the need to expand on the program to create more reuse, development, and lowered vacancy rates. The challenges in following state law pertaining to Fair Market Value (FMV) sales has left the City of Buffalo with many vacant lots in its inventory, which also costs the City of Buffalo maintenance and potential tax dollars (BURA, 2015).

Under the 2015 *Homestead Plan* many residential lots would have gained homesteading eligibility. If any residential lot acquired by BURA or the City of Buffalo through the foreclosure process did not receive an offer to purchase from a qualified buyer within 6 months of public acquisition, this lot would become eligible for the *Homestead Plan* (BURA, 2015). One stipulation was that these lots also could not be designated for a public purpose land banking (BURA, 2015). Private individuals and non-profits were eligible to obtain vacant lots, pending the submission of building plans to the City of Buffalo. Construction on the lot required completion within 18 months of purchase. To prevent individuals from purchasing through the *Homestead Plan* in order to flip properties for profit, the plan would require that the purchaser occupied the structure for a minimum of three years after completed construction (BURA, 2015).

With the Side-Lot acquisition program in the 2015 *Homestead Plan*, homeowners would have been able to purchase adjacent vacant lots to their owned structure (BURA, 2015). The purpose of this part of the plan was to lower costs and efforts required by the City to maintain these lots. If a FMV offer were to be placed before a homestead transfer was completed, the FMV sale would take precedence (BURA, 2015). Essentially the 2015 *Homestead Plan* would have expanded on the 2005 Urban Homestead Program to promote access to homeownership, decrease abundance of blighted lots, and help to minimize City of Buffalo responsibilities and costs pertaining to vacant lots.

This plan was not adopted by the City of Buffalo, and therefore was not recognized with the 2016 *Buffalo Green Code*. Failure to implement the 2015 *Homestead Plan* subsequently meant that the 2005 *Urban Homestead Program* was no longer in effect for the City of Buffalo. This being due to the resolution passed by the Buffalo Common Council in 2015, suspending the 2005 program with the intention of the 2015 program being adopted along with the *Buffalo Green Code*.

Buffalo's Plans, Programs, and Strategies

Buffalo Housing Opportunity Strategy (2017)

Buffalo Housing Opportunity Strategy was published in 2017 and prepared by czb LLC on behalf of the City of Buffalo. City departments involved in the strategy included the Mayor's Office, OSP, and BURA. Many people serving on the steering committee included representatives of local organizations. The primary intentions of this report included better understanding the differing housing markets within Buffalo, and how to move towards encouraging demand and affordability in all neighborhoods in the coming years.

Three main findings arose from the *Buffalo Housing Opportunity Strategy*. First, the rebound in the housing market is legitimate, but is restricted to a small number of neighborhoods in Buffalo (czb LLC, 2017). Second, unaffordability issues in Buffalo are not caused by housing costs, but by low income levels (czb LLC, 2017). Lastly, inequities that have been present in Buffalo for decades are still holding the city back from potential success and overall sustainability (czb LLC, 2017).

Buffalo Housing Opportunity Strategy outlined neighborhood level trends and housing conditions based on five different levels of demand in the city. Neighborhood markets facing the lowest levels of demands were also noted to have a high number of vacant lots when conditions were assessed. All markets labelled low demand were located east of Main Street, with the absolute lowest demand neighborhoods being three contiguous neighborhoods in the center of the East Side (czb LLC, 2017). For these three neighborhood markets, 49% of the residential lots were determined to be vacant. Confidence in the market and investments toward housing were cited as obstacles seen in these neighborhoods. The presumption is that with investment in just a singular home, there may be little to no return on that investment due to its location.

Interventions to improve market conditions were offered for each level of demand. Focused and strategic resource allocation to specific blocks was suggested, allowing surrounding blocks to feed off the improving conditions (czb LLC, 2017). In addition, coordinating partnerships to support the work being done would create an inclusive environment. Community land trusts were included in all market demands to create long lasting affordability and sustainability (czb LLC, 2017). Realistic outcome targeted for low demand markets specifically stabilizing and managing vacant lots, and clean and green programs. This included passive and active management strategies.



What's Next for Buffalo-Niagara? (2018)

What's Next for Buffalo-Niagara was the product of an event held by University at Buffalo School of Architecture and Planning in late 2018. The event was framed as a look towards the future of the region, and heard the voices of almost 80 professionals. Attendees included government officials, planners, economic stakeholders, and experts in a wide range of fields including community development, environmental sustainability, and social justice (Hovey, 2020). This event was sparked by an idea of former Mayor of Buffalo Anthony Masiello, and became a workshop of professionals hosted by University at Buffalo School of Architecture and Planning.

Emerging ideas from the group of professionals included a number of different topics. Overall, there was a call for working together to create better outcomes. Specifically, the need for more collaborative processes and structures to create more efficient regional development, economic development, and housing and neighborhood development (Hovey, 2020). There was a call for more equitable and fair considerations, along with increased participation throughout the region. Ideas were discussed as regional needs while groups were created based on their field of expertise. These groups included economy and employment, environment and energy, land use, transportation and metropolitan form, housing and neighborhoods, and finally governance and civic culture (Hovey, 2020).

Expertise groups focused on housing and neighborhoods came up with a few more specific goals in which vacant land opportunities were mentioned. Building new infill homes on the East Side, creating an ecosystem of tools including community land trusts and land banking, and community led development were all mentioned when discussing Buffalo's over 7,000 vacant lots (Hovey, 2020). As the *Buffalo Housing Opportunity Strategy* mentioned, the fact that only 12 of 50 Buffalo neighborhood markets are considered viable was a concern of this group (Hovey, 2020). To work towards more viable markets and neighborhoods, the creation of community councils was suggested in addition to the other strategies.



Summary of Buffalo's Plans, Programs, and Strategies

Buffalo's approach to the number of publicly-owned vacant lots has gained national and local attention long before the years identified in the inventory. With the *Urban Homestead Program*, *Queen City in the 21st Century*, and *Blueprint Buffalo Action Plan* all being written or implemented before 2006, there has been a long-standing question around what to make of the vacant lots within Buffalo. Changing policies from City Hall in the *Urban Homestead Program* and *5-in-5 Demolition Program*, analysis of the issue within the *Blueprint Buffalo Action Plan*, and identification of other weaknesses in Buffalo's housing market in the *Buffalo Housing Opportunity Strategy* have also contributed to the discussion of vacant lots in the city. *What's Next for Buffalo-Niagara* is an update of what professionals in the area and national researchers have come to make of the obstacle, or opportunity, of publicly-owned vacant lots. While many programs and plans have mentioned or addressed this abundance of lots, there is no clear and defined plan created specifically for the process of acquiring, reusing and planning for vacant lots presented from the City of Buffalo.

Buffalo's Plans, Programs, and Strategies

Map 10

Urban Renewal, CARE, & CCE Areas

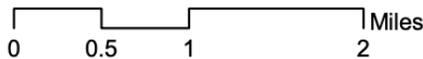


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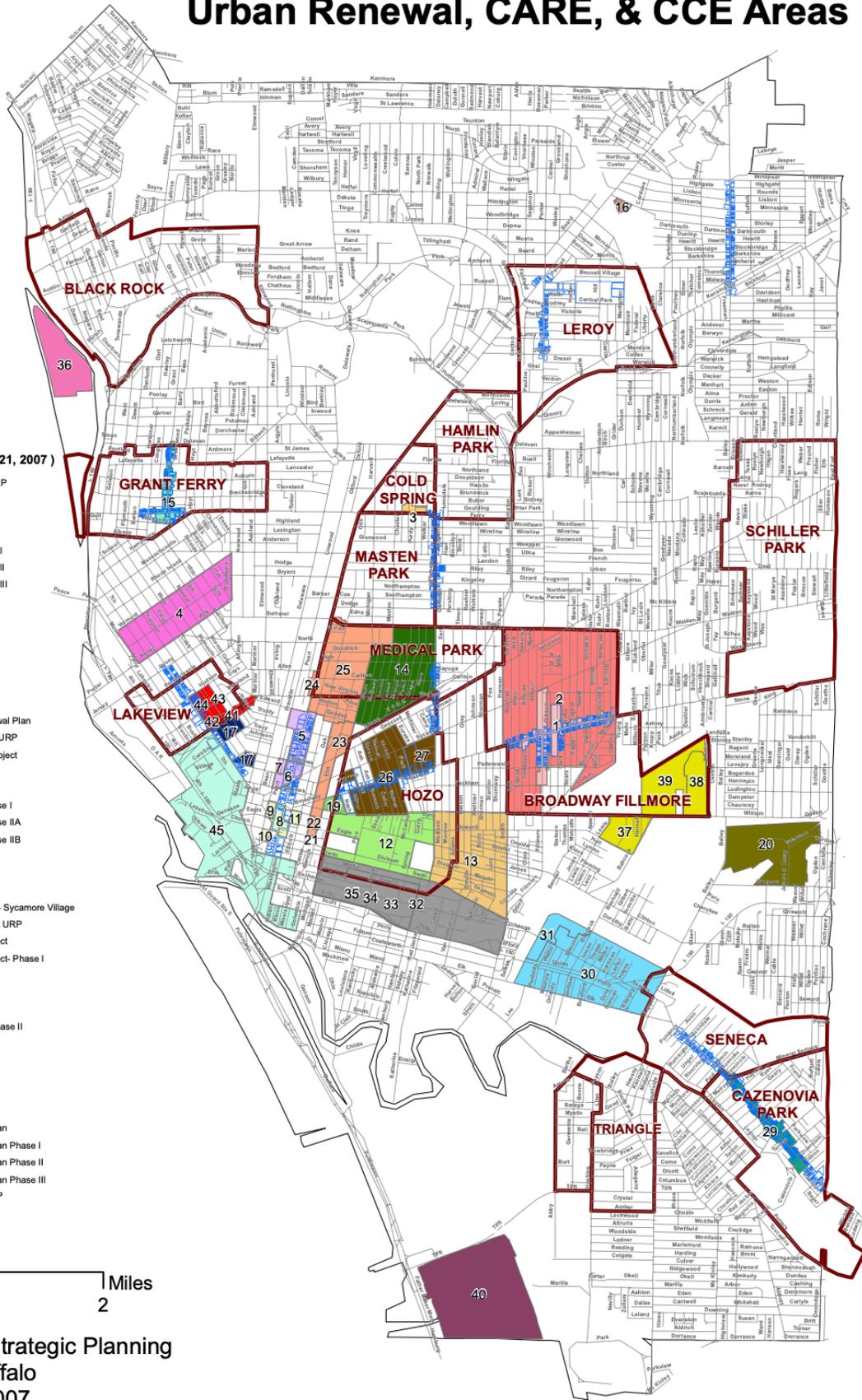
- CARE
- CCE
- City of Buffalo Streets

Urban Renewal Area (as of June 21, 2007)

- 1-Broadway-Fillmore Commercial Area URP
- 2-Broadway-Fillmore NDP
- 3-Cold Spring Urban Renewal Plan
- 4-Connecticut St. Urban Renewal Plan
- 5-Downtown Entertainment District Phase I
- 6-Downtown Entertainment District Phase II
- 7-Downtown Entertainment District Phase III
- 8-Downtown Renewal Phase I
- 9-Downtown Renewal Phase II
- 10-Downtown Renewal Phase III
- 11-Downtown Renewal Phase IV
- 12-Elicott Redevelopment Project URP
- 13-Emslie NDP
- 14-Fruit Belt NDP
- 15-Grant-Ferry Market Place Urban Renewal Plan
- 16-LaSalle Revitalization Project Phase II URP
- 17-Lower West Side: Georgia Prospect Project
- 19-Michigan Street Preservation Area
- 20-New Buffalo Industrial Park URP
- 21-Oak-Michigan Industrial Corridor - Phase I
- 22-Oak-Michigan Industrial Corridor - Phase IIA
- 23-Oak-Michigan Industrial Corridor - Phase IIB
- 24-Oak St. URP Amendment
- 25-Oak St. Redevelopment Project URP
- 26 -Pratt-William Revitalization Area URP
- 27 -Pratt-William Revitalization Area URP - Sycamore Village
- 29-Seneca-Cazenovia Commercial District URP
- 30-Seneca Babcock Redevelopment Project
- 31-Seneca Babcock Redevelopment Project- Phase I
- 32-South Elicott NDP
- 33-South Elicott NDP
- 34-South Elicott NDP - Phase II
- 35-South Elicott Urban Renewal Plan - Phase II
- 36-Squaw Island North Area
- 37-Thruway Industrial Park - Pilot Project
- 38-Thruway Industrial Park Phase I
- 39-Thruway Industrial Park Phase II
- 40-Union Ship Canal Project Area
- 41-Virginia St. Corridor Urban Renewal Plan
- 42-Virginia St. Corridor Urban Renewal Plan Phase I
- 43-Virginia St. Corridor Urban Renewal Plan Phase II
- 44-Virginia St. Corridor Urban Renewal Plan Phase III
- 45-Waterfront Redevelopment Project URP



Office of Strategic Planning
City of Buffalo
July 18, 2007



Our Professor, Dr. Jason Knight, has conducted extensive research on the City's tax foreclosure process, *in rem* auction, and the laws guiding the disposition of publicly-owned properties. This section was prepared with his assistance and takes considerable material from two reports he prepared. The first is titled "Assessment of Tax Delinquency and Foreclosure Eligibility, Erie County, New York" and was prepared for the Buffalo Erie Niagara Land Improvement Corporation. The second, a forthcoming publication by the Partnership for the Public Good, is tentatively titled "How the City of Buffalo Can Transfer Properties to Non-Profit Organizations for Less than Fair Market Value."

Tax Foreclosure and Auction

The City of Buffalo is its own foreclosing governmental unit. As such, it has total control over the collection of unpaid City taxes and the power to foreclose on eligible tax-delinquent properties. In order for a property to be eligible for foreclosure, it must be delinquent for two years before the City can begin the process of foreclosure. The City of Buffalo prepares an annual list of tax delinquent and foreclosure-eligible properties from which it notifies property owners of the City's intent to foreclose on the property, or re-notifies owners of prior adjourned foreclosures that it again will foreclose upon. Owners are provided a legally-mandated time period under which they can pay the back taxes and therefore avoid their property going into the auction. For an owner to keep their property from going to auction, the delinquent taxes must be paid. The owner can set up a payment plan with the City if unable to redeem the full amount of unpaid taxes. Each property is listed at the auction with the taxes and fees owed, which may include property taxes, sewer fees, user fees, and public utility bills (Baird, 2011). Owners who forego making tax payment have their property placed in the annual *in rem* auction, which the City of Buffalo holds every October to sell tax delinquent, foreclosure-eligible properties to the public, including residential structures and vacant lots. A person or organization interested in property acquisition through the auction may go online and view the inventory of properties that will be available at the auction. The auction inventory is available on the City of Buffalo Division of Real Estate website. This list is frequently updated as properties become available. Properties are organized to be auctioned by the tax district. Tax districts 1 through 5 are auctioned on the first day of the annual auction, districts 6 through 10 on the second day, and 11 through 14 on the last day. For a potential buyer, the expectation is to put down a deposit of 20% or \$500, whichever number is greater. The bidding process typically starts at \$500 for vacant lots and \$1,000 for lots with homes.

A property auction ends with one of four possible outcomes. First, a property attracts bids and is sold to a private party. Second, a property does not attract any bids and the foreclosure is adjourned, giving the owner another year to redeem the taxes and avoid foreclosure. Third, the property could go without any bids and the City could choose to strike the property to itself, which means the City acquires the property. Lastly, since the formation of the Land Bank, it can acquire properties at the auction using what is referred to as its legislative "super bid" authority, which allows it to acquire the property for the value of the unpaid back taxes.

The City, therefore, has acquired the vast majority of the vacant lots it currently holds title to due to striking the property to itself when there are no bidders at the auction.

Land Disposition

Typically, a local government is bound by state law as it relates to the sale of publicly-owned property. Generally, the NY Constitutions so-called "Gift and Loan" clause, usually referred to as "the gift of public funds" law, guides the sales of properties. The law seeks to protect the public from the misuse of government funds, assets, or services. The purpose of the clause is to ensure that "municipal resources are used only for public purposes" and not benefit private interests.

Local governments often pass a local law that sets forth how it will sell publicly-owned properties, keeping in mind the requirements and purpose of the "gift and loans" clause. In Buffalo, Chapter C, Article 27 – Real Estate, of the City Charter appears to set forth how the City undertakes the sale of publicly-owned properties. Specifically, §27-13 Sale or Lease of Property for Development or Redevelopment, states:

"Real property or any interest therein and appurtenances thereto belonging to or in the control of the city, necessary for or incidental to the clearance, replanning, development or redevelopment, reconstruction and rehabilitation in substandard and insanitary areas, or for urban renewal, may be sold or leased for a term not exceeding ninety-nine years, or otherwise disposed of, to any person, firm or corporation at public auction or by sealed bids at the highest marketable price..."

Currently, based on Dr. Knight's and our class' discussions with a number of nonprofit organizations, the City's position on selling properties to nonprofits for less than fair market value falls into one or more of the following justifications:

- All properties must be sold at fair market value per NYS and local laws
- The market is robust, and all properties have a market value and will be sold for the appraised value (because the City is prohibited from selling for less than fair market value)
- The Homestead Program no longer exists but properties formerly eligible remain eligible but are sold at the discretion of the City
- Nonprofits are not homeowners and therefore cannot acquire Homestead-eligible properties

Outside of selling properties for fair market value via sealed bids or auction, the City historically, sold properties through its now-defunct Homestead Plan. Under NYS Urban Development Law, the City can designate areas of the city as urban renewal areas, within which it can sell public properties for less than fair market value. In doing so, it requires the passage of an urban renewal plan by the Council. In Buffalo, this has taken the form of an adopted Urban Renewal Plan that incorporates a Homestead Plan.

The history of homesteading dates to at least 1974, when the City Common Council approved an Urban Renewal Plan for the Community Wide Urban Renewal Demonstration Program, formalized as the Community-Wide Urban Renewal Homestead Program. In 2005, the Homestead Plan was revised and updated.

Buffalo's Tax Foreclosure and Land Disposition

Along a parallel track as it created the GreenCode, the City drafted and published a new Homestead Plan in October 2015, with significant input from the public. This updated plan would replace the 2005 Homestead Plan and be adopted with the GreenCode. It would include the termination of all existing Urban Renewal Plan with the only exception being the 1974 Community-Wide Homestead Urban Renewal Plan. Further, the plan would revise the Homestead Plan's 2005 boundaries (URA, CCE, CARE) and allow homesteading of vacant structures throughout the city. Additionally, and importantly for nonprofit affordable housing organizations, it would significantly expand the areas where new construction could be undertaken. The plan explicitly states "Prospective homeowners and non-profits will be eligible to homestead vacant lots for new construction in areas designated for housing under the city's Unified Development Ordinance."

However, between the publication of the draft Homestead Plan in October 2015 and the adoption of the GreenCode on December 27, 2016, the City was unable or unwilling to adopt the publicly supported Homestead Plan alongside the GreenCode. Instead, during the Council session where the GreenCode was adopted, the Common Council instead approved the termination and repeal of the Urban Renewal areas while resolving that in the "absence of all urban renewal areas, the Council shall continue to recognize the Urban Homestead Program and all previously (sic) parcels determined to be Homestead-Eligible," further resolving that the current (2005) Homestead Program would remain in place until a new Homestead Plan was approved.

However, based on Dr. Knight's research and communication with community stakeholders and housing organizations, it appears the City is not processing any applications submitted for remaining Homestead-eligible properties, effectively eradicating the program.

Summary of Tax Foreclosure and Land Sales

Ultimately, the City's tax foreclosure auction remains a critical pathway for the growing number of vacant parcels current within the City's ownership. As the City's housing market, prior to the current covid-19 outbreak, rebounded from the housing foreclosure crisis, properties making it to the auction continued to decrease, as it did the number of properties the City struck to itself. However, the fact remains that more than 7,000 publicly-owned vacant lots remain in the City's ownership. The disposition of those lots, especially to nonprofit organizations seeking to address critical community needs, has been complicated by the deactivation of the City's homestead plan and a move to a process where all properties are sold for fair market value. However, laws, policies, and strategies do exist to allow the City to sell for less than fair market value, which currently does not seem to be something the City is interested in. The unadopted Homestead program would appear to be a valuable policy for the sale of lots to nonprofit organizations.

Case Studies in the Rust Belt

Legacy cities throughout the United States, like Buffalo, have experienced a decrease in urban population and consequently, an overabundance of vacant lots in the last 30 to 70 years. As we have laid out in the previous section “History of Buffalo”, these cities share distinct historical and economic similarities that caused population loss, vacant properties, mass demolitions, and finally, a surplus of vacant lots. These cities, known as Rust Belt cities, economically flourished through manufacturing and other industries that eventually were phased out by changes in national economic conditions. Compounding these circumstances, suburban sprawl encouraged urban dwellers to seek homeownership outside of the city causing a high rate of population loss within these cities. Rust Belt cities that share this common story include Buffalo, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Detroit.

Rapid population loss resulted in many uninhabited urban properties which seemed to serve no purpose but created blight and disinvestment in the neighborhoods in which they were prevalent. There is a population that remained in these blighted neighborhoods for they lacked the financial resources required for residential mobility to the suburbs. The households that remain today in neighborhoods with an overabundance of vacant lots are disproportionately impoverished compared to each regions’ total population. In short, concentrated poverty and vacant lots coexist and compound the negative circumstances that enabled these challenges to multiply. This is the common theme among Rust Belt cities that face the challenge of utilizing vacant lots as a community asset in areas of concentrated poverty.

The cities included in the case studies section are evaluated for their efforts towards vacant lot reuse and include the following elements: local government role, vacant lot policy, green infrastructure plan, land bank, nonprofit organization, guide, and a best practice project.

Cleveland

In 2008, there were approximately 3,300 acres of vacant land, over 7,000 vacant lots, and about 15,000 vacant buildings in the city of Cleveland. Although the reuse of vacant lots has been outpaced by the creation of vacant lots, the city of Cleveland has developed and prioritized the reuse of vacant lots in the past few years. After each demolition occurs, the vacant lot becomes an asset for the city, and considered a resource for future development as the population stabilizes and progress is made toward revitalization. The Re-imagining a More Sustainable Cleveland working group, a part of Cleveland Neighborhood Progress, was formed to develop strategic efforts to put vacant lots to productive use. This includes short-term strategies to stabilize neighborhoods while permanent development is considered, and long-term reuse strategies are planned for areas in the city where demand is limited (Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, 2008).

Cleveland: Local Government Role

The city of Cleveland implements its Land Reutilization Program in order to acquire and hold vacant lots and then sell the vacant lots to individuals, private developers, and nonprofit organizations for reuse. The goal of the city’s program is to have a streamlined pathway in place that encourages redevelopment of publicly-owned land by nonprofit organizations and others in an efficient and transparent process. The city of Cleveland’s Parks Maintenance Division is also responsible for the maintenance of vacant lots throughout the city from April through October. This maintenance program helps to ensure that the vacant lots that still exist are not a nuisance or creating visible blight in neighborhoods (City of Cleveland, n.d.).

Cleveland: Vacant Lot Policy

Cleveland has a transparent vacant lot disposition policy that provides ample opportunity to reuse vacant lots. The city of Cleveland's Land Reutilization (Land Bank) Program and the Cuyahoga Land Bank are responsible for acquisition of vacant lots, demolition of vacant properties, and a streamlined process that encourages vacant lot reuse projects (City of Cleveland, n.d.). Demolition of vacant properties is necessary to improve safety, neighborhood aesthetics, increase surrounding property values, and create an opportunity for vacant lot reuse. The Cuyahoga Land Bank has partnered with deed holders which allows the land bank to increase the number of total properties demolished annually (Cuyahoga Land Bank, n.d.). Vacant lots that remain are held for potential development, transferred to the municipality, cleaned and greened, or reused for a purpose that aligns with community priorities.

Cleveland: Green Infrastructure Plan

The Complete and Green Street Policy is a green infrastructure initiative that was developed by the Cleveland Heights City Council. The policy exemplifies a prioritized effort to improve the economic, environmental and social sustainability of Cleveland. It does so through efficient, green stormwater solutions applied to the reuse of vacant lots. The local policy of green strategies has had positive outcomes in reduction of waste, stormwater runoff and energy consumption. The policy also includes a goal to improve the livability and environmental needs of communities while also achieving goals to reduce the amount of runoff water that enters storm sewers. Green infrastructure policies are also included in the city of Cleveland's Master Plan (Jewell, 2018).

Cleveland: Land Bank

The city of Cleveland's land bank is its Land Reutilization Program and is designed to acquire vacant land and market it to individuals, developers, and non-profit organizations for redevelopment. The goal is to contribute to the economic, social and environmental betterment of the City through redevelopment of publicly-owned land. The land bank application process ensures that each vacant lot is transferred to responsible parties committed to restoring vacant lots to productive use. Interested parties must submit a written application to the land bank office and outline the details of their goals. Each land bank application has its own guide which outlines important information such as specific application requirements, Land Bank policies and procedures (City of Cleveland, n.d.).

("Willow Community Garden," 2014)



Case Studies in the Rust Belt

Cleveland: Nonprofit Organizations

Habitat for Humanity Cleveland was created 24 homes in 2019 through nonprofit funding and over 80,000 volunteer hours. The organization also uses its valuable professional resources to assist homeowners in making their housing costs more affordable. Habitat Cleveland has helped to lower monthly housing costs by over \$400 a month for the average homeowner that the organization serves (Habitat for Humanity Cleveland, n.d).

Cleveland Neighborhood Progress led the vacant land reuse initiative in the city of Cleveland known as Re-Imagining Cleveland. The alternative land use strategies used in this initiative remediate vacant lots into productive uses. Strategies offered align with the city of Cleveland's long-term development objectives and encourage residents to reclaim their neighborhoods. Re-Imagining Cleveland's vacant lot reuse projects include vineyards, orchards, market gardens, pocket parks, and stream bed reconstruction projects within the City of Cleveland. The initiative also enables Cleveland residents to acquire vacant lots adjacent to their homes, helping to stabilize property values and make neighborhoods safer and improve the quality of life for communities (Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, 2008).

Cleveland: Guide

In 2008, the city of Cleveland, in collaboration with consultants and nonprofit organizations, developed the Re-Imagining Cleveland Vacant Land Re-Use Pattern Book as a guide for vacant lot reuse. The pattern book provides useful information to organizations and residents that want to acquire and reuse a vacant lot. It also encourages the design of vacant lots as a neighborhood strategy to create long-term benefits and sustainable goals. The pattern book includes vacant lot reuse strategies that encourage walkability, green space and parks, and produce environmental benefits. Each strategy offers advantages and disadvantages, cost estimates involved in the reuse of a vacant lot, and a design model to utilize for planning. Process recommendations are included to offer a step-by-step process to develop, plan, and reuse a vacant lot (Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, 2008).

Cleveland: Best Practice Project

The Ecovillage Produce Market Garden is a project that successfully reused vacant lots to provide a fruits and vegetable farm and market. The project was developed through partnerships and gardening expertise of master gardeners from various nonprofit organizations. The project increased capacity in the supply of an existing food stand within the neighborhood farmer's market, increased fresh food access within the inner city, and provided support for a local sustainable small business. Another objective of the Ecovillage Produce Market Garden was to develop a viable economic development model that can be replicated in other neighborhoods where a surplus of vacant lots and food insecurity coexist (Northeast Ohio Green Map, 2012).

("Cleveland Ecovillage Produce Market Garden," 2014)



Milwaukee

The City of Milwaukee has approximately 2,900 vacant lots and has implemented aggressive policies and strategies to encourage the reuse of vacant lots. Milwaukee recognized the potential of these vacant lots to be used as an asset of available land and provide for its community's essential needs. The city created the HOME GR/OWN initiative in an effort to transform vacant lots into green space and promote economic development as part of Mayor Barrett's Strong Neighborhoods Plan. HOME GR/OWN has incorporated green infrastructure on many of its vacant lots, including Fondy Park, which won a Green Luminary award from the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District. HOME GR/OWN is intentional in its collaboration with local nonprofit organizations such as Walnut Way's Blue Skies landscaping and Groundworks Milwaukee to employ workers from these neighborhoods (City of Milwaukee, 2019).

Milwaukee: Vacant Lot Policy

The city of Milwaukee provides a simple process for purchasing a vacant lot or obtaining a permit to reuse a vacant lot. A new property owner or resident may expand their existing property with a vacant lot as a side lot with the \$1 side lot program (City of Milwaukee, 2013). The requirements to participate in the program also require that the applicant not have any outstanding public utility bills, overdue property taxes, or property code violations in the city of Milwaukee. Milwaukee also offers a discounted price to nonprofit organizations for vacant lots that have been available and have not sold for over 60 days (City of Milwaukee, n.d.). Milwaukee's vacant lot acquisition system is an effective means to increase property values in the neighborhood, add to the city's tax base and improve the quality of life for community residents.

Milwaukee: Local Government Role

In 2013, the city of Milwaukee published the *Vacant Lot Handbook: A Guide to Reusing, Reinventing, and Adding Value to Milwaukee's City-owned Vacant Lots*. The Handbook was created by the city of Milwaukee in partnership with nonprofit organizations, and in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee School of Architecture and Urban Planning and community stakeholders. The Handbook is a prime example of a local government establishing collaborative partnerships with the community and nonprofit organizations. The city also manages the city's vacant lot stock, vacant lot acquisition, permit programs, and discounted vacant lot programs (City of Milwaukee, n.d.).

HOME GR/OWN Milwaukee is a nonprofit organization that was established by Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett and the city's Environmental Collaboration Office (ECO). The organization's goal is to transform disinvested neighborhoods by utilizing city and partnership resources with a focus on local food access. The organization also promotes economic development in commercial areas in order to provide essential amenities in impacted neighborhoods. By working with local partners, the initiative is able to strengthen and expand Milwaukee's local food supply chain. HOME GR/OWN is also involved in green job creation, ecosystem restoration, climate change mitigation strategies, and sustainability efforts (City of Milwaukee, n.d.).

Case Studies in the Rust Belt

Milwaukee: Green Infrastructure Plan

In 2013, the city of Milwaukee developed its sustainability plan, the *Refresh Milwaukee Plan*, which includes a section focused on the improvement of its water systems. The plan includes the Green Infrastructure Baseline Inventory (GIBI) to measure and assess the amount of paved surface area in Milwaukee. The GIBI report also includes specific green infrastructure recommendations for each paved surface category, which includes streets, parking lots, and vacant lots. The plan recommends soil amendments as a primary green infrastructure strategy for vacant lots. This strategy involves the addition of specific plants to the vacant lot in order to improve soil quality, promote plant growth, and encourage the infiltration and absorption of water (City of Milwaukee, 2019). The GIBI report is a prime example of a city initiative that utilizes the challenge of vacant lots as an asset to improve the city's ecosystem and advance sustainability goals.

Milwaukee: Land Bank

The city of Milwaukee does not manage properties and vacant lots through a land bank but does manage a land bank-like system through its local government. The city owns and maintains more than 3,000 vacant lots and offers a variety of properties for sale, including tax-foreclosed properties, vacant lots, and brownfield properties suitable for redevelopment. Offers to purchase are reviewed to ensure that buyers will reuse a vacant lot in a way that improves the community. The city primarily approves vacant lots to be privately developed or reused as community gardens and parks. As part of its initiative to decrease the surplus number of vacant lots, the city of Milwaukee offers \$1 vacant side lots to neighboring homeowners (City of Milwaukee, 2013).

Milwaukee: Nonprofit Organizations

Since 1984, Habitat for Humanity Milwaukee has served over 1200 households through affordable housing and home repair assistance (Habitat for Humanity Milwaukee, n.d). The organization has saved an average of \$30,000 for each household they have served over the life of their mortgage. In neighborhoods that Habitat Milwaukee has built homes, assessed home values increased by 25% in comparison to the city-wide average increase of less than 2% during the same period. Homeowners created through the work of Habitat Milwaukee, contribute over \$800,000 in property taxes annually, benefiting the community and the city of Milwaukee (Habitat for Humanity Milwaukee, n.d). Habitat Milwaukee, in partnership with the city of Milwaukee, developed the Neighborhood Revitalization Plan for 2018-2020. The plan intends to create 65 new homes in 3 years and will transform blocks of vacant lots into affordable housing in the Midtown neighborhood (Habitat for Humanity Milwaukee, n.d). This is a prime example of partnerships between city government and nonprofit organizations that create actual results that benefit communities.

Groundwork Milwaukee was established in 2007 and acts as a land trust and local chapter of the national nonprofit Groundwork organization. The organization's primary goals are focused on the reuse of brownfield sites and vacant lots, community programming, and green and blue infrastructure development. In 2013, Groundwork Milwaukee and Milwaukee Urban Gardens established a collaborative partnership in order to combine each organizations' resources and increase the number of reused vacant lots created in the city. Together, these organizations formed the Milwaukee Urban Garden Network, made up of over 90 community gardens. Groundwork Milwaukee has established partnerships with many organizations, including HOME GR/OWN Milwaukee, LISC Milwaukee, and Walnut Way Conservation Corporation (Groundwork Milwaukee, n.d.). These organizations have found it beneficial for the communities to combine resources and work in a collaborative effort.

Milwaukee: Guide

(“HOME GR/OWN Milwaukee’s Fondy Park Bioswales,” n.d.)



In 2013, the City of Milwaukee published the *Vacant Lot Handbook: A Guide to Reusing, Reinventing, and Adding Value to Milwaukee’s City-owned Vacant Lots*. The handbook was created by the city of Milwaukee in partnership with many nonprofit organizations, the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee School of Architecture and Urban Planning, community stakeholders, and residents (City of Milwaukee, 2013). The handbook is another prime example of local government efforts to establish collaborative partnerships with the community and nonprofit organizations. The handbook provides many vacant lot reuse designs and ideas for residents and community groups interested in the reuse of publicly-owned vacant lots. The handbook emphasizes the availability of vacant lots as a means to create opportunities for side yard expansions, neighborhood amenities, community gardens, green and blue infrastructure, and infill development (City of Milwaukee, 2013). The guide is essentially a provision of tools that allow the community itself to create the assets that add value to their neighborhoods.

Milwaukee: Best Practice Project

Fondy Park was a sizable vacant lot in the Lindsay Heights neighborhood of Milwaukee until HOME GR/OWN collaborated with the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee’s Community Design Solutions Together, the two groups created a design for a community-based park. In 2017, partnerships with Walnut Way Conservation Corps and the Blue Skies Landscaping program enabled the project design to come to fruition. The park includes bioswales, stormwater trees, and a stormwater cistern, that capture stormwater from the roof of the farmer’s market and other impervious surfaces (City of Milwaukee, 2019). The park is an example of a community-based green space initiative that incorporates green infrastructure and neighborhood amenities.



(“HOME GR/OWN Milwaukee’s Fondy Park Pumpkin Patch,” n.d.)

Pittsburgh

As of 2015, there were over 27,000 vacant lots in the city of Pittsburgh as a result of population decline. Pittsburgh has an infrastructure that was built to accommodate 600,000 residents, but its current population is about half of that. Many neighborhoods in Pittsburgh were challenged with the problems associated with disinvestment and an overabundance of vacant lots and structures owned by the city or governmental departments. Pittsburgh has about 30,000 vacant lots and properties that cover a high percentage of the city’s land area. Pittsburgh has a history of creating vacant lot gardens, since the early 1900s, when residents planted fruit and vegetable gardens throughout the city (Pittsburgh City Planning, 2015).

Pittsburgh: Local Government Role

In order to implement the mandates of the Open Space Plan, the Department of City Planning created an Advisory Committee of City departments, authorities and non-profit partners to create the Vacant Lot Toolkit. This Committee contracted a team of consultants who assisted in developing these policy recommendations. By conducting interviews with non-profits, community groups, community development corporations, City officials from Planning, Law, Finance, Public Works Departments, the Mayor’s Office and City Council, and hosting focus groups with residents and community organizations, the Committee gained significant input from various community stakeholders throughout the development process (Pittsburgh City Planning, 2015).

Case Studies in the Rust Belt

Pittsburgh: Vacant Lot Policy

The City of Pittsburgh amended its Code of Ordinance by adding a new Chapter 454 entitled “Adopt-A-Lot Program.” The ordinance granted ownership of vacant lots to the city of Pittsburgh, included the development of the Adopt-A-Lot Program, and officially stated the promotion of community-based vacant lot reuse strategies. The Adopt-A-Lot Program allows temporary licensing or leasing of lots and allows individuals, groups, or organizations to reuse vacant lots.

The community-based vacant lot reuse strategies promoted in the ordinance include gardens, green infrastructure, food gardens, and strategies that advance sustainability goals (Pittsburgh City Planning, 2015).

Pittsburgh: Land Bank

The Pittsburgh Land Bank plays a vital role in the acquisition process of vacant lots and properties in the city of Pittsburgh. In 2014, the Pittsburgh Land Bank was created as a result of a local ordinance. It operates citywide within the municipal boundaries of the City of Pittsburgh. It is governed by a 9-member board of directors and is the local government agency responsible for the recycling of distressed properties back to productive use (Pittsburgh Land Bank, n.d.). The land bank enables efficient vacant lot reuse through its transparent process. Transparency and efficiency in the acquisition process is essential in the role of land banks and in the effort to revitalize neighborhoods.

Pittsburgh: Green Infrastructure Plan

In 2016, the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority initiated its current green infrastructure plan, the *Citywide Green First Plan*. The plan outlines cost-effective green infrastructure strategies that incorporate the reuse of vacant lots to manage stormwater and capture runoff. The implementation of the plan will reduce street flooding and sewer backups, a common result of heavy rainstorms. These strategies will also help Pittsburgh comply with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) combined sewer overflow mandates (Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority, n.d.). An effective green infrastructure plan can enable a city to transform the challenge of vacant lots into an opportunity to improve the quality of local water systems.

Pittsburgh: Nonprofit Organizations

In the last 30 years, Habitat for Humanity of Pittsburgh has provided over 100 homes and has assisted in the home repairs of over 90 homes. Pittsburgh has made a lot of progress in creating affordable housing but the area’s residents are currently in need of over 15,000 affordable homes. (Habitat for Humanity Pittsburgh, n.d.). The Larimer Consensus Group, made up of community stakeholders and residents, including Habitat Pittsburgh, worked collaboratively to develop a plan to green the Larimer neighborhood. In the vision plan created for Larimer, the consensus group plans to turn vacant lots into green space, urban farms and affordable housing. Through the support and volunteer hours of residents, Habitat Pittsburgh transformed neglected vacant lots into new energy-efficient, taxpaying homes. Additional greening efforts include tree plantings across the neighborhood, maintenance and expansion of the community’s African Healing Garden, and the launch of a community-garden-grown farmers market to improve community health outcomes and generate funds for Larimer Consensus Group’s future projects (Habitat for Humanity, n.d.).

Grow Pittsburgh is a nonprofit organization focused on urban agriculture that serves the Pittsburgh region. Its primary goal is to teach people in the community how to grow food through the promotion of community gardens. Grow Pittsburgh’s programs include community garden programs, garden resource center, urban farm apprenticeship, Urban Farmers in Training, and the Community Garden Sustainability Fund. Groups and individuals involved in vacant lot reuse can apply for materials such as fencing, raised beds, compost and topsoil, signage, rain barrels, or technical assistance services like tilling or soil testing (Pittsburgh City Planning, 2015).

Pittsburgh: Guide

The Vacant Lot Toolkit Policy Guide is a comprehensive overview of the goals, policies, and procedures for reusing vacant lots. It also outlines all of the necessary steps and application requirements associated with the sale or lease of a vacant lot in the city of Pittsburgh. The Vacant Lot Toolkit is the how-to guide for those interested in vacant lot project planning and offers design ideas for reusing vacant lots into edible gardens, flower gardens, and rain gardens. The toolkit also offers specific information on environmental and lot conditions, budget, insurance, and inspection requirements that should be considered by those interested in vacant lot reuse. The Vacant Lot Toolkit also provides extensive information on resources including organizations that can assist in vacant lot reuse, funding options, and essential applications. Residents and nonprofit organizations in Pittsburgh can refer to these guides when considering a vacant lot project on publicly-owned land. (Pittsburgh City Planning, 2015).



“Wilksburg Garden Dreams Urban Farm and Nursery,” 2020

Pittsburgh: Best Practice Project

In 2018, Grow Pittsburgh partnered with Allegheny Land Trust (ALT) on a collaborative initiative to protect and preserve urban agricultural lands. The Three Rivers Agricultural Land Initiative (TRALI) provides long-term stability for community gardens and urban farms because it ensures that future urban agriculture will be planned on protected land. The initiative encourages urban agriculture by preventing the loss of agricultural lands to other forms of development. TRALI offers resources and support to the community for existing projects and the development of new projects. This partnership utilizes the experience and expertise of two nonprofit organizations focused on urban agriculture. ALT contributes its expertise as an accredited land trust to acquire and manage land and Grow Pittsburgh in operating urban farms and assisting neighborhoods in starting and sustaining community gardens (Grow Pittsburgh, n.d.). This type of initiative is essential when we consider that the protection of local food production and sources is vital to urban communities.



“Wilksburg Garden Dreams Urban Farm and Nursery,” 2020

Philadelphia

The city of Philadelphia has approximately 40,000 vacant lots and about 25 percent of these are publicly-owned lots. For privately-owned vacant lots, property owners are responsible for maintaining their vacant lots, clearing debris, and keeping the property safe. However, the city of Philadelphia holds about 10,000 publicly-owned vacant lots and the cost of maintenance for these vacant lots is a drain on local resources (City of Philadelphia, n.d.). In recent years, the city of Philadelphia in collaboration with nonprofit organizations have established effective programs to reuse many publicly-owned vacant lots. In Philadelphia, they have prioritized the creation of green spaces and community gardens in place of vacant lots and currently maintain hundreds of gardens across the city (Garden Justice Legal Initiative & Grounded in Philly, 2015).

Case Studies in the Rust Belt

Philadelphia: Local Government Role

The City's Vacant Lot Program is responsible for vacant lots that are overgrown or littered with garbage and debris. Residents can request a vacant lot cleanup and the city will send the property owner a warning notice to clean up their property. If the owner doesn't clean up the property within the period listed on the warning notice, city crews will clean up the property and bill the owner for the cleanup cost. The process for reporting and addressing vacant lots in Philadelphia is outlined by strict consequences. The city of Philadelphia's vacant lot program is designed to handle problem properties (City of Philadelphia, n.d.). On the other hand, vacant lot acquisition is managed by the Philadelphia Land Bank and most vacant lot reuse programs are organized by the LandCare Program.

Philadelphia: Vacant Lot Policy

The Philadelphia Land Bank and the nonprofit organization Grounded in Philly provide all of the necessary information that a person or nonprofit organization would need to acquire a vacant lot from the city. Vacant lot acquisition occurs through the Philadelphia Land Bank as either a vacant lot sale and transfer of land ownership at a reasonable cost or through a lease agreement. Ground Philly assists individuals that would like to create a community garden by providing the resources and necessary steps for individuals to become a nonprofit organization (Grounded in Philly, n.d.). Community gardens that would like to enter into a lease with the City are also required to have insurance, another step for which Grounded Philly provides assistance. If public land is acquired for gardening reuse, the project may be eligible for a Brownfields Grant to test soil at no cost and provide custom soil safety recommendations through the Mayor's Office of Sustainability (Grounded in Philly, n.d.).

Philadelphia: Green Infrastructure Plan

Green City, Clean Waters is the city of Philadelphia's 25-year plan to improve the local water quality through green infrastructure and stormwater management strategies. The plan is primarily focused on the improvement of water quality through green land-based approaches. The plan's green infrastructure projects include appropriate vacant lot reuse, rain gardens, widespread street tree planting, stormwater planters, and other methods that capture runoff. Through effective implementation and regular monitoring of the city's *Green City, Clean Waters* program, the city has reduced water pollution impacts while also improving natural resources and the quality of life in neighborhoods. Vacant lots offer an opportunity for stormwater management and green stormwater infrastructure (City of Philadelphia, n.d.).

Philadelphia: Land Bank

The Philadelphia Land Bank is responsible for distributing publicly-owned land to residents, nonprofit organizations, and private developers. Through the land bank's open space program, acquisition of vacant lots is available for community gardens and other community-based green space and encouraged as a prioritized strategy. Anyone who is interested in acquiring vacant lots can view available lots on the land bank's map of available real estate and fill out an application that states how the property will be used. To lease a vacant lot from the land bank, the interested party must be a nonprofit organization and Grounded Philly offers resources to individuals who wish to create a nonprofit organization for this purpose (Grounded in Philly, n.d.). The Philadelphia Land Bank's website is clear, informative, and accessible for residents and nonprofit organizations that are interested in acquiring vacant lots.



(“Habitat Philadelphia’s Oxford Green Development,” n.d.)



(“Fatima’s Community Garden,” 2019)

Philadelphia: Nonprofit Organizations

Over the past 25 years, Habitat for Humanity of Philadelphia has completed over 200 affordable housing units and assisted over 500 families to make home repairs throughout the city of Philadelphia (Habitat for Humanity Philadelphia, n.d.). Recently, local residents completed surveys to determine how best to address problematic areas in the Sharswood neighborhood of Philadelphia. As a result, a neighborhood coalition formed that included renters, homeowners, business owners, and private and public partners. The coalition worked with Habitat Philadelphia to set goals to improve housing, health, safety, education, and job opportunities. In 2019, Habitat Philadelphia and volunteers started development on Oxford Green, a new affordable housing development in the Sharswood neighborhood (Habitat for Humanity, n.d.). In addition, Habitat Philadelphia works with a group of local partners to repair and maintain neighborhood assets, including parks and churches. With the help of Habitat Philadelphia, residents conduct block cleanups, make improvements to community areas, and have stopped illegal dumping in their neighborhood (Habitat for Humanity, n.d.).

The Philadelphia Horticultural Society’s LandCare Program is a nonprofit-based program focused on the reuse of vacant lots. PHS works with community-based organizations and city agencies to utilize Philadelphia’s challenge of vacant lots as neighborhood assets. The LandCare program cleans, greens, and stabilizes vacant lots as a passive reuse strategy. The program has reused and maintained over 12,000 lots that make up over 16 million square feet of vacant land. Over 800 properties have been redeveloped into new uses, including housing, commercial properties, and green space. The LandCare program encompasses two primary initiatives, Clean and Green and Community LandCare. The Clean and Green program targets vacant lots in neighborhoods with public safety issues and areas that lack open space and green amenities. PHS hires city-based landscape contractors, who clean and mow the lots twice per month from April through October. Through the Community LandCare initiative, PHS works with community organizations, who hire local residents to perform landscape maintenance work on vacant lots in their neighborhood (Pennsylvania Horticultural Society website, n.d.).

Philadelphia: Guide

Grounded in Philly created the Philly Vacant Land 215 Toolkit as a guide for the community and nonprofit organizations interested in the reuse of vacant lots, with a primary focus on community gardens. The Toolkit includes information on the initial planning process, choosing a vacant lot, how to access and acquire land, public and privately-owned property, the land bank, and a wide range of information on vacant lot reuse and remediation (Garden Justice Legal Initiative & Grounded in Philly, 2015).

Philadelphia: Best Practice Project

The LandCare program developed an initiative focused on community development that includes work opportunities for formerly incarcerated citizens. Through the Reentry Initiative, landscape contractors and community organizations hire and train ex-offenders to perform landscape maintenance services in their communities. PHS also added 2,000 new vacant lots to the LandCare maintenance inventory as it created the program PHS Roots to Re-Entry (Pennsylvania Horticultural Society website, n.d.). This example utilizes the challenge of vacant lots to create opportunity and invest in its community and residents.

Case Studies in the Rust Belt

Detroit

Over the last 20 years the number of vacant housing units has doubled in Detroit while the city's population has declined 25 percent. Currently, an estimated 20 square miles of Detroit's land area is vacant. Detroit Future City (DFC) is the group leading Detroit's vacant lot reuse and planning efforts. DFC created and now implements the *Detroit Strategic Framework* through a citywide public-engagement effort. The *Detroit Strategic Framework* provides strategies and approaches on how to best use the city's abundance of vacant lots, create job growth, economic benefits, build infrastructure, and support community engagement focused on the revitalization of Detroit. The *Land Use Element*, of the Framework, offers strategies for Detroit's vacant land based on its current state and future needs. The Strategic Framework developed zones with specific strategies that offer guidance on the best uses for each zone. DFC is a collaborative effort and DFC's board of directors includes various stakeholders, nonprofit organization leaders, and representatives from the University of Michigan and the city of Detroit (Detroit Works, 2012).

Detroit: Local Government Role

The city of Detroit is involved in the reuse of vacant lots in a variety of ways including its involvement in the *Detroit Strategic Framework* and its green infrastructure plans through its Detroit Water and Sewerage Department. The city's Department of Neighborhoods (DON) connects the city of Detroit to block clubs, community groups, business owners, community leaders, and Detroit residents. Its primary goals are to decrease blight caused by disinvestment and revitalize neighborhoods. DON directly engages with thousands of residents and volunteers in both major initiatives like tax foreclosure prevention and smaller efforts, such as vacant lot clean-ups and house board-ups. Managers help residents form block clubs and community associations, drive community engagement on neighborhood planning projects and other initiatives, resolve citizen complaints, and educate residents on a broad range of City programs and policies (City of Detroit, n.d.).

Detroit: Vacant Lot Policy

The Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA) is the leading authority over the management of Detroit's vacant lots and properties. The DLBA offers a variety of sales initiatives and disposition programs. These policies and procedures were voted on and approved by the DLBA Board of Directors at public meetings. The policies and procedures are published on their website in order to provide transparency and information on the various programs and initiatives of the DLBA, in addition to exactly how the programs and initiatives are expected to operate. Vacant lot policies implemented by the DLBA include a side lot disposition policy, disposition policies for property auctions, discount policies, community partnership policies, economic development project policies, and a buy back policy (Detroit Land Bank Authority, n.d.).

Detroit: Green Infrastructure Plan

Detroit's Green Infrastructure plan was created as a result of the ecosystem services design project focused on demolition sites in the Cody Rouge Neighborhood. These demolition sites provided an opportunity for local partners to redesign vacant lots using approaches that would offer environmental, social, and economic benefits. The use of green infrastructure strategies on demolished sites reduces the amount of stormwater that enters Detroit's sewer system. Stormwater infiltration is a green infrastructure approach supported and encouraged by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department's (DWSD) approved Green Infrastructure Plan. A Cody Rouge design project, part of Detroit's Green Infrastructure Plan, aims to turn vacant property demolitions into bioretention gardens and monitor environmental performance (City of Detroit., 2016). This is an example of utilizing the challenge of vacant lots as an opportunity to improve the city's ecosystem.

Detroit: Land Bank

The Detroit Land Bank Authority serves the city of Detroit as a pathway to acquire and reuse vacant lots. The land bank offers a variety of sales programs to make homeownership and land purchases accessible to residents and organizations involved in vacant lot reuse. The Compliance Program requires renovation and occupancy to improve neighborhoods and prevent real estate speculation. The land bank works directly with individual buyers, nonprofit organizations, and developers for projects of various scales. The land bank also offers a variety of discount policies applicable at property auctions and apply to nonprofit organizations, public school employees, city employees, and members of trade union locals that participate in the City of Detroit's Skilled Trade Employment Program (Detroit Land Bank Authority, n.d.).

Detroit: Nonprofit Organizations

Habitat for Humanity Detroit was established in 1986 and has helped over 400 Detroit families attain stable home ownership. In 2002, Habitat for Humanity Detroit had completed the construction of 100 homes and by 2003, there were 2000 Habitat for Humanity homes throughout the state of Michigan (Habitat for Humanity Detroit, n.d.). In 2015, Habitat for Humanity Michigan was awarded a \$1.1 million grant from the Michigan State Housing Development Authority to aid in the production of affordable housing for low-income families. In Detroit's Morningside Commons neighborhood, Habitat Detroit has initiated a plan to replace boarded-up or vacant properties with 100 new or rehabbed homes over an area of 15 blocks (Boss, 2013).

Keep Growing Detroit and its Garden Resource Program began in 2003 and has created and supported the creation of hundreds of gardens throughout Detroit. The Garden Resource Program provides programming and resources for starting vegetable gardens, including the provision of seeds and Detroit grown vegetable transplants. The organization also offers a network of gardeners and advocates that promote urban agriculture for the local food system. Over 20,000 residents are involved in the Garden Resource Program that supports over 1400 gardens in every neighborhood in Detroit. The organization provides access to quality and affordable resources, including over 70 varieties of fruits and vegetables needed to create an urban vegetable garden. It also provides support through programming and network of garden experts, and education to promote urban agriculture (Keep Growing Detroit, n.d.).

Detroit: Guide

The Detroit Future City's *Field Guide to Working with Lots* is a guide for Detroit residents, businesses, and nonprofit organizations interested in the reuse of vacant lots. The guide was based on input from over 50 Detroit organizations and provides educational resources, various forms of programming, and information essential to those interested in the reuse of vacant lots. It also offers a variety of reuse designs, design ideas for vacant lots, cost estimates for reuse planning, and specifications necessary to implement and carry out a vacant lot reuse project. Considerations for vacant lot reuse projects include cost, upkeep, stormwater, people, experience, and sun and shade requirements. The DFC Implementation Office continually updates the resources in the guide to ensure that it continues to be of value to those interested in the reuse of vacant lots (Detroit Works, 2012).

Case Studies in the Rust Belt

Detroit: Best Practice Project

Detroit Hives is a nonprofit organization that created urban bee farms and serves as an educational resource. The organization offers the community educational tours and workshops, experience with honey bees, conservation, and their role in our ecosystem. Visitors are able to see the inside of a honey bee hive, and try and buy honey from the urban hives. Detroit Hives raises bee awareness while also promoting the revitalization of Detroit neighborhoods. The organization reused vacant lots into bee farms for the conservation of honeybees, to help spread bee awareness, and to educate our communities and local schools about bees and their contribution to our environment (Detroit Hives, n.d.). Essentially, this initiative used the challenge of vacant lots and sparsely populated areas to create a unique asset in Detroit neighborhoods. (Detroit Hives, n.d.).

(Brenner, 2016)



(“Keep Growing Detroit Farm,” n.d.)



Summary of Case Studies in the Rust Belt

The Rust Belt cities examined as case studies differ in their specific approaches to vacant lot reuse through initiatives and disposition policies. However, it is clear that these cities share the common theme of a strategic approach that is collective, collaborative, and inclusive. Each city government, while involved to some degree in the management of vacant lots, had established mutualistic partnerships with nonprofit organizations that are well-equipped to reuse vacant lots. These city governments have also recognized the necessity to develop and establish a vacant lot reuse strategy in order to achieve quantifiable goals. Information on disposition policies, processes, and assistance in vacant lot acquisition is available and accessible on these city government websites. Land banks act in conjunction with nonprofit organizations and individuals who wish to acquire vacant lots in an effort to efficiently disperse vacant lots at a reasonable cost. Vacant lot reuse strategies exist within green infrastructure plans and are monitored by city governments in order to follow through with intended goals. Nonprofit organizations are welcomed and heavily involved in the planning process and implementation of vacant lot reuse strategies. The challenge of vacant lots in these cities is used as an opportunity to benefit and serve the communities in which they exist. The development and implementation of vacant lot reuse strategies does not belong to one single entity, but is created through a collaborative and collective process that involves the city government, nonprofit organizations, and community residents.

Clean and Green

The clean and green strategy is a simple solution to address the challenge of vacant lots through cost-effective methods. Vacant lots are sites for trash dumping and are commonly not maintained at an acceptable level. The clean and green strategy has positive impacts on community health, community safety, and the overall improvement of a neighborhood's appearance. This strategy consists of cleaning the lot by removing trash and other debris, planting new grass and trees, routine maintenance by mowing the lawn.

Through a simple clean and green program, the city of Buffalo can later develop active vacant lot reuse strategies that fit the needs of a community. The first step should be a clean and green program in order to mitigate negative impacts and create a vacant lot that is ready for a community garden or some type of development. Greening a property improves the standard of living in a community by improving the community's health and providing a safer environment.

Community Benefits:

- Green and blue infrastructure
- Local job opportunities
- Increase in nearby property values
- Increased safety

Considerations:

- Maintenance
- Organization
- Vacant lot inventory

Supplies and Equipment:

- Lawn mower
- Crew
- Leaf bags



Vacant Lot Reuse Best Practices

Best Practice Examples

PUSH has purchased 22 properties through the city of Buffalo's tax foreclosure auction and from private owners. PUSH employed contractors to clean and green these lots through a process that consists of grading it, removing all concrete and debris and planting additional grass. The clean and green strategy is a baseline strategy to open vacant lots to a lot of different other green or blue infrastructure. PUSH employed one full-time landscaper, assisted by a part-time worker in the summer months, to maintain its 22 properties (Grimaldi, 2011). PUSH contributes to the city through property taxes and water and garbage fees for each property and holds liability insurance policies on all of their properties. This is a net positive benefit to the surrounding community and towards the city tax base.

The Genesee County Land Bank (GCLB) in Flint, Michigan adopted a local clean and green program in 2004. The land bank assigned different community groups to their seasonally maintained vacant lots and each group maintains over 20 lots every three weeks. In total, they maintain over 4,100 vacant properties and 12 food gardens, flower gardens, trees, and pocket parks. They have reduced blight in and around Flint through its investment of the clean and green program valued at more than \$1.55 million (The Land Bank Organization [LBO], n.d.). The groups are encouraged to use a stipend system to employ local youth and have incorporated youth engagement into the program. In 2018, roughly 700 of the 1,100 residents in the clean and green program were youth. In a 2019 study of the program, clean and green program efforts were associated with reduced assaults and violent crime in the city of Flint by 40 percent (Beukema, 2019). GCLB created a support system within its clean and green program that involves community groups and community youth in improving their local community through the care of vacant lots.

Philadelphia also has a successful clean and green program. The Philadelphia Horticultural Society (PHS) is an organization that is in charge of this program and has been given permission to improve vacant lots that violate the City's nuisance ordinance. They are responsible for thousands of properties that account for about nine million square feet in Philadelphia. Turning blighted to vibrant places for the past ten years. PHS goes through the basic steps of cleaning up the debris, importing topsoil if necessary then planting grass and trees. What PHS builds a wooden fence to create the perception of a property that is being cared for, preventing future illegal dumping. According to Beukema's study in 2019, "based on the Philadelphia model, it would cost roughly \$1,250 to clean and green the lot and \$150 per year to maintain it."

Green and Blue Infrastructure

Green infrastructure is a way for urban areas to incorporate natural landscapes into public spaces. Blue-green infrastructure focuses on combining green spaces alongside productive water management. Blue and green infrastructure work as interchangeable tools in handling environmental issues across urban areas. In cities, grey infrastructure is abundant in the form of housing, roads, and business. Green and blue infrastructure work as elements that promote the natural environment within cities. Under green infrastructure, trees, natural grassland, and ecological parks are beneficial to both the natural environment and residents. Blue infrastructure resolves are elements linked to water. Like permeable surfaces, ponds, rain gardens and trees using green elements. In Rust Belt cities there is often a disparity in natural elements that are consequential to communities and the surrounding environment.

Green and blue infrastructure is a strategy used by many planners to create more desirable outcomes for communities. Excess stormwater can cause problems such as erosion, property damage, flooding and a decrease in water quality. Blue-green infrastructure delays or reduces peak flows by retaining, draining and infiltrating water and by enhancing evapotranspiration (U.S. Geological Survey, n.d.). Rain gardens can also be used as green and blue infrastructure. Some of the positive effects of blue infrastructure is a reduction of stormwater runoff, flooding and water pollution reduction. Green infrastructure can save energy by avoiding cooling in homes. Green infrastructure promotes physical activity and increases property values nearby. Blue and green infrastructure also help to create sustainable outcomes like better air quality and reduced carbon. Implementing green infrastructure in Buffalo would promote local ecosystems and provide safer streets as they slow down traffic and are used as a buffer for noise and pollution.

Best Practice Examples

Blue infrastructure can benefit Buffalo’s aging sewer system substantially. Overflow stormwater can affect the limited capacity of the sewer system causing a combined sewer overflow (CSO). This will cause pollutants that will affect the water quality through our water resources and impact aquatic organisms in the process. Vacant lots can be used as blue infrastructure by absorbing and filtering stormwater.

PUSH implemented its first rain garden under PUSH Blue, a program dedicated to creating green infrastructure to promote stormwater management and green jobs. The organization’s main focus is to focus on CSO, combined sewer overflow. A number of rain gardens are located in the West Side as the area is most vulnerable to sewer overflow. PUSH not only finds value in providing an aesthetic appeal to the neighborhood but also finds purpose in creating a safety net and adding climate-resilient infrastructure to assist the community and the environment. “PUSH has installed approximately 22 acres of rain gardens—or 221 vacant lots—in partnership with the Buffalo Sewer Authority” (Maurer, 2013). The relationship between PUSH Buffalo and Buffalo Sewer Authority has been key when implementing projects to the community and the city.

Community Benefits:

- Improve stormwater management
- Additional green space for recreation
- Promote wild habitats and biodiversity
- Increase quality of life
- Improve air quality
- Improve healthy soils
- Decrease urban heat island effect
- Save municipal’s energy use

Considerations:

- Maintenance
- Overseeing organization

Supplies and Equipment:

- Perennials
- Fencing
- Soils
- Varies between blue-green projects
- Compost
- Stone



Urban Agriculture

Urban agriculture has become a popular strategy that communities use to not only repurpose vacant lots, but also to promote public health, economic development, and build social capital. While many assume urban agriculture is solely related to the farming of fruits and vegetables on previously vacant city lots; urban agriculture also refers to the production of nonedible plants, and animal husbandry. Such operations might take the form of household food gardens, school food gardens, community food gardens, large scale urban farms, flower farms or gardens, backyard chicken coops, or backyard beehives; and may be either privately, publicly, or commercially owned (Santo, 2016).

Vacant Lot Reuse Best Practices

Urban Farming

Urban farming, or the production of fresh food in city neighborhoods, can take the shape of; large scale operations, where food is sold to local outlets, or small scale operations, where food is grown and consumed by a household, school, or community. But regardless of size, urban farming practices are most successful with a great deal of hands on support. Therefore, these operations should be strategically situated in communities where residential land use is dominant, where access to fresh or healthy food is severely limited, and where several individuals are interested in participating. Although urban farming may seem like an easy fix for improving community health, socio economic issues, and tackling vacant lots; there are several obstacles that could prevent the success of this strategy (Lots to Love, 2020; Santo, 2016).

Among the most notable obstacles regarding urban farming are locating a suitable lot in a community, and gathering a large enough workforce to maintain the farm or garden. Zoning laws, soil quality, and proximity to several residential homes, are all factors one must consider when determining whether or not a particular vacant lot is suitable for an urban farm or food garden. Although these obstacles can be difficult to overcome, zoning laws and soil quality are not absolute. If zoning laws prohibit urban farming as a land use, a variance application is a viable solution; and if the lot's soil quality is poor, raised beds could be installed that protect the plants from various toxins like lead, or the more expensive option, soil could be cleaned from its toxin. However, if the lot is not surrounded by several residential homes with individuals who are willing to put the work in and tend to the crops, the farm or food garden will likely fail (Lots to Love, 2020; Santo, 2016).

In many cases, obstacles can be resolved and urban farming can be a highly successful vacant lot strategy that visually, socially, environmentally, and economically improves neighborhoods and communities. Visually, urban farming can transform blighted vacant lots into beautiful displays of lush vegetation that boost a community's pride for place, and improves their overall health and wellbeing. For families that otherwise could not afford fresh fruits or vegetables, urban farming can greatly improve their diets and physical health; but it can also improve their mental wellbeing, as gardening has therapeutic and stress relieving benefits. Socially, urban farming offers communities the opportunity to bond with their neighbors, creates an atmosphere where social gatherings can take place, and in turn, reduces crime rates in its neighborhood. Environmentally, urban farming has the power to repair damaged ecosystems by protecting urban green spaces, increasing biodiversity, increasing rainwater drainage, reducing air pollution through plant's filtration qualities, reducing the "urban heat island effect", and supporting the recycling of organic waste by composting. Then finally, economically, urban farming can offer employment and workforce training opportunities for low-income populations; and can create profitable business opportunities for distressed neighborhoods, or individuals who had previously been socially excluded (Santo, 2016).



Community Benefits:

- Reduce food deserts
- Reduces crime rates
- Improve diets, physical healthy, and mental health
- Promotes community involvement
- Creates a safe place for social gatherings
- Repairs damages ecosystems
- Increasing biodiversity, and rainwater drainage
- Reducing air pollution
- Support recycling of organic waste by composting

Considerations:

- Soil quality
- Zoning laws
- Level of support from surrounding households
- Access to necessary funding

Supplies and Equipment:

- Raised beds if soil quality is poor
- Seeds
- Mulch
- Soil
- Compost
- Fencing

Best Practice Examples

Detroit, Michigan is home to 1,400 urban gardens and farms with more than 70 urban gardens that have the opportunity to sell locally-grown fruits and vegetables to local markets. Among those urban farms is Keep Growing Detroit (KGD), one of the largest farms in the city, that shares its resources with over 1,400 farms and gardens. KGD forms an organizational body that transforms young gardens into strong community leaders. Along with being an advocate for smaller farms and gardens, KGD sells its produce to local markets and restaurants.

The goals associated with KGD, and the several smaller organizations that benefit from their resources, are to work to promote sustainable change in the local food system, and engage members of the community to reduce socioeconomic disparities. Along with this, they also work to fight city issues like, the abundance of vacant lots, poor diet among the community, and food insecurities in several neighborhoods. Through KGD's initiative of support to other smaller farms and gardens who fight for the same cause, the organization is creating food entrepreneurs who assess and address needs in the community.

Urban Beekeeping

Urban beekeeping is a vacant lot reuse strategy that not only benefits the community with the production of honey, but also enhances the local ecosystem. With one in four wild bees at risk of extinction in the United States, urban beekeeping poses as an opportunity for communities to conserve the honey bee population that is vitally important to our food system (Mordowanec, 2020). Transforming vacant lots into assets through beekeeping, can also increase the health of surrounding vegetation and food production.

Pairing urban beekeeping with other urban agriculture practices is advantageous, as bees cross pollinate with nearby crops and flowers, typically within a three mile radius. In fact, honey bees actually thrive if their hives are located near vast amounts of vegetation, as they require approximately two million flowers to produce one pound of honey. Since a healthy colony can produce around 100 pound of honey a season, one yard, or even a few neighboring yards, does not offer nearly enough pollen or nectar to satisfy the bees (Mortimer, n.d.). For this reason, urban beekeeping is widely effective in improving the health of surrounding flowers, trees, fruits, nuts, and vegetables (Mortimer, n.d.).

Despite the many social and environmental benefits associated with urban beekeeping, there are several misconceptions that prevent communities from welcoming this practice to their neighborhoods. For instance, many confuse the honey bee with other species like wasps or yellow-jackets. Honey bees are not scavengers, and find little interested in picnic food or sugary drinks, nor are they likely to sting. Unlike wasps or yellow-jackets, honey bees are bred for gentleness, and only sting when provoked since they die after using their stinger (Mortimer, n.d.). If these misconceptions about bees can be eliminated, urban beekeeping has the potential of being one of the many strategies viable in transforming vacant lots into community and environmental assets.

Vacant Lot Reuse Best Practices

Community Benefits:

- Supports the environment
- Improve crop pollination
- Preserve the bee population
- Organic and local food production

Considerations:

- Zoning laws
- Proximity to a vast supply of plants

Supplies and Equipment:

- Queen bee & worker bees
- Hive box
- Beekeeping suit & veil
- Bee smoker
- Honey extractor



(Mortimer, 2020)

Best Practice Examples

In Detroit, Michigan, Timothy Paule and Nicole Lindsey partnered in 2017 to establish Detroit Hives, a non-profit organization in Detroit's inner-city. The couple's goal is to spread awareness of the medicinal benefits of raw honey, and to transform a portion of Detroit's seemingly endless supply of vacant lots into urban bee farms. With a rough estimate of 90,000 vacant lots in the city, the couple has converted seven lots into thriving urban bee farms where they maintain 34 beehives. Timothy and Nicole also grow vegetables on these lots to promote the benefits of cross pollination among the bees (Hurlock, 2019).

The non-profit also takes advantage of its urban location. Detroit's inner-city uses significantly less pesticides than other rural agricultural communities. For this, bees in urban communities are healthier, and are at less risk of extinction (Mordowanec, 2020). Timothy and Nicole use their non-profit organization to not only transform vacant lots into assets, but also to promote environmental education in their community. Detroit Hives hosts tours, field trips, and tasting events; as well as, partners with local businesses to promote raw honey (Mordowanec, 2020).

A flower farm is another great vacant lot reuse strategy that can be a profitable way to beautify a community, and support the environment. Unlike other reuse strategies, a flower farm is a low cost and light workload way to invest in a neighborhood, and does not require soil clean up, or building raised beds. While soil quality is important for urban farming practices, since contaminated soil can transfer harmful toxins into the produce, those toxins pose no threat to non-edible or ornamental flowers. Therefore, if cost and soil contamination are driving factors in the selection of a vacant lot reuse strategy, a flower farm might be the best choice. A flower farm might also be best when working with an oddly shaped, or small vacant lot, as other reuse strategies may not be feasible (Lots to Love, 2020).

Taking the shape as either a community garden, or as a place where flowers are grown and sold, a flower farm can be an easy way to improve a neighborhood and support the environment simultaneously. Regardless of whether the flower farm is for profit or not, this reuse strategy can create a unique habit for both people and small native wildlife. Flowers are not only enjoyed by people for aesthetics, they also attract pollinators and small wildlife like birds, butterflies, and bees. A flower farm works best when located near community amenities where they will be seen, appreciated, and maintained (Lots to Love, 2020).

Community Benefits:

- Beautify neighborhood
- Support the environment
- Create a safe habitat for small native wildlife

Considerations:

- Irrigation
- Adjacent properties
- Visibility
- Maintenance

Supplies and Equipment:

- Seeds
- Top soil
- Mulch
- Perennials or Annuals
- Shrubs
- Fencing

Best Practice Examples

In Detroit's Jefferson-Chalmers neighborhood, Nancy Weigandt and Tom Milano, both experienced gardeners who had volunteered to clean up vacant lots for years, started their own nonprofit, Garden Detroit. Their goal was to turn blighted land into places of beauty that could create jobs and safe places for spiritual growth. Through working with the Land bank to acquire vacant lots, and receiving an implementation grant from the Kresge Foundation, they were able to transform nine vacant lots, and a corner lot with a large hoop house, into lush sanctuary gardens and flower farms for the community to cherish.

Along with beautifying their neighborhood, Weigandt and Milano feel that their sanctuary gardens and flower farms are largely beneficial for the environment. With 80 percent of cut flowers coming from Central America, a great amount of energy is wasted. By reducing flower shipments, and instead growing and selling flowers locally, we can reduce our carbon footprint and enhance the local ecosystem. Weigandt and Milano sell their flowers to local retailers, and host floral workshops, events, and festivals (Runyan, 2018).



Vacant Lot Reuse Best Practices



Affordable Housing

In a city, like Buffalo, with an abundance of vacant lots and a shortage of affordable housing for many residents, the development of affordable housing should be considered as a necessary reuse strategy. As we have seen in the section “Case Studies in the Rust Belt”, all of the cities that have a surplus of vacancy lots also face the challenge of concentrated poverty. In these places, populations of concentrated poverty inherently experience a shortage of decent, affordable housing. The reuse of vacant lots in the form of affordable housing serves multiple purposes through decreasing the number of vacant lots, creating a supply of affordable housing, and community wealth building through homeownership (Local Initiatives Support Corporation [LISC], 2018). It is economically beneficial to the city, financially feasible through various methods of funding, and logistically possible through cooperative partnerships with nonprofit organizations like Habitat for Humanity.

Areas of the city of Buffalo, were based on census tracts and categorized as “Moderate, Lower, and Lowest Demand” areas in the Buffalo Housing Opportunity Strategy of 2017. These areas of varying demand coincide with the areas that were identified to have an overabundance of vacant lots. While it may not be logical to situate the development of affordable housing in the “Lowest Demand” areas, it would be beneficial in the neighborhoods considered “Moderate and Lower Demand” areas. However, many households in the “Moderate and Lower Demand” areas are rent-burdened due to low-income and rising housing costs in Buffalo. In these areas, it would be most beneficial to create a supply of affordable housing through the reuse of vacant lots. It is essential to understand that development of affordable housing is the most active strategy of the vacant lot reuse strategies (Magavern et al., 2017). Affordable housing development should be considered as a prioritized strategy in sections of the city where it will be most beneficial (czb LLC, 2017).

The creation of affordable housing as a vacant lot reuse strategy can be accomplished in a variety of ways. The most efficient and impactful methods to create affordable housing would involve the incorporation of nonprofit organizations into a strategic affordable housing development plan (Magavern et al., 2017). The plan should include the geographical location of most suitable vacant lots, quantifiable goals such as number of households served and housing units to be produced, and partnerships with various nonprofit organizations that specialize in the creation of affordable housing (Magavern et al., 2017). Private development should be considered if the production of affordable housing is as cost effective as it would be through production done by a nonprofit organization. Affordable housing that contributes to city tax revenue should be given preference over projects that are able to defer taxes for 10 years.

Local nonprofit organizations involved in the production of affordable housing include:

- Habitat for Humanity
- PUSH
- Fruit Belt Community Land Trust

Vacant Lot Reuse Best Practices

Best Practice Examples

In Portland, Oregon strategic efforts were implemented to utilize vacant lots for the creation of affordable housing. Specifically, in the area of vacant lots, as opposed to the rehabilitation of existing housing stock, Portland developed a few best practices that supported the financial feasibility of affordable housing development. Here, vacant lots were identified as an asset of available land to create affordable housing where the location was deemed less than profitable for private development. The city of Portland created solid partnerships with nonprofit organizations and private developers whose sole purpose was focused on the creation of affordable housing. In an effort to decrease unnecessary costs and streamline production, Portland created an expedited pathway that involved expedited building permit reviews and land acquisition for projects that produced affordable housing (Schilling, 2002).

Community Benefits:

- Increased supply of affordable housing
- Creation of property tax-contributing homeowners
- Revitalized neighborhoods in place of gaps from vacant lots
- Opportunity for infill development
- Use of existing infrastructure from previously demolished houses

Land Banking

The purpose of a land bank is to take vacant and blighted properties from distressed neighborhoods and reinvent them to revitalize these neighborhoods. According to a 2014 national survey by the Center for Community Progress, a land bank is a national leader on solutions for vacant, abandoned, and other problem properties (NYS Land Banks, 2014). Successful land banks are often experienced in the knowledge of tax collection and the foreclosure procedure. A land bank 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 (Schilling, 2006).

Land banks acquire and maintain distressed properties to later transfer them to a responsible individual or nonprofit in order to benefit the public good. Land banks being part of a governmental entity or a nonprofit corporation, are granted special powers to perform essential duties. New York State Municipal Law authorizes municipal urban renewal agencies (Articles 15 and 15-A) which have similar structures and powers as land banks (Schilling, 2006). They can acquire property at low or no cost throughout the tax foreclosure process. Land banks can clear the title and also extinguish back taxes of the property. Lease the property for temporary uses, for example, community gardens and farms. Land banks can also "negotiate sales based not only on the highest bid but also on the outcome that most closely aligns with community needs" (NYS Land Banks, 2014). Meaning, they can defer another buyer from acquiring a property if it doesn't align with the neighborhood's exact needs and give it to a more community-oriented organization. Land banks play an essential role in stabilizing neighborhoods. Vacant lots can stain a community's image. Land banks work to eliminate that distress and outcome.

Vacant Lot Reuse Best Practices

Best Practice Examples

Community Benefits:

- Stabilize vacant properties
- Decrease criminal activity
- Initiative for economic activity

Considerations:

- Transparent transactions
- Predictable prices for vacant lots
- Disposition policies included
- Narrow focus on goals and objectives
- Property inventory

Land Banks have found success all over the country, especially in Syracuse, New York. After a year the Greater Syracuse Land Bank (GSLB) was created, they received \$2.5 million in tax revenue from receiving properties from the tax foreclosure auction process. This relieved the city of taxes and gave GSLB the financial revenue needed to run the organization. GSLB believes they will acquire half of the City's list of 4,000 tax-delinquent in their first three years (NYS Land Banks, 2014). Syracuse has acquired 1,862 properties while generating 1.4 million a year in property taxes. GSLB has a green lots lease and a Green lots Grant program for people who want to start a green infrastructure project like community gardens and farms on vacant properties. The Land Bank awards two groups a grant up to \$1,500 for capital improvements on the Land Bank-owned vacant lot. The group needs to fill out the RFP and if accepted, the potential vacant lot owner will sign a lease with the Land Bank. This is a great example of a land bank getting involved with the vacant lot inventory and redistributing them to potential uses that can benefit the community.

(State of New York's Community Impact and Innovation Unit, 2016)



Utilize Collective Impact framework to reach goals:

1. Adopt an Urban Homesteading Program reflective of current vacant lot situation
2. Local government transparency with vacant lot acquisition process
3. Create a system to monitor planned objectives for vacant lots
4. Create a discounted disposition policy to non-profit organizations
5. Encourage vacant lot reuse strategies for community wealth building
6. Prioritize the Fruit Belt Community Land Trust

There is no one way to address an abundance of vacant lots in any given geographic location. The city of Buffalo can be a pioneer in its own policies and programs that address vacant reuse, while also looking to other national strategies as guidance. The following recommendations consist of mainly policy-based approaches that have been compiled as a result of the research and analysis done throughout this report.

Overarching idea:

Utilize Collective Impact framework to reach goals

What:

Collective Impact is a theory based on the idea that social change can be achieved successfully through effective organizing and partnerships. Collective Impact initiatives begin with the hope that long term goals will be achieved through a system of partnerships between government, community, businesses, and educational institutions. Collective Impact initiatives begin with a shared interest that is used to drive support for the initiative and create shared accountability within the initiative supporters. To drive support and reach goals, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, and communication are crucial (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Why:

Buffalo's abundance of vacant lots has an impact on a number of different actors and organizations within the city. The overwhelming number of lots in some neighborhoods have created gaps in the community and economy. At a citywide level, all residents and businesses suffer the financial burden created by the creation and maintenance of publicly-owned vacant lots. In order to create a system to manage and monitor the number of vacant lots, it is important to have representation of organizations, residents, businesses and city hall departments.

How:

The City of Buffalo should organize a collective impact initiative, focused strictly on inventory and reuse of publicly-owned vacant lots. The initiative's short- and long-term goals should be outlined by a group of leaders acting as a board of the initiative. A complete board should include representatives of nonprofit organizations, OSP, key economic stakeholders, residents, and should have support from the Mayor's Office. After the creation of the board and initiative, a shared measurement system should be created to revisit results and successes annually.

Recommendations and Next Steps

How we achieve the initiative:

Adopt an Urban Homesteading Program reflective of current vacant lot inventory

What:

Urban homestead programs are often used to encourage prospective homeowners to build homes in cities facing vacancy across the nation. In the case of Buffalo's previous program, eligible homesteaders could purchase vacant lots to either build a new home on or add to their currently owned adjacent lot. Buffalo Urban Homestead lots have been, and should continue to be, designated as eligible lots for the program based on location, immediate demand, real value, and abundance.

Why:

Urban homesteading has proven to be an effective way for cities in similar situations to rid themselves of abundant vacant lot inventory and obligations. Homesteading can also help achieve sustainable outcomes desired by and mentioned in Buffalo's comprehensive plan. Vacant lots can be used in a number of ways to benefit the city of Buffalo, specifically in creating new and affordable housing stock. New homesteaders will contribute to added property values, tax revenue, and aid in wealth building across the city. Homesteading would also relieve the City of Buffalo of maintenance responsibilities and associated costs, allowing resources and funding to be used elsewhere.

How:

By taking into account successes of the previous Urban Homestead Program and more current needs, the City of Buffalo should approve a new Urban Homestead Program. This should be based on the ideas presented in the 2015 unpassed legislation, as well as more current information. The 2005 Urban Homestead Program was a long-standing policy supported by nonprofit organizations, the Buffalo Common Council, and prospective homeowners in the region. Revisiting previous legislation and proposed plans will help the city gain a perspective on where it has been and what the future looks like in terms of vacant land inventory.

How we achieve the initiative:

Government transparency with vacant lot acquisition process and policy

What:

The city of Buffalo should create a clear and uniform policy for the sale of vacant lots to non-profits, potential home builders, and businesses. This policy would have clear guidelines for the purchaser, and cost should be adjusted based on the type of purchaser and intended use. All of this information should be clearly stated and supported by OSP, as well as being readily available upon request.

Why:

Current resources like a universal policy and database that would be helpful in assisting the sale of vacant lots, are missing from the City of Buffalo website. Inconsistent prices and processes have become an added question for many nonprofits interested in acquiring vacant lots from the City of Buffalo. Transparent policies would allow for increased overall sales, as well as more efficient sales process. This would benefit both the City of Buffalo and the buyers. This clarity would also allow for buyers to collaborate and have beneficial impacts on communities that are experiencing high numbers of vacant lots. Resources like a full list of available and previously sold lots will eliminate competition between nonprofits and unclear prices of lots.

How:

In order to achieve and maintain transparency of sales and acquisition processes, the City of Buffalo should work to create a new vacant lot acquisition process. Primarily, a website of information dedicated specifically to vacant lot inventory, sales, and acquisition should be created. This should include a full list of available lots and restrictions based on types of buyers and intent of lot reuse. Information regarding past sales and available lot inventory should also be listed in a database accessible by any and all potential buyers. This would eliminate any discrepancies between sales.

Recommendations and Next Steps

How we achieve the initiative:

Create a system to monitor planned objectives for vacant lots

What:

A vacant lot monitoring system would ensure that plans and programs written into City of Buffalo legislation would be carried out successfully and responsibly across all involved departments. Adequate vacant lots reuse plans should include an annual assessment of inventory, along with updated maps and lists of opportunity areas. Reuse options should be included for each area and also evolve based on area needs.

Why:

The city of Buffalo has created plans and set goals for vacant lot management within its comprehensive plan and other programs in the past. These plans and programs were absent from any system to monitor success or hold accountability. The Good Neighbors Planning Alliance was tasked with shedding the excessive number of publicly-owned vacant lots under the comprehensive plan. There was no measure of accountability or resources tied to that goal. The 5-in-5 Demolition Program had a goal of demolishing 5,000 vacant units in 5 years, in a strategic way with redevelopment plans in place. These redevelopment plans lacked accountability and specifics. In order to ensure successful reuse, each implemented program and plan needs to have an attached monitoring system. Without monitoring the plan, goals are often unachievable or forgotten.

How:

The city of Buffalo OSP should revisit previous plans and programs to assess the original goals of the plans. The city should also consider altering current actions to proceed on a path of reaching these goals successfully. Revisiting and accessing these plans will include a detailed inventory analysis and timeline for previous and future actions. There should be assessment reports created annually for the goals pertaining to vacant land management.

Recommendations and Next Steps

How we achieve the initiative:

Create a discounted disposition policy to non-profit organization

What:

A vacant lot disposition policy dictates the process and cost of vacant lot acquisition for all interested parties. In some cities, like Detroit and Milwaukee, preference and discounted vacant lot prices are offered to nonprofit organizations that have the expertise and ability to efficiently reuse vacant lots. Nonprofit organizations that specialize in vacant lot reuse are better equipped logistically to repurpose vacant lots and reduce the burden of vacant lot maintenance off of city governments.

Why:

Habitat for Humanity Buffalo and PUSH work to create homeowners which contribute to the city tax base through the development of affordable housing. These nonprofit organizations develop housing that has a positive impact on neighborhood quality and increase nearby property values. They are able to contribute all of these positive impacts at no profit, as opposed to private developers that must incur an inherent profit margin. As a result, it is not financially feasible for nonprofit organizations to compete with private developers for vacant lots at the auction held by the City of Buffalo. A disposition policy that specifically promotes the ability of nonprofit organizations to acquire vacant lots is a cost-effective policy when the return on investment that these organizations produce is taken into consideration.

How:

Establish a nonprofit disposition policy that offers a discounted or nominal cost to nonprofit organizations, like Habitat for Humanity Buffalo, PUSH, and Grassroots Gardens. This can be a unique policy based on the length of time that a vacant lot remains idle or a broadly applied discount. This also provides an opportunity for the city of Buffalo to create meaningful and mutualistic partnerships with the nonprofit organizations whose sole purpose is the betterment of the communities in the city of Buffalo. The Detroit Land Bank Authority and the city of Milwaukee have both implemented discounted nonprofit disposition policies which increase the capacity at which nonprofit organizations are able to acquire and reuse vacant lots (DLBA, n.d.; City of Milwaukee, n.d.).



Recommendations and Next Steps



How we achieve the initiative:

Encourage vacant lot reuse strategies focused on community wealth building

What:

Community wealth building strategies are any vacant lot reuse strategies that are beneficial to the community as a whole and contribute to the financial prosperity of the residents of those communities. These strategies can be achieved either indirectly through the development of neighborhood assets and amenities or the increase of property values through the improvement of overall condition of the neighborhood. Community wealth building strategies can also be achieved through the creation of profit-bearing resident and community-owned businesses developed by vacant lot reuse. It is essential that the residents of communities negatively impacted by vacant lots are also the beneficiaries of the vacant lots when reused as assets and opportunities (Dubb, 2018).

Why:

The highest concentration of poverty that exists in the city of Buffalo, or Erie County, is concentrated in the neighborhoods on the East Side. The majority of Buffalo's black population reside in these neighborhoods which incur the highest demolition rates and highest number of idle vacant lots. Income inequality exists for residents of the East Side of Buffalo in comparison to residents of the entire city of Buffalo. However, what is more disturbing is the inability for black households in these neighborhoods to equitably accumulate wealth in comparison to white households of the same income. Lack of intergenerational wealth through homeownership, educational opportunities, access to jobs accounts for many of these inequities. Community wealth building is the solution to these inequities that perpetuate concentrated poverty (Greater Buffalo Racial Equity Roundtable, 2016).

How:

The city of Buffalo should prioritize vacant lot reuse strategies that contribute to the community wealth of the residents that have been negatively impacted by widespread demolitions and the inherent disinvestment of their neighborhoods. The Northland Workforce Development Center, which was developed on idle vacant land, is a positive contribution toward the community wealth building in this neighborhood. The city of Buffalo should build on that momentum and continue to support projects like this that create job and educational opportunities while repurposing vacant lots and revitalizing neighborhoods. Another opportunity to create community wealth is through home ownership. This can be accomplished with policies that encourage and support the development of affordable housing through nonprofit organizations.

Recommendations and Next Steps

How we achieve the initiative:

Prioritize Vacant Lot Transfers to the Fruit Belt Community Land Trust

What:

A community land trust is a form of land ownership that is held by a community-based nonprofit corporation by which the land is leased out for development. The primary purpose of a community land trust is to ensure that affordable housing is developed and remains accessible to the community. A community land trust is able to preserve affordability through resale restrictions set in their land deeds for future land sales (Duda, 2014). This is a particularly useful mechanism for a community to use if there is an overabundance of vacant lots that exist in proximity to a potentially high market demand area. A community land trust is organized and controlled by a board of local community residents and local stakeholders in order to prioritize community needs over profit-based motivations. Currently, there are over 250 community land trusts in every major city in the United States (Community Wealth Organization, n.d.).

Why:

The Fruit Belt Community Land Trust was established in 2017 and struggles to acquire vacant lots from BENLIC and the City of Buffalo. This is due to the fact that many vacant lots in the Fruit Belt neighborhood are deemed potentially marketable by the city of Buffalo and offered only at market value prices at auction. However, most of these vacant lots are not sold at the auction and continue to be vacant, unused land for years. The shortage of affordable housing disproportionately rent-burdens the residents of the East Side of Buffalo more than any other area of the city of Buffalo. The development of affordable housing, through the Fruit Belt Community Land Trust, is a mechanism to transform the challenge of vacant lots into an opportunity for affordable housing (Magavern et al., 2017).

How:

The Fruit Belt Community Land Trust should be prioritized as the benefactor to all vacant lots in neighborhoods of the East Side of Buffalo that have been vacant lots for over one year. The city of Buffalo and BENLIC should create an efficient pathway for vacant lot acquisition for the Fruit Belt Community Land Trust in order to remove barriers imposed by market value priced vacant lots (czb LLC, 2017). This solution would not only propagate affordable housing, it would take the burden of vacant lot maintenance off of the city of Buffalo. The Fruit Belt Community Land Trust has also partnered with Habitat for Humanity Buffalo on past projects and this would provide an opportunity for both organizations to create much-needed affordable housing (Hovey, 2020). The release of vacant lots to the Fruit Belt Community Land Trust would require that the city of Buffalo prioritize affordable housing and community wealth building over the possibility of a potential real estate profit.

Lots of Lots Conclusion

This study of vacant lots in Buffalo is one of many studies and reports conducted in the last 20 years that evaluates the challenge of vacant lots in Buffalo, offers sound reuse strategies, and provides policies and programs that have had success in similar situations. However, leadership in the city of Buffalo has yet to implement effective policies and programs that address the vacant lot challenge. The city of Buffalo also lacks collaborative partnerships with nonprofit organizations that would greatly increase the efficacy of vacant lot reuse. Instead, it's apparent that the vacant lot acquisition system that is currently in place acts as a barrier to local nonprofit organizations that attempt to acquire vacant lots in neighborhoods of disinvestment. These local nonprofit organizations have the capacity, experience, and expertise to reuse vacant lots with community-based strategies that would greatly benefit community residents and the city.

The inventory of vacant lots presents the reality and severity of the vacant lot challenge in the city of Buffalo. In the last 14 years, the number of publicly-owned vacant lots has increased steadily, with a concentration of these vacant lots in areas of concentrated poverty. With no real plan in place for the reuse of these vacant lots and the city's lack of effective policies and programs, these vacant lots continue to be a challenge and have negative impacts on the community and the city. The evaluation of past, present, and proposed plans to address the challenge of vacant lots shows that this challenge has been a public concern and has persisted over the last 20 years. It also proves that there is no real systematic plan currently in place that effectively addresses the reuse of vacant lots. Many of the recommendations suggested by planning professionals in the last 20 years have not been implemented or apparently considered by leadership in the city of Buffalo.

The recommendations included in the final section are a result of the inventory and analysis of vacant lots in Buffalo, the evaluation of local policies and programs, and a comprehensive assessment of best practice policies and programs in other cities. Cities that show signs of success in the reuse of vacant lots on a widespread scale seem to utilize a collective impact framework of policies and programs between government leadership, nonprofit organizations, and community residents. Transparency, collaboration, collective resources, partnerships, and coordination are common themes in other cities that actively address the challenge of vacant lots. These cities have found the value in partnerships with nonprofit organizations to utilize vacant lots as an opportunity and an asset in neighborhood revitalization. Leadership in the city of Buffalo has an obligation to its constituents to address the abundance of publicly-owned vacant lots with a systematic vacant lot reuse plan. This is attainable through the development and implementation of policies and programs that prioritize the value of local nonprofit organizations and community-based vacant lot reuse strategies.



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