DETROIT
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A DFC Special Report: Green Culture Shift

The Detroit Future City (DFC) Strategic Framework and 2016 DFC report entitled 'Achieving an Integrated Open Space Network in Detroit' highlights Detroit's massive vacant land portfolio as one of its greatest assets. DFC has been working since its inception to demonstrate how this land has the potential to be transformed into an open space asset, thus establishing the city of Detroit as a leader in innovative open space land uses. We are calling this movement a "Green Culture Shift".

Why is Detroit Poised for a 'Green Culture Shift'?

Decades of population loss have left Detroit with more than 24 square miles of vacant land. As population stabilizes and moves toward growth, Detroit has a tremendous opportunity to transform this vacant land into a system of open space that will enhance health, well-being and economic vitality throughout Detroit neighborhoods.

There are currently more than 120,000 vacant lots in Detroit, of which 93,000 are zoned for single-family residential.[1] The number of vacant lots will continue to increase as the City works to meet its stated target of demolishing an additional 6,000 vacant structures by spring 2019.[2] If the City keeps up that current pace of demolition with the remainder of severely blighted properties in Detroit neighborhoods, it is estimated the amount of vacant land could grow by 25 percent to total at least 30 square miles over the next decade.

DFC recognizes a common desire in Detroit to consider new construction of buildings over any other land use approach. While there is certainly the opportunity to redevelop some of these lots, the scale of conventional redevelopment required will still leave ample room for open space within the city. It is important to consider what would it take to redevelop Detroit based on existing zoned land uses. Without undertaking a full study, there are a few quick data points that we can examine including, the number of single-family vacant lots and vacant housing units in the city:

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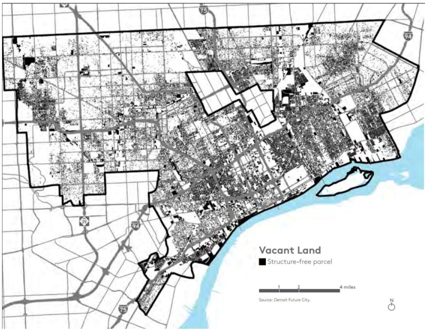
If all of the vacant housing units in the city were reoccupied and every vacant lot currently zoned for single-family were to have a new home built on it, this would result in more than 196,000 additional housing units.[3] In order to fill all of these additional homes, Detroit's population would need to increase by 74% to nearly 1.2 million people,[4] not taking into account any growth that would occur in Downtown or Midtown. In order to actually achieve this population Detroit would need to grow at a rate of 20% every 10 years for the next 30 years, a rate of growth that is not currently being seen in cities like Chicago or Pittsburgh who continue to see their population stay steady.

Rather than lament this current condition, Detroit should embrace a green culture shift that looks beyond the value of land as defined by the real estate market and recognizes the opportunity to use land to promote environmental sustainability, quality of community life, and equitable economic opportunity for Detroit residents.



Open space is a solution for Detroit,

What is a 'Green Culture Shift'?

Open space is not the same thing as vacancy. At DFC, we define open space as structure-free land that is intentionally used. This open space could take the form of natural areas, productive landscapes, green buffers, parks and recreation and green stormwater infrastructure, in addition to the creative landscape and social-oriented ideas that Detroiters have implemented across the city.

not an unwelcomed result of Detroit's past.

Too often, open space is thought of as a “consolation prize” for disinvested neighborhoods that do not have the market to attract traditional bricks-and-mortar development. Open space is a solution for Detroit’s future, not an unwelcomed result of Detroit’s past.

Well-maintained and intentional open space can serve to make dense areas more livable, stabilize areas of moderate or increasing vacancy, and present new opportunities for land-based entrepreneurship in areas of large-scale vacant land. Each type of neighborhood has its own quality of life challenges and open space will look different based on how it is leveraged to address those. Numerous research studies show that land can be used to improve the quality of life for residents in non-market ways, but there is a burden of proof to make these benefits tangible for all Detroiters to help accelerate a green culture shift.

Ronald Matten installed the ‘Native Butterfly Meadow’ Field Guide to Working with Lots design in 2016 as part of DFC’s mini-grant program. Photo Credit: Andrew Potter

How Do We Get There?

Opportunity #1: Collectively Define Values and Goals

To build a green culture shift in a way that benefits all Detroiters, we need to collectively define what we value as a city and answer the question “what kind of city do we want to become?” For example, do we want to become a “food sovereign city”, in which the majority of fruits and vegetables consumed in Detroit are grown in Detroit? If so, Keep Growing Detroit calculates that between 5.5 and 7.8 square miles of land would need to be dedicated to urban agricultural production. Do we want to produce 100% of our energy from renewable sources? To meet all of Detroit current households’ electricity demands, it would require approximately 13 square miles of open space dedicated to solar energy production. Once our values and goals are defined, we can work collectively to determine how we can best use open space to help achieve them.

The time to articulate these values is now. In 2018, the City of Detroit will be developing a Public Lands Framework and a Sustainability Action Agenda; both initiatives share a goal of improving the quality of life for Detroiters. The Public Lands Framework, led by the Detroit Planning and Development Department, will create a strategic framework for the appropriate reuse of publicly owned lands in the city. This includes a transparent and proactive land disposition strategy and process to support vacant land transformation across City departments, and in coordination with the Detroit Land Bank Authority with the goal of improving quality of life in Detroit. Concurrently, the newly-formed Office of Sustainability will lead the development of a Sustainability Action Agenda that aims to strengthen the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of Detroit's residents, businesses and neighborhoods. The process will establish short term (1-3 years), medium term (3-8 years), and long term (8 -15 years) outcomes, goals, actions, and metrics through engagement with the broader community that will guide future government and community actions to improve the quality of life for Detroiters, provide greater economic opportunities, and address climate impacts. Robust resident outreach, education and participation will be critical to both efforts and will ensure these plans represent a bold, shared vision that can be implemented by all.

There are more than 72,000 publicly-owned vacant lots dispersed throughout the city, mostly at the scale of three contiguous lots or less.

Opportunity #2: Plan for the Long-term

The Public Lands Framework will be a critical decision-making tool so that as development takes place, the integrated network of open space can be built over time. Long-term plans can often seem unrealistic at first, but with dedicated and sustained action, they can become a reality.

The Detroit Riverfront is a good example. Construction on the riverfront started with the GM Plaza in 2004, and is now beginning to close-in on the lofty goal of creating 5.5 miles of connected, accessible public space spanning from Belle Isle Bridge to the Ambassador Bridge.

This targeted strategy has been implemented over time and is generating economic value in adjacent areas. Even when financial resources may be scarce, having access to land is critical to maintaining the possibility of achieving a connected vision over time.

There are more than 72,000 publicly-owned vacant lots dispersed throughout the city, mostly at the scale of three contiguous lots or less. To achieve the collectively defined goals and values -- like improving health outcomes or setting renewable energy targets-- we need to take our land reuse to a much larger scale. The Public Lands Framework process should help identify where privately-owned vacant land may need to be strategically acquired to achieve community defined goals.

Detroit's riverfront demonstrates a range of open space types, from wetlands and prairies to trails and parks all connected by the RiverWalk. Photo Credit: Stephen McGee

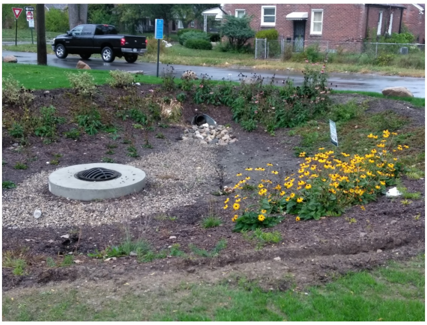
Opportunity #3: Engage Creatively and Informatively
Resident engagement is not ‘one size fits all’; it must be thoughtfully developed and customized to working with neighborhoods where vacant land is growing due to demolition.   While the development of a city’s riverfront is a familiar public amenity model, it is more challenging to build support for open space that is more natural looking and more closely associated with rural settings, like meadows and forests. To be effective, this engagement demands funding and dedicated time to arm residents with information and open up new possibilities. It is important to recognize that Detroiters have varied opinions when it comes to viewing land as an opportunity. Residents have been dedicated stewards of land by cleaning up blight and mowing, but many have moved beyond ‘clean and green’ to landscaping beautification or even a social gathering space. With 1,534 existing gardens and farms, Detroit is also a leader in urban agriculture which can continue to serve as a gateway for catalyzing discussion about how land can “work” for us.

Through funding small scale vacant land transformation, assisting communities with strategic planning, and convening partners who are interested in open space from many perspectives, DFC has learned lessons that can inform creative engagement models:

- **Illustrate** to stakeholders during the planning process how proposed landscape installations will grow over time. Understanding the timeline to achieve the community’s desired results can help set realistic expectations.
- **Communicate** that land reuse projects can be short, medium, or long-terms to help pair future desires of the community with market realities
- **Empower** residents to know their available land (where it is, and who owns it) and produce small scale open space strategies to support project “matchmaking” with partners and land acquisition
- **Invest** in new innovative tools such as 3-D modeling and virtual reality, to respond to resident feedback in real time
- **Connect** Detroiters to existing local open space projects like the Dequindre Cut, Oakland Avenue Urban Farm and Viola Liuzzo Park, or to best practices in other leading cities so residents can see and experience the possibilities firsthand
- **Plan** for long-term success of installation. If there is an expectation that residents will play a central role in maintenance, then dedicated funding should be allocated to support this

Opportunity #4: Invest in Excellence
Detroit neighborhoods with vacant space are often thought as laboratories where “anything goes”. This mentality can turn residents away from embracing a ‘green culture shift’ if projects are not deployed with technical excellence, the authentic engagement of neighbors, and a plan to sustain projects through appropriate maintenance. One crucial way to demonstrate the benefit of vacant land transformation is demonstrating land’s “worth” through job creation for Detroit residents. This can take numerous forms including installing and maintaining green stormwater infrastructure, or incubating land-based entrepreneurs and attracting land-based businesses that can build pathways to shared prosperity. Initiatives such as Fitzgerald Neighborhood Project focus on holistically addressing every publicly-owned vacant building and lot at once for maximum impact and effectiveness. The initiative unites workforce development, vacant land transformation, housing renovation and aims to makes the case that we can transform a neighborhood’s quality of life through embracing the assets of productive land and existing buildings. This project has the

potential to create an integrated neighborhood landscape and can be evaluated and replicated in other neighborhoods in the future.



DWSD’s Green Infrastructure Program installed three bioretention areas at Viola Liuzzo Park, located at the corner of Trojan Avenue and Forrer Street in northwest Detroit. Photo Credit: Victoria Olivier

Detroit’s vacant land is not contiguous, or relegated to one area. While vacant land exists in every neighborhood, there are parts of the city with larger concentrations of it. Open space development, improvement, and maintenance is a significant challenge for Detroit given its fiscal constraints, and implementing a plan will require creative and strategic financing decisions. We must invest in open space as a component of a holistic revitalization of Detroit, and in so doing, can create a more stable, sustainable future. Together, we can spur a green culture shift where land is viewed as an important tool to help build our workforce, improve our resiliency to increasingly intense weather events, boost our health outcomes, stabilize neighborhoods and connect us to each other. This is an opportunity that few cities have, and the time is now for Detroit to leverage land as an asset to address the needs of residents today, and prepare for residents’ needs in the future.

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[1] Zoned R1 or R2

[2] https://wdet.org/posts/2017/11/03/86014-why-im-running-detroit-mayoral-incumbent-mike-duggan/

[3] For ease of calculation this analysis assumes that only single-family housing will be built on all lots that are zoned R1 or R2. Some of these could be developed as two-family or other residential developments that could increase the number of new units. There are currently approximately 93,000 vacant lots that are zoned R1 or R2, Detroit’s single-family zoning districts. For ease of calculation this analysis assumes that each of these parcels will be redeveloped with a single-family house, 1 housing unit. We also assume that each currently vacant housing unit will be reoccupied, adding an additional 102,791 housing units.

[4] This assumes that Detroit’s average household size remains at 2.54 people per household.

About Our Research

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139 SQUARE MILES

DFC conducts research and analysis, and develops resources to help those interested in better understanding the current conditions in Detroit. We provide tools to key stakeholders, so that, collectively, we are empowered with up-to-date information that can help us have the most positive impact possible.

See Our Research

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