

# THE LAND AND BUILDINGS ASSETS ELEMENT

A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO PUBLIC ASSETS



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## DETROIT FUTURE CITY

# A Day in the Life

## *Putting the Land Back to Work*

Back when Chandra was getting her degree at MSU, she never dreamed she'd live in Detroit. But when her sister relocated to Detroit with her husband, and then a job opened up at the Recreation Department the summer after Chandra got her master's degree, she saw it as a sign.

Through her job, Chandra is getting to know her new home in ways she never anticipated. She meets with community groups to discuss neighborhood visions for green space, talks with church groups and local schools to help them align their own decisions about reinvestment with those of the public agencies, and participates in discussion with the other public agencies in charge of Detroit's land to help mesh their overlapping missions and policies. When she needs a break—and needs to be reminded what it's all for—she takes a brief bike ride along the greenway she cut her teeth on when she arrived six years ago.

After back-to-back meetings all day, that bike ride is looking pretty good. Luckily, she has the perfect excuse to leave work right at 5 p.m. today: her sister's baby shower is tonight, and she has to stop off in Corktown on her way to pick up a gift for the celebration. At her last meeting of the day at 4 p.m., Chandra can't tell what energizes her most: the Strategic Framework working group's progress on a zoning overlay proposal for a new Live + Make residential community, or the thought of a relaxing bike ride to a great dinner with family and friends, and the celebration of a new Detroiter-to-be.

# TRANSFORMATIVE IDEAS

## LAND AND BUILDING ASSETS

Vacant land and buildings are among Detroit's most valuable assets for its future. While in the abstract this may seem reasonable, to those dealing with these properties it is difficult to internalize. The sheer magnitude of the inventory, the difficulties of maintaining it, the obstacles to reuse, and the limited resources affecting every public agency in the city are all barriers to recognizing the untapped potential of the city's public land inventory. The challenge does not stop at public land: In fact, far more vacant and underutilized properties remain in private ownership.

Turning vacant land from burdens to assets will take more than changes in specific policies and practices. **All public agencies—whether city, county, or state—will need to change how they think about land, and make equally fundamental changes to the way they acquire, manage, and dispose of land and buildings, and the way other public agencies regulate them.**

Without such a change in thinking and practice, the inventory of vacant land and buildings in its current condition will not only fail to become an asset, it will

continue to act as a roadblock to the implementation of creative strategies for land use, environmental restoration, economic growth, and neighborhood revitalization.

If public land is to become an asset, all of the different public agencies that hold land need to align their missions around a single shared vision—not only a vision for “better land management,” but a vision that reflects the aspirations for the city as a whole, as expressed in its land use and environmental plans, economic growth strategies, and neighborhood revitalization efforts. Within these plans and strategies, public land plays a critical role. Indeed, without a coordinated, strategic approach to the acquisition, disposition and reuse of public land, none of those strategies can come to fruition.

A transformative strategy is about more than the parcels in public ownership themselves. It also must provide an integrated approach to land and buildings across the entire city. A truly transformative

strategy for land repurposing, redevelopment, and management will demand that the City look at its regulations governing vacant land and problem properties in private ownership, and how those regulations and their enforcement help or hinder the achievement of Detroit's revitalization goals. It calls for rethinking the county's tax foreclosure practices, to better link them to strategies of acquisition and disposition of public land; and for aligning decisions about public facility siting, reuse, or closures with public land decisions, as well as with the larger land use, environmental, and economic growth strategies being pursued by the City of Detroit.

#### PUBLIC LAND WORKING GROUP AGENCIES:

- Detroit Land Bank Authority
- City of Detroit – Planning and Development
- City of Detroit – City Planning Commission
- City of Detroit – General Services
- Wayne County Treasurer
- Wayne County Land Bank
- Michigan Land Bank Fast Track Authority
- Detroit Economic Growth Corporation
- Michigan State Housing Development Authority
- Detroit Housing Commission
- Detroit Public Schools
- Detroit Water & Sewerage Department

Each of these 12 agencies has a different mission and goal related to the use and reuse of public land. These agencies continue to meet to create a strategic and coordinated approach to the use and reuse of publicly held land.

# 5 LAND AND BUILDINGS ASSETS TRANSFORMATIVE IDEAS

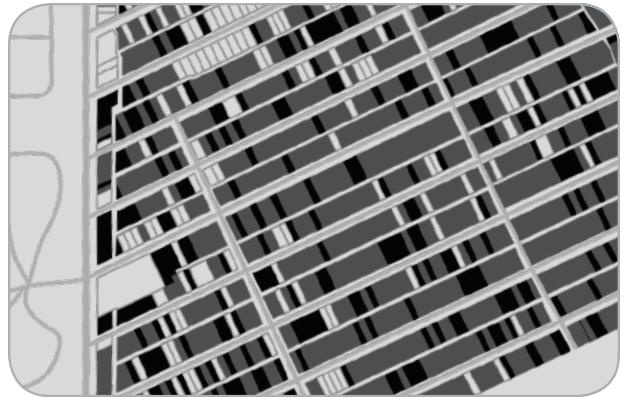
**1****A CITY THAT SHARES A VISION:  
COORDINATING THE MANAGEMENT OF  
VACANT LAND**

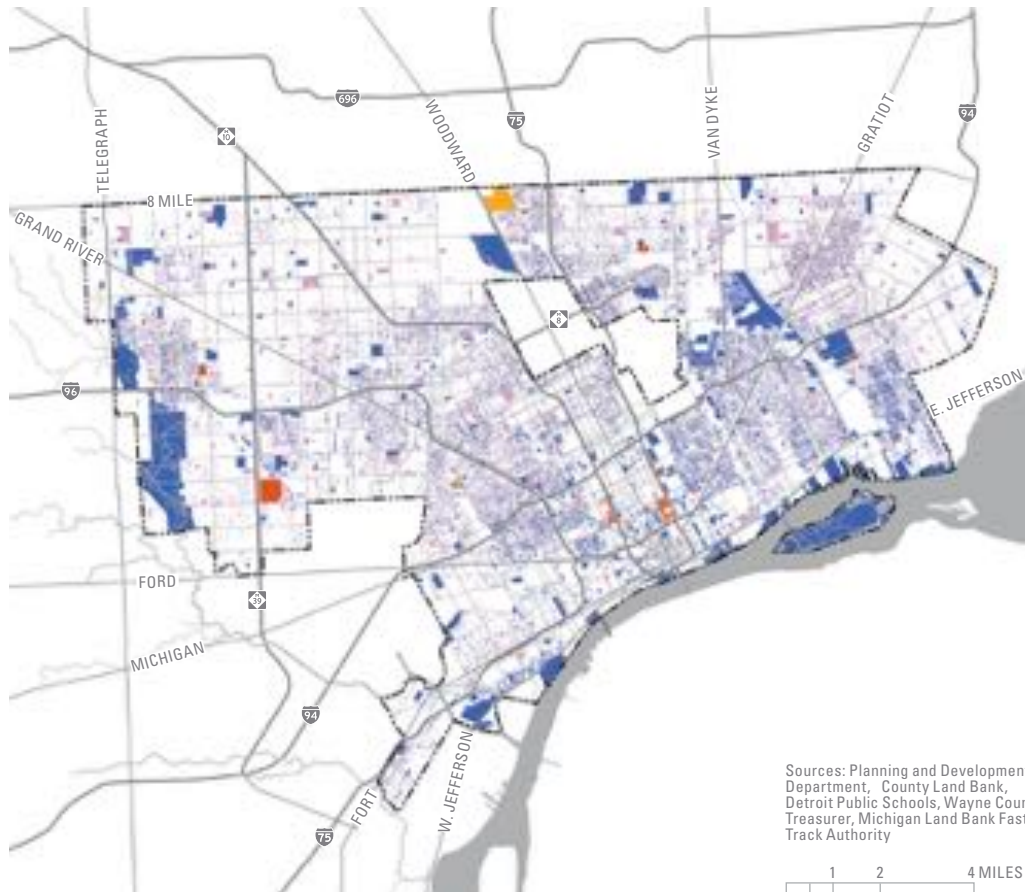
Public land and facility strategies must be aligned with the City's strategies for neighborhood revitalization, economic growth, and creation of blue/green infrastructure, while the activities of all public landholding entities and other public agencies must be grounded in a single, coordinated, strategic framework.

We need to begin thinking of properties in public ownership and those in private ownership as part of a single system. **All land, whatever its legal ownership, is public in the sense that how it is used and maintained affects its neighbors and the community as a whole, and affects the city's ability to preserve its neighborhoods and build its economy.** More important than who actually owns the inventory is how it fits into the vision for the city. Detroit needs to develop a coordinated system in which all entities operate consistently across all aspects of public land management and private land regulation, making decisions based on clear policy goals and principles, and utilizing available legal and

financial tools as efficiently as possible. Wherever title to any single parcel resides, that parcel should be seen as being part of single inventory, guided by a single set of policies and goals.

Such a profound change in thinking and procedures will not be easy. The transformation of Detroit's approach to its land will require many separate agencies, with separate missions and priorities, to subordinate their differences to a common direction and purpose, and to foster unprecedented connections among landholding, regulatory, and user agencies. In the long run, public landholding agencies and those leading the city's regeneration should explore realignment of responsibilities, including reducing the number of separate entities holding title to public parcels, to increase the system's efficiency and take better advantage of the legal and technical capacities of particular agencies.





## PUBLIC LAND OWNERSHIP BY AGENCY

- CITY OF DETROIT
- DETROIT HOUSING COMMISSION
- WAYNE COUNTY LAND BANK
- MICHIGAN LAND BANK FAST TRACK AUTHORITY
- WAYNE COUNTY TREASURER
- DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

While there are many publicly owned parcels within the city of Detroit, these are owned by a variety of different agencies with different missions. Coordination among these agencies is key to unlocking the potential of Detroit's publicly held land.

Sources: Planning and Development Department, County Land Bank, Detroit Public Schools, Wayne County Treasurer, Michigan Land Bank Fast Track Authority





## 2

**A CITY WHERE EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED: VIEWING VACANT AND PROBLEM PROPERTIES WITHIN ONE INTERRELATED SYSTEM**

Detroit contains an estimated 150,000 vacant properties, roughly 2/3 vacant land parcels and the rest vacant buildings. Of these, the eight public landholding entities control about 66,000, or well under half. In addition, the city contains an unknown number of problem properties that are still occupied, including underutilized, poorly maintained industrial buildings and many absentee-owned houses and small apartment buildings suffering from neglect.

Historically, the respective systems designed to deal with publicly owned and privately owned properties have not been integrated. The latter is managed as a regulatory function, and has regrettably suffered from the lack of resources that burdens several of Detroit's systems. Many ordinances are on the books, but are poorly or intermittently enforced, with too few personnel to keep up with the volume of properties.



1.

**Decisions about vacant land and problem properties, whether in public or private ownership, need to be made through a single lens:** How will these properties be treated, so their outcomes will benefit the city by stabilizing neighborhoods, fostering economic growth, and creating opportunities for new infrastructure and innovation, rather than continuing to act as a drag on the city's future?

## 3

**A CITY OF STRATEGIC APPROACHES:  
RECOGNIZING THE UNIQUENESS  
OF EACH PROPERTY'S VALUE AND  
CHALLENGES**

A coordinated approach to addressing Detroit's vacant land must begin with a strategic approach to addressing the land in public ownership to maximize the city's ability to create long-term value and enhance community amenities and quality of life through its use and reuse. **This approach must be grounded in a basic principle: Vacant land is not fungible—each property has its own problems, and its own potentials.** Every decision a public agency makes about land has strategic implications, this applies to the following areas:

- Property acquisition, including establishing policies about which properties should be added to the public inventory;
- Property disposition, including determining the most appropriate reuse, identifying suitable buyers, and selecting the most appropriate disposition methods;



2.

- Property holding strategies, including when properties should be held for long-term public purposes, for assembly into more buildable or marketable sites, or for future reuse potential;
- Maintenance of public land; and
- Demolition of vacant structures

All decisions about public land should be made on the basis of strategic principles designed to lead to the betterment of the city.

## 4

## A NEW URBAN LANDSCAPE: USING LAND FOR INFRASTRUCTURE AND INNOVATION

Many people in Detroit, as elsewhere, still think of reuse of vacant land as equivalent to redevelopment of new buildings to replace the ones that have been torn down. Yet the reality is that, outside certain key locations, continuing demographic and economic trends project that little new development will take place in Detroit for many years. **This is a challenge, but also a great opportunity. It means that Detroit's vast inventory of vacant land can be used for a variety of new purposes, to foster innovations in public open space, urban agriculture, clean energy, and more; and to build a new network of blue/green infrastructure to divert stormwater from the city's overtaxed sewer system and clean the city's air.**

Pursuing this idea also demands a change in attitude toward the large areas of vacant land that cover many parts of the city. Rather than seeing this land as largely worthless, and being eager to unload it to any willing private party, the public sector should



3.

see this land as being of value, and of creating large, contiguous tracts where current holdings may be substantial but fragmented. This, in turn, calls for greater emphasis on holding rather than selling public land, and on making it more costly for private entities—often speculators—to hold onto vacant parcels instead of using them productively or relinquishing them.

It also requires us to think about the smaller lots in traditional neighborhoods not as necessarily future infill sites, but as long-term open spaces in those

neighborhoods, and to ensure that they are used in ways that strengthen, rather than undermine, the fabric of those areas.

Finally, it calls for an open-minded, creative approach to innovation and experimentation. The sheer scale of the vacant land available creates the opportunity to try out different reuse alternatives, some of which may be new and largely untried. Both through its land use regulations and its disposition policies, the City should encourage the full range of ideas for reuse of vacant land in ways that hold promise to further the city's revitalization and enhance its quality of life.

## 5

## A CITY WHERE PUBLIC FACILITY INVESTMENTS COUNT: ALIGNING PUBLIC FACILITIES WITH LAND USE TRANSFORMATION

Much of the public land inventory in Detroit is made up of public facilities, including public schools, parks, recreation facilities and community centers, police substations, and more. Those facilities are an important part of the ‘glue’ holding the city’s neighborhoods together, and define the quality of life in those neighborhoods. Today, as a result of declining population and financial resources, many of those facilities, particularly school buildings, have been closed, and many others, including many of the city’s parks, fall short of their promise. Population and fiscal constraints are realities that cannot be wished away, but a different approach can be taken within those constraints to integrate decisions about public facilities into larger decisions about Detroit’s future land use.

Decisions about public facilities are being made in Detroit every year—whether to close a facility or invest money in upgrading it, whether to close



4.

a park or reduce its ongoing maintenance, where to consolidate public facilities and services, how to reuse vacant facilities, and more. Each of these decisions affects far more than the facility itself. **Going forward, all such decisions should be aligned with the larger strategies governing the future of the neighborhoods and other areas in which they are located. Outcomes should enhance the stability of neighborhoods slated for revitalization, or help further the conversion of other areas into blue/green infrastructure or other non-development reuses.**

# REALITIES



## AGENCY MISALIGNMENT

### OCTOBER 2011 PROPERTY AUCTION

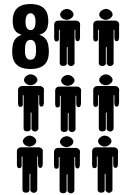
**13K** **\$500** **6K** 

13,000 DETROIT PROPERTIES WERE LISTED IN WAYNE COUNTY'S OCTOBER 2011 AUCTION<sup>1</sup>

MINIMUM BID PRICE AT OCTOBER 2011 AUCTION<sup>2</sup>

PROPERTIES UNSOLD AT OCTOBER 2011 AUCTION

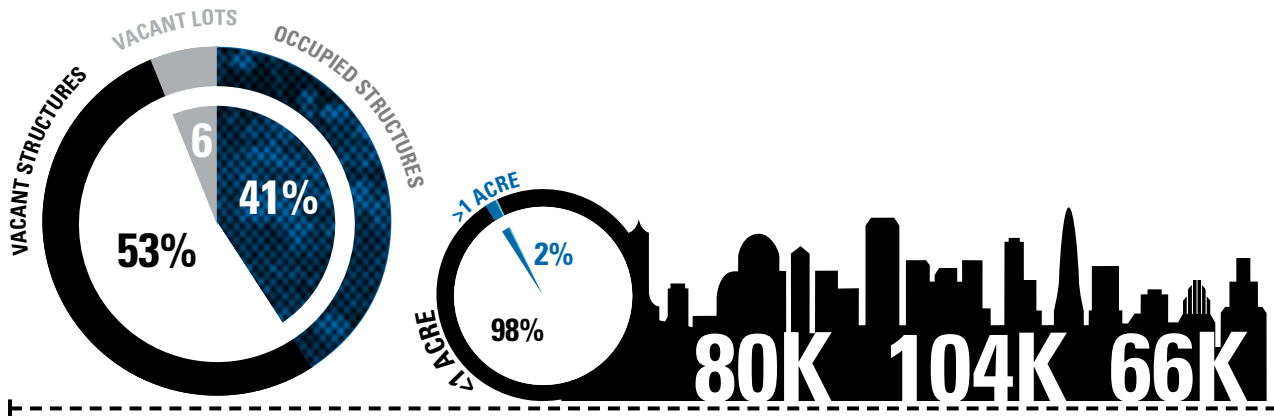
**50%**  
**PUBLIC OWNERSHIP**



HALF OF ALL PROPERTIES FROM OCTOBER 2011 AUCTION REVERTED BACK TO PUBLIC OWNERSHIP<sup>3</sup>

EIGHT SEPARATE PUBLIC AGENCIES MANAGE DETROIT'S PUBLIC LAND

# EXCESSIVE ABANDONMENT



FORECLOSED PROPERTIES IN  
DETROIT BY TYPE, 2011<sup>5</sup>

**45,000 PARCELS  
HAVE BEEN TAX  
FORECLOSED  
SINCE 2010<sup>6</sup>**

98% OF ALL  
CONTIGUOUS PUBLICLY  
OWNED PARCELS IN  
DETROIT ARE LESS  
THAN ONE ACRE IN  
TOTAL SIZE<sup>7</sup>

79,725 OF DETROIT'S  
349,170 HOUSING  
UNITS ARE VACANT<sup>8</sup>

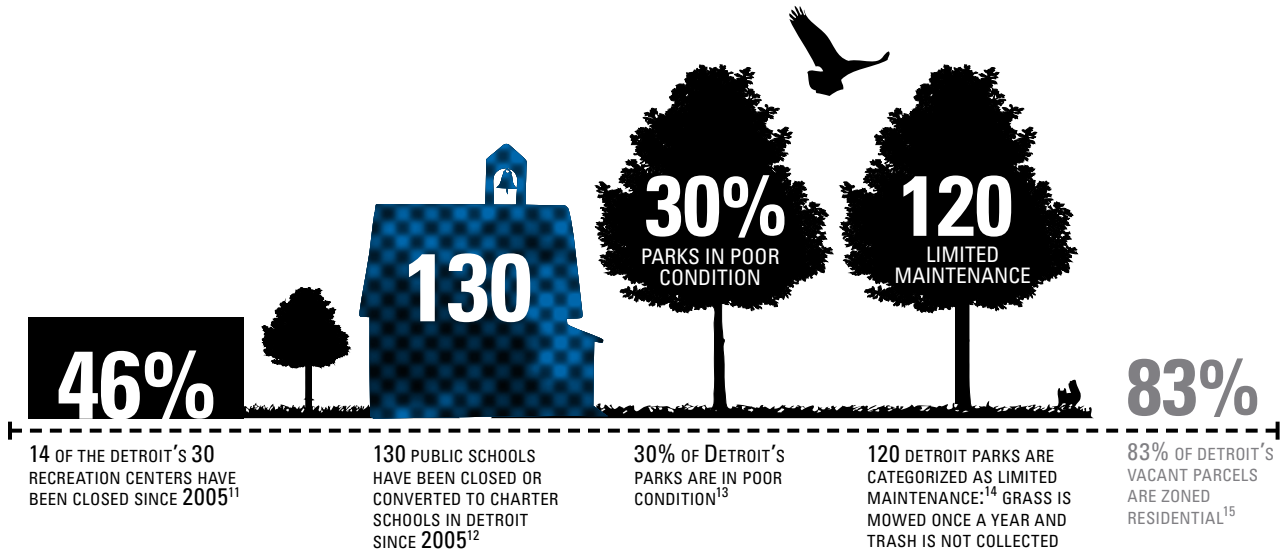
104,000 OF DETROIT'S  
385,390 PARCELS ARE  
VACANT<sup>9</sup>

66,000  
PROPERTIES IN  
DETROIT ARE  
PUBLICLY OWNED<sup>10</sup>

5) Data Driven Detroit; 6) WCT; 7) Planning and Development Department (P&DD), Detroit Public Schools (DPS), WCT, Michigan Land Bank Fast Track Authority, & Hamilton Anderson Associates; 8) US Census 2010; 9) P&DD; 10) P&DD, DPS, Wayne County Assessor



# PUBLIC EXPENDITURE BURDENS



11) Detroit Recreation Department (DRD); 12) The American Prospect; 13) DRD 2006; 14) DRD; 15) P&DD

# THE STATE OF DETROIT'S PUBLIC LAND

While many American cities also have large public land inventories, and are affected by market constraints that limit their ability to reuse their vacant land and buildings, no other city in the United States faces that reality to the extent of Detroit. As public officials and policy-makers begin to frame a strategic response to the public and vacant land inventories, they are faced with three daunting challenges:

**THE SCALE OF VACANCY.** The scale of the vacant property inventory, both in total and in public ownership, is far greater in Detroit than in any other American city. The number of vacant properties, as well as the number of houses acquired by speculators and rented out, continues to grow and destabilize neighborhoods. The number of properties going to tax foreclosure auction has been rising steadily, and in the fall of 2012 exceeded 20,000, an increase of two-thirds over the preceding year. Turning these vacant properties into an asset, in the face of limited resources and market demand constraints, is a major challenge.

**WEAK MARKET CONDITIONS.** Detroit is tasked with finding uses for vacant land that are not only achievable within the constraints of the current market, but which can plant the seeds for future market recovery. The growth of the vacant property inventory to its current proportions is more than anything else a reflection of extremely weak real estate market conditions, which—in conjunction with the limited public resources available—impose severe constraints on what can be done with vacant land. Since 2000, the number of vacant units has skyrocketed, while since peaking in 2005-2006, real estate sales and house values have plummeted. The median sales price for houses in Detroit in 2011 was only \$17,500.

Demographic and market trends show a continuing loss of population, and a continuing loss of demand for home ownership in many of the city's neighborhoods that have been stable up to this point. With a large surplus of predominantly single-family housing units in Detroit, there are only a few locations in the city where it still makes sense to build

new houses. Meanwhile, the cost of rehabilitating a long-empty older house or apartment building usually vastly exceeds the resulting market value. Even in Downtown and Midtown, where market demand appears to be stronger, making the numbers work for new development or major rehabilitation is challenging.

**MULTIPLE PUBLIC LANDHOLDING AGENCIES.** Public land in Detroit is held by many separate agencies, including city, county, and state agencies, as well as autonomous or quasi-governmental entities such as the Detroit Public Schools, the Detroit Housing Commission, and the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation. Few other cities have such fragmented holding of their public land inventory. There is no consistency of policy, procedure, or mission among these agencies, while many are hamstrung by burdensome legal requirements and complex procedures. The Department of Planning and Development controls the largest number of properties, yet its ability to do strategic disposition is constrained by procedural obstacles, including the need to obtain City Council approval for all transactions, however small and insignificant from a citywide perspective.

Public landholding agencies also must act in a context wherein well over half of the vacant buildings and land parcels in the city are owned not by the public sector, but by private owners. With the cost of holding vacant land in Detroit negligible, and regulation minimal, landowners can sit on properties, destabilizing neighborhoods or blocking the assembly of vacant land into buildable parcels. The Wayne County tax foreclosure process, meanwhile, continues to funnel an ever-growing number of properties into a revolving door of real estate speculation, further destabilizing the city's neighborhoods.

**Building a coordinated, strategic system for land management cutting across organizational and institutional boundaries, including maintaining the growing inventory of public properties and public facilities, is the challenge faced by the agencies holding public land in Detroit.**

**BREAKING THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF SPIRALING VACANCY.** Detroit's public land inventory can become a powerful asset in building a better future for the city. Current practices, however, do little more than maintain the status quo, while failing to take advantage of this valuable resource; indeed, they

perpetuate a vicious cycle in which vacancy triggers more vacancy, and in which properties move through a revolving door of speculation until they are stripped of value and end up abandoned. The sheer scale of the problem, though, coupled with the complex realities of market weakness and institutional/organizational fragmentation, demand bold new approaches, capable of breaking away from prior practices, overcoming these challenges and turning public land into an asset for Detroit's regeneration.

# IMPERATIVES

**We must be strategic and coordinated in our use of land.**

# PUBLIC LAND ACTIONS AND IMPACT

The use and maintenance of vacant and problem properties affect the quality of life in the city's neighborhoods more profoundly than almost any other single element in the urban environment. Vacant buildings contribute to crime, have an impact on public health, undermine neighbors' property values, and above all foster a sense of decay and decline that in turn leads to loss of confidence among residents and businesses—in their neighborhoods and in the city as a whole.

Detroit's ability to address its problem property issues is impeded by its severe fiscal and market constraints, but it is equally impeded by the absence of a systematic, coordinated approach to the problem, in which all public and private stakeholders are fully engaged. Such engagement is not an easy goal to achieve; it means creating a coordinated system in which all entities operate consistently, making decisions based on clear policy goals and principles, and utilizing each entity's legal and financial tools as efficiently as possible, while fully engaging non-governmental partners in making decisions and tackling problems. Having such a

system is more important than who actually owns the inventory. Whoever holds title to individual parcels, however, the whole should be thought of as a single inventory, guided by a single set of policies and goals, and integrated with parallel strategies to address the larger part of the vacant property inventory that remains in private hands. It will require many separate agencies, with separate missions and priorities, to subordinate many of their differences to a common direction and purpose.

## WHAT WE LEARNED FROM CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FEEDBACK

- 40% of survey respondents chose increase in blight as the most damaging impact of population loss in their neighborhood.
- Survey respondents ranked imperative #5, We must be strategic and coordinated IN OUR USE OF LAND, as the third most important out of all 12 imperatives.
- Comments about VACANCY & ABANDONMENT were the fourth most frequent type of comment out of approximately 180 topics.
- Participants mentioned over 200 parks, greenways, recreation centers, and gardens as top assets in their communities citywide.
- Top public land strategies recorded from DWP participants included:
  - ENFORCE CODES on privately owned land and structures.
  - IMPROVE AND STREAMLINE METHODS OF SELLING PUBLIC LAND.

# STRATEGIES AND IMPLEMENTATION

## PLANS FOR ACTION

**CREATING A COORDINATED, STRATEGIC SYSTEM FOR MANAGING PUBLIC ASSETS.** A coordinated, strategic system for managing Detroit's public land assets must cut across and integrate five areas of responsibility with respect to publicly owned land: acquisition and assembly, disposition, holding, maintenance, and demolition. Each poses distinct challenges. This system should also include a public role in dealing with privately owned problem properties.

**STRATEGIC PROPERTY ACQUISITION AND ASSEMBLY.** Public agencies are reluctant to add to the public land inventory because of the difficulties of maintaining and reusing the existing inventory. Many city residents are painfully aware of the city's problems maintaining the existing inventory. Moving toward a strategic approach for making public land an

asset will require both public officials and residents to rethink that position, yet refrain from adding properties wholesale or without careful thought.

Multiple public landholding agencies should agree on the priorities for strategic acquisition, and develop an ongoing joint process with the Wayne County Treasurer's Office to identify and target properties for public acquisition through the tax foreclosure process. This means not only knowing which properties should be prioritized for acquisition, but which public entity is the most appropriate one to take the properties in each case.

An important goal of strategic property acquisition is the assembly of larger publicly owned sites. The vast majority of publicly owned properties are small parcels, unsuitable for many potentially valuable



uses; even where public agencies hold larger parcels, they are often broken by privately owned out-parcels that impede their reuse. Systematic assembly of individual parcels into larger sites can create shovel-ready sites for future industries or other businesses in employment growth areas. Other large sites in high-vacancy areas can be converted to blue/green infrastructure. As public landholding entities identify their priority areas for acquisition, they should perform fine-grained, block-by-block analysis to identify and prioritize specific parcels that contribute to assembly of larger sites in key locations.

Property acquisition cannot be divorced from the rest of the system. It would be premature to acquire too many properties before practices for disposition and reuse have been improved to the point where properties are targeted for the most appropriate disposition and reuse as they are acquired. Similarly, maintenance systems must be improved to handle demand from the properties being added to the inventory. Failure to do so could make matters worse, and reinforce widespread community concerns about the City's ability to deal with its property assets.

**PROPERTY DISPOSITION AND REUSE.** Disposition is the single most important element in the strategy for public land. Each property disposition involves three separate but closely interwoven decisions:

- WHAT REUSE should the property be put to?
- WHAT ENTITY should most appropriately carry out the reuse?
- WHAT DISPOSITION METHOD is the best way to get property into the hands of the most appropriate user?

The first decision flows from the Strategic Framework's goals for land use, economic growth, city systems, and neighborhood stabilization and revitalization. The second clearly follows from the first: Whatever the reuse, each property should be conveyed to an entity with a compatible mission for that reuse, as well as the capacity to carry it out. These will be different for each reuse, dictating a different pool of potential buyers in each case. In some cases, the best strategy will be not to dispose of the property at all, but to hold it in inventory.

Finally, the method of disposition must be selected to ensure that the property ends up in the right hands. An auction is unlikely to be the best way to get a property to a community-serving organization for long-term greening, for example. Where the entity currently holding the property lacks the legal authority to dispose of it appropriately, a procedure should be established to convey the property to an

entity that has the necessary authority, which then disposes of the property.

The shared disposition system should include the following features:

- a common property database, including a user-friendly and accessible web presence for all public land information;
- formal policies and procedures for disposition that all of the public landholding entities follow and that are readily available to the public in written form;
- a single ‘front door’ for receiving and processing applications for public land;
- an efficient and goal-oriented disposition process, with transparent guidelines and procedures; and
- ongoing coordination and integration with public and private agencies pursuing the city’s land use, economic growth, and environmental goals.

In the final analysis, the disposition of public assets is a process designed to serve the larger goals of the community, and must be carried out in that spirit.

**PROPERTY HOLDING.** Not all properties should be sold off, even when a willing buyer is present. Selling

an individual small parcel in an area where public entities hold multiple parcels, and where assembly of those properties, along with strategic acquisition, can create a significantly more marketable or buildable property, is counterproductive. The value the City realizes is likely to be small compared to the future value that could be created, while by selling individual parcels, the opportunity for assembly may be lost. Properties should be held in the public land inventory for three different reasons:

- **LONG-TERM PUBLIC BENEFIT:** properties that are best used for stormwater management or public open space should be retained indefinitely in public ownership;
- **ASSEMBLY:** properties in areas—particularly those identified as economic growth target areas—that can be assembled into larger and more buildable parcels; and
- **MARKET CHANGE:** properties that should be held by the City because they are in areas that are likely to experience market improvement within the next 10 years or sooner, at which time the City can promote significantly higher-quality redevelopment or reuse.

Although in the latter two cases, the ultimate goal is to convey the properties out of the public inventory,

holding the property until the most appropriate time for reuse will significantly enhance its reuse potential and the fiscal benefits to the city.

**MAINTENANCE.** Maintaining the thousands of vacant properties under public control is a massive challenge. Despite valiant efforts, limited resources and other constraints leave many vacant lots inadequately maintained, and many vacant buildings inadequately secured. The City can enhance its maintenance of vacant land and reduce blight by targeting maintenance resources to key areas, using creative strategies to reduce maintenance costs, holding private owners accountable for their properties, and enlisting civic organizations and residents as partners.

Specific strategies that can achieve these objectives include targeting maintenance resources more carefully to threatened residential neighborhoods, using creative landscape interventions to reduce maintenance costs, and shifting some maintenance responsibilities to other entities. Individual lots in low-vacancy areas should be sold or leased where possible to private entities, whether sold to homeowners as side lots, used as community open space, or maintained by neighborhood associations or block groups. Enforcing maintenance

requirements for privately owned properties will motivate them to take responsibility for their properties or pay the City of Detroit to maintain them.

**DEMOLITION.** 40,000 to 50,000 vacant buildings stand in Detroit today. Realistically, perhaps no more than 10 percent of them are likely to be reused or mothballed for future reuse, while additional buildings continue to be vacated and abandoned every day. With the population continuing to decline, neither the financial resources nor the market demand exist to save these thousands of buildings all over the city, nor are such resources likely to exist in the short term. The magnitude of the problem calls for resources to be targeted where it will have the greatest positive impact on the surrounding area.

To make sure that we save buildings that can and should be saved, demolition decisions should be made on the basis of: (1) how they affect the stability and viability of residential neighborhoods and economic growth target areas; and (2) how they affect realization of long-term goals for land use, economic growth, neighborhood stabilization and the environment. While room must be made for buildings that would need to be taken down because of urgent health and safety concerns despite overall

neighborhood and planning objectives, those should be exceptions. Priority criteria for demolition may include:

- Buildings in vital but at-risk neighborhoods, where the abandoned building is a blighting influence on the surrounding properties;
- Buildings in economic growth target areas, where demolition will remove a blighting influence or further land assembly for reuse; and
- Buildings in areas slated for blue infrastructure, where the building location and footprint affects the utility of larger areas for stormwater management.

A procedure should be put in place to engage the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, Detroit Planning and Development Department, Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, and other relevant public agencies, as well as key neighborhood associations and community development organizations (CDOs), to ensure the effective use of limited resources.

Post-demolition site treatment also deserves greater attention, particularly for properties in low-vacancy residential neighborhoods, where the risk of the vacant lot becoming a blighting factor in itself is significant. Wherever possible, the most appropriate landscape intervention for the lot should be identified in advance—in consultation with neighborhood organizations and CDOs—and incorporated into the demolition specification. This will reduce the overall cost of treating the property and ensure that the lot becomes a community asset rather than a problem.

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FEEDBACK AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

- The process of public entities purchasing, holding, maintaining, and/or selling needs improvement
- Competition for assets distracts from a strategic vision
- Land-holding agencies are not handling properties in Detroit ways that benefit residents
- Improve and streamline methods of selling public land
- Increase transparency around public land disposition
- Focus on improving the process, and the focus on accessibility (e.g., internet purchasing)

### PILOT PROJECT

#### RESTRUCTURED DISPOSITION PROCESS

Develop a coordinated strategy for strategic disposition of properties in public ownership through the partnership of multiple land-holding agencies.

Image Source: Hamilton Anderson Associates



## USING A DECISION-MAKING MATRIX

No plan can prescribe the ideal future outcomes for a community, particularly in a city the size and complexity of Detroit. The future is uncertain, and is likely to both present challenges and offer opportunities that cannot be predicted in advance. For that reason, the focus of the Detroit Strategic Framework is not to lay down prescriptive uses and outcomes, but—as reflected in its title—to provide a strategic framework for local decision making. Nowhere is that reflected more clearly than in the area of land assets, where decisions about thousands of properties must be made over the coming years, within a constantly changing economic, social, and political environment. The purpose of this section is to provide a framework within which public officials, business and community leaders, and residents can make informed, strategic decisions designed to lead to the best outcomes for the city and its residents. In that process, the decision matrix can be a valuable tool.

A decision matrix is a tool that public officials and others use to solve a problem, by posing a series of either/or questions that gradually lead the user to the best solution or solutions from the wider range

of theoretical options. The decision matrices in this chapter can be used by planners, public officials, community groups, and residents to identify the most appropriate disposition strategies or outcomes for those parcels.

To illustrate how a decision-making matrix is used, an example is presented on the page 597. In order to reach a conclusion about the most appropriate disposition strategy, a series of questions is asked about the parcel. The answers to the questions for a hypothetical property are highlighted in the matrix. In the illustration, the questions are

- **STEP 1: CATEGORY.** What type of property is it? This matrix is to be used to evaluate alternatives for parcels of publicly owned vacant land larger than 1 acre in predominantly residential neighborhoods. Other decision matrices, presented later, will do the same for small vacant land parcels, for vacant houses, and for parcels in economic growth target areas.
- **STEP 2: FRAMEWORK ZONE.** What framework zone is the parcel located in? Since development strategies vary on the basis of the framework

zone, this is a key piece of information for planning the disposition of the parcel. In the hypothetical case shown here, the parcel is in a Moderate-Vacancy zone.

- **STEP 3: PROPERTY FEATURE.** Is the parcel suitable for assembly? Whether a parcel is suitable for assembly, in the sense that it may be surrounded by other vacant land or vacant buildings, is an important consideration for determining its reuse potential. In the hypothetical case, the parcel is not suitable for assembly, at least in the near term—it may be surrounded by occupied buildings, or land clearly slated for some other purpose.
- **STEP 4: AREA CHARACTERISTICS.** What is the level of market demand in the area? The near-term redevelopment potential of the property is most powerfully driven by the level of market demand in the immediate area; only limited market demand for new development exists in the vicinity of the hypothetical parcel.

These four questions allow the user to answer the fifth, critical question:

- **STEP 5: REUSE/DISPOSITION OPTIONS.** What are the most appropriate reuse or disposition options for the property? Since the user knows from the first four questions that the property is in a Low-Vacancy 1 zone, but one where the market at present is weak, it is likely that the most appropriate solution may be to find an interim green use for the property, while holding it for future redevelopment as market conditions improve. This is not, however, the only possible disposition option—if there are other parcels in the area that are more market-suitable, or if suggested by the particular features of the parcel, it may be appropriate to cycle the property into long-term green reuse, whether for open space, agriculture, or blue/green infrastructure. To try to package the parcel in the short run for redevelopment, however, appears clearly inappropriate.

This exercise points out the limitations as well as the value of a decision matrix—it can help the user zoom in on an appropriate decision, but cannot substitute for additional, more detailed information the user may have, nor for the user’s exercise of judgment.

## KEY TO THE MATRIX

### 1 CATEGORY

The category refers to the basic type of property under consideration—in this case, a vacant parcel larger than 1 acre within a residential area.

### 2 FRAMEWORK ZONE

The Framework Zone in which the parcel is located—in this case, the parcel is located in a Moderate-Vacancy zone.

### 3 PROPERTY FEATURE

The key feature on the parcel with respect to its redevelopment potential—in this case, by virtue of its location or adjacent uses, it is deemed “not suitable” for near-term assembly into a larger parcel.

## DECISION-MAKING MATRIX FOR REUSE OF NEIGHBORHOOD PARCELS

1

CATEGORY

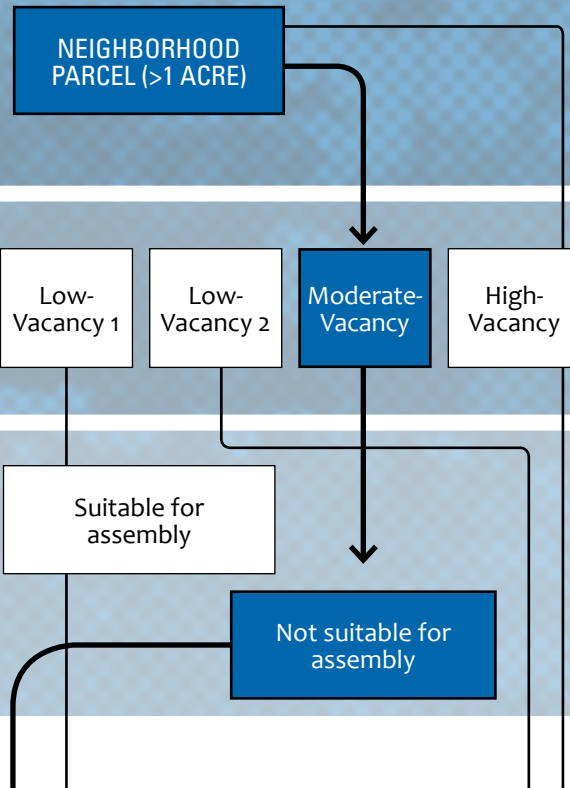
NEIGHBORHOOD  
PARCEL (>1 ACRE)

2

FRAMEWORK  
ZONELow-  
Vacancy 1Low-  
Vacancy 2Moderate-  
VacancyHigh-  
Vacancy

3

KEY PROPERTIES

Suitable for  
assemblyNot suitable for  
assembly



#### 4 AREA CHARACTERISTICS

The key features of the area with respect to its redevelopment potential—in this case, the area has limited market demand.

4

AREA CHARACTERISTICS

Strong market demand

Limited market demand

#### 5 REUSE/DISPOSITION OPTIONS

The alternative reuse options available for a property—in this case, the preferred option is to use the parcel for an interim green use while holding for redevelopment. Selling or leasing for long-term green reuse is an alternative, while selling for near term redevelopment is not presently a realistic option.

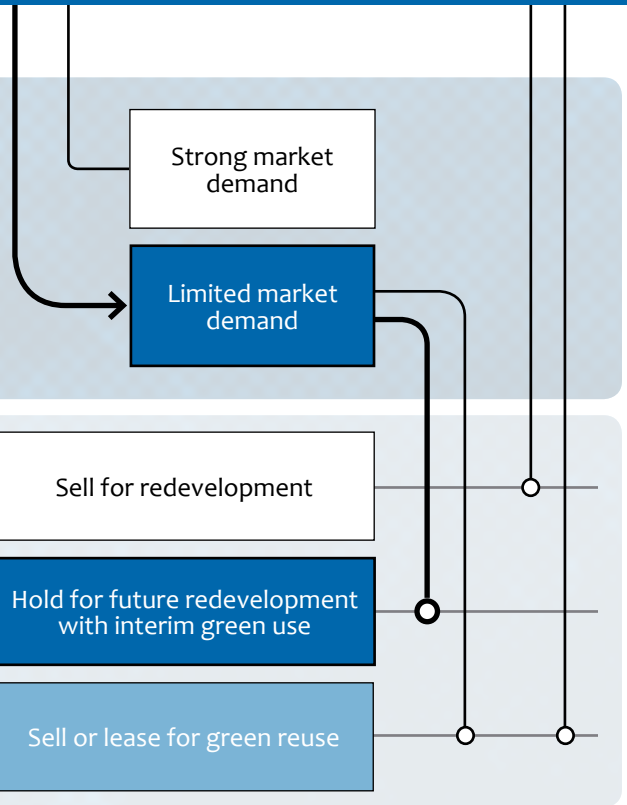
5

REUSE / DISPOSITION OPTIONS

Sell for redevelopment

Hold for future redevelopment with interim green use

Sell or lease for green reuse





## PUBLICLY OWNED VACANT PROPERTY

■ PUBLICLY OWNED VACANT PROPERTY

While the 66,000 publicly owned parcels in the city of Detroit have traditionally been seen as a liability, through a strategic and coordinated approach, this land can be turned into a valuable asset to help move the city forward.

Sources: Planning and Development Department, Wayne County Land Bank, Detroit Public Schools, Wayne County Treasurer, Michigan Land Bank Fast Track Authority



**FIVE TRANSFORMATIVE IDEAS : SIX IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES****A****TARGET VACANT PUBLIC LAND AND BUILDINGS IN EMPLOYMENT DISTRICTS FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH**

Detroit has strong assets for economic growth, yet is held back by the shortage of ‘move-in’ buildings and shovel-ready buildable sites into which local firms can expand, and new firms from outside Detroit can locate. The strategic reuse of public land holdings—coupled with an aggressive strategy to make private land speculation more costly—may be the critical element in Detroit’s ability to realize its economic growth potential. By positioning publicly and privately owned vacant land in and around economic growth employment districts for assembly and reuse, Detroit can level the playing field to compete with suburban greenfield development opportunities.

Detroit needs a series of highly focused strategies to create sites that can be marketed on short notice to potential users, as well as to create opportunities for existing firms to grow their businesses. These strategies fall into three broad categories:

- strategic acquisition and assembly of properties to create desirable and buildable sites;
- targeted disposition of properties to developers and end users around specific economic development goals, while holding properties for further assembly; and

- strategies to increase the cost of holding vacant land and buildings by private owners, while fostering the greater use of underused industrial and commercial buildings.

These strategies are detailed in the next section on using land assets for economic growth.

#### IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

- 1 Identify strategic targets for acquisition of properties by public entities.
- 2 Adopt policies for targeted disposition and holding of properties in economic growth areas.
- 3 Increase the cost of holding vacant property.
- 4 Adopt program to foster greater use of underused buildings.

**FIVE TRANSFORMATIVE IDEAS : SIX IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES****B****USE VACANT PUBLIC LAND AS A TOOL FOR NEIGHBORHOOD STABILIZATION**

While not the only factor threatening the stability of Detroit's vital yet at-risk residential neighborhoods, the proliferation of vacant lots and empty buildings scattered around those areas are a significant force blighting these neighborhoods and accelerating their decline. Factors contributing to blight include the inadequate maintenance that many lots receive, difficulty in putting them back into neighborhood-enhancing reuse, housing vacancy and abandonment, and the continued proliferation of privately owned vacant lots and problem buildings. Targeted strategies for these sites can minimize their blighting effect and turn them into neighborhood assets.

High priority must be given to actions to remove existing blighting elements in at-risk neighborhoods, and to the extent possible, prevent future blighting elements from appearing. Specific strategies that should be pursued include

- systematically reusing vacant lots in ways that contribute to neighborhood stability, such as community gardens, side lots, and other landscape treatments to create attractive low-maintenance environments;
- expeditiously recycling vacant and abandoned houses for reoccupancy where feasible, or demolition where reoccupancy is not feasible;

- adopting regulatory programs and incentives to motivate more responsible ownership by absentee landlords; and
- increasing the cost of holding vacant land and buildings by private owners.

All of these actions should be planned and implemented through partnerships among city agencies, neighborhood associations and community development corporations, to leverage the energy and human resources that these organizations are willing and ready to bring to stabilize and rebuild their neighborhoods.

These activities should be coordinated closely with other neighborhood stabilization activities, including steps to increase public safety, foster greater home ownership, and build stronger neighborhood organizations.

#### IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

- 1 Reuse vacant lots to enhance neighborhood stability.
- 2 Adopt targeted demolition strategy based on stabilization priorities.
- 3 Address problem landlords.
- 4 Increase the cost of holding vacant property.
- 5 Pursue targeted neighborhood stabilization strategies.



## FIVE TRANSFORMATIVE IDEAS : SIX IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

### C

#### TRANSFORM LARGELY VACANT AREAS THROUGH BLUE AND GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

Large parts of Detroit are dominated by vacant land and buildings with little or no short-term or medium-term development potential, but with the ability to be turned into valuable assets for the city through a variety of green reuse alternatives. Today's largely unmanaged, chaotic vacant land environment in these areas contributes to the sense of neglect felt in many parts of the city, undermining the quality of life not only for the residents of these areas, but for the city as a whole.

Perhaps the most dramatic potential for transformation lies in the use of public land for blue/green infrastructure; that is, reuse of land to absorb stormwater and divert it from the city's sewer system, or to clean the air and improve community

health. Reusing vacant land in these ways can save the city hundreds of millions or billions of dollars in sewer upgrading costs while creating landscaped and maintained marshes, lakes, greenways, and forests that will remove blight, enhance their surroundings while linking them to the rest of the city, and potentially create future market value and redevelopment opportunities.

#### IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

- 1 Hold land between interstates/industrial areas and neighborhoods for green infrastructure (do not release for future residential development).
- 2 Acquire available land for blue infrastructure in key locations.

**FIVE TRANSFORMATIVE IDEAS : SIX IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES****D****LINK PUBLIC FACILITY AND PROPERTY DECISIONS TO LARGER STRATEGIES**

In recent years, many schools, parks, recreation centers, police substations, and other public facilities have been closed as Detroit adjusts to new fiscal and demographic realities. Some have been used for other purposes, while many sit vacant. At the same time, Detroit Public Schools has built, expanded, or upgraded other school facilities. Decisions about which facilities should be closed, or where services or maintenance should be reduced or enhanced, as well as the reuse of vacant facilities, should be guided by the City's land use and neighborhood stabilization goals, in order to maximize the value of existing facilities and reduce the blighting effect of vacant buildings and the potential destabilizing effect of

future closings. At the same time, the presence of a number of new or significantly upgraded school facilities represents an important opportunity for neighborhood stabilization. Targeted neighborhood strategies around new or significantly upgraded schools, along with co-location of other community-serving activities can maximize their value as neighborhood assets while enhancing the quality of life in the surrounding area.



**IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS**

- 1 Create priority system for public land and parks acquisition.
- 2 Create joint policies and systems for disposition of public property.
- 3 Adopt coordinated maintenance strategy for public land.
- 4 Adopt targeted demolition strategy based on stabilization priorities.
- 5 Use new and upgraded schools as community anchors for stabilization.
- 6 Review criteria for school closing to reflect neighborhood stability factors.
- 7 Update parks and recreation facilities planning to reflect current and future populations and budgets (update aspects of 2006 Strategic Master Plan by the DRD).
- 8 Parks and recreation planning at neighborhood scales: refine citywide strategy of Detroit Strategic Framework through smaller-scaled analysis.

**FIVE TRANSFORMATIVE IDEAS : SIX IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES****E****INCORPORATE MORE INNOVATIVE  
VACANT LAND MAINTENANCE  
APPROACHES**

Only a handful of the thousands of vacant sites in Detroit are likely to see redevelopment—in the sense of new buildings—over the next decade or more. As demolitions continue to take place, the number of vacant parcels is likely to grow. If there is one central question that must drive the entire discussion of public land, it is this: how can one transform these thousands of parcels from their current status, where they blight neighborhoods and form barriers between communities, to a new status in which they become assets, enhancing rather than blighting their surroundings, and linking rather than separating the different parts of the city?

While vacant land today fragments the city, isolating neighborhoods from one another, it can become a vehicle for re-knitting the city's fabric. The secret lies in giving a central role to the use of landscape in its many forms and variations, as laid out elsewhere in this Framework as the vehicle for transforming vacant land into a productive part of the urban environment, whether with respect to ongoing maintenance, short-term holding uses, or long-term reuse for purposes such as stormwater management, urban agriculture, carbon forests, and more. Landscape needs to become a central rather than a peripheral element in Detroit's toolkit of urban land

uses. This is as true in neighborhoods—where many scattered vacant parcels need to be integrated into the community fabric through sensitive landscape treatments—as in high-vacancy areas, where large-scale uses for vacant land are needed.

#### IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

- 1 Adjust city maintenance standards, strategies, and practices to vary by framework zone and future land use (do not mow all vacant lots in city regardless of location, but instead adopt different lower-cost maintenance strategies in different areas); look for partnerships to help with land maintenance.
- 2 Form partnerships with community groups and other organizations, businesses, and individuals to help maintain land.
- 3 Refine set of landscape maintenance typologies and develop cost estimates to implement.

**FIVE TRANSFORMATIVE IDEAS : SIX IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES****F****USE MORE AGGRESSIVE REGULATORY TOOLS**

Well over half of the vacant properties in Detroit are privately owned, including the great majority of the city's vacant buildings. No vacant property strategy that focuses entirely on the publicly owned inventory, yet fails to address the private inventory, can hope to be transformative for the city's future. In addition to vacant properties, large numbers of occupied but poorly maintained properties, often owned by short-term speculators, are destabilizing the city's neighborhoods, while rising numbers of properties—vacant and occupied—are appearing on the county's annual tax auctions. More aggressive, targeted strategies to address these challenges need to be an integral part of the public land strategy.

The City needs to establish clear standards for maintenance of vacant properties by private owners, and use its regulatory authority aggressively to increase the cost of doing business for those owners who do not maintain their properties to the full required standards. Restructuring and effectively enforcing existing vacant property ordinances is an important first step. A second priority should be strategies to motivate responsible landlord behavior and penalize speculators who do not maintain their properties, a critical issue in many neighborhoods where more and more formerly owner-occupied houses are falling into the hands of absentee owners. Finally, the tax foreclosure process, through which

thousands of properties move through a revolving door of speculation, foreclosure, and ultimate abandonment, needs to be addressed.

Neighborhood associations and CDOs need to be full partners with the public land agencies in designing and carrying out these strategies. Not only do these agencies lack the resources to tackle the problem on their own, but many of Detroit's neighborhood associations and CDOs are actively seeking opportunities to take responsibility for the future of their neighborhoods. Only by tapping their energy—not merely in carrying out City initiatives, but by playing a strong role in framing and designing those initiatives—will Detroit have a realistic chance to succeed in finding new purposes for its vacant land.

#### IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

- 1 Increase the cost of holding vacant property.
- 2 Address problem landlords.
- 3 Create formal partnership with Wayne County Treasurer for tax foreclosure auctions.

# **A TARGET VACANT PUBLIC LAND AND BUILDINGS IN EMPLOYMENT DISTRICTS FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH**

Detroit has strong economic growth potential: many Detroit firms want to grow, while other firms want to move to Detroit, adding jobs and strengthening the local tax base. Three broad strategies should be used to put vacant land and buildings in the service of economic growth:

## **STRATEGICALLY ACQUIRE AND ASSEMBLE LAND FOR DESIRABLE/BUILDABLE SITES.**

One of the biggest constraints on Detroit's economic growth is the shortage of good quality 'move-in' buildings and shovel-ready buildable sites. Few of the many vacant industrial and commercial buildings in Detroit are in move-in condition; most require major rehabilitation in order to be usable. Similarly, while public agencies hold large amounts of vacant land in employment districts, most of it is fragmented—often broken up by parcels held by speculators—and not suitable for redevelopment.

Public land can become a critical asset in efforts to address this problem. While adopting a strategic approach to disposition, public agencies must also acquire properties in economic growth districts where these properties clearly further the goal of creating buildable sites for economic development and job creation. This should be a top priority for vacant land acquisition by public agencies, along with acquisition of industrial buildings that can be rendered move-in at reasonable cost. Objectives for property acquisition can include developing sites that can be marketed to businesses coming into the city or that need new/expanded facilities. In addition, they can be sites identified close to existing major industrial or other job-generating facilities, to be used to further the expansion of those facilities in place.

**COMBINE TARGETED DISPOSITION TO DEVELOPERS AND END USERS WITH STRATEGIC HOLDING FOR FUTURE ASSEMBLY.** While creating a pool of buildable sites and usable buildings is a necessary step toward fostering an effective economic growth strategy, it must be matched with a parallel systematic approach to the disposition of land and buildings in employment districts. The fundamental principle is that no public land should be sold except for uses that clearly further creating jobs, or strengthening the vitality of the employment district; furthermore, that small parcels should not be sold at all, if by so doing the opportunity for significantly greater impact through assembly is lost. These parcels should be held in inventory while the process of acquisition and assembly takes place.

Priority should go to sales to an end user, either an adjacent existing business or institution already in place, or a firm locating or relocating in the city. Where land is sold to a non-user, such as a developer or investor, the public agency should not only be as certain as possible that the development will actually take place, but should build in provisions for the property to revert back to the City or other public agency in the event that the developer fails to perform within a reasonable time. While some land in employment districts can be used for non-

development uses, such as blue/green infrastructure, those uses should be limited to those which also enhance the attractiveness or marketability of the employment district.

**INCREASE THE COST OF HOLDING VACANT PROPERTY.** The fragmentation of ownership in Detroit's employment districts makes it all but impossible for an effective land reuse strategy to take place without aggressively tackling the privately owned vacant and underutilized properties interspersed throughout these areas, often held by speculators who anticipate potential public interest in these properties. Under current conditions, the cost to a private landowner to hold a vacant property, neglect it, and allow it to become a nuisance, while impeding economic development efforts, is all but zero. The City should immediately increase the cost of holding vacant land by establishing a vacant land registration fee, imposing clear maintenance requirements for privately owned vacant land, and aggressively enforcing both fee payment and maintenance requirements.

In addition, many occupied buildings in employment districts are severely underutilized, often occupied by a firm that may use as little as 10 percent of the building's floor area, or using buildings that

can support labor-intensive activities for storage. Voluntary approaches, including facilitating owners' leasing space in their buildings, should be used to address this concern.

"To help industrial development, there should be pre-assembled sites for development and obsolete/blighted structures torn down."

For Profit Real Estate Developer and Broker Roundtable

### IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

- 1 Identify strategic targets for acquisition of properties by public entities.
- 2 Adopt policies for targeted disposition and holding of properties in economic growth areas.
- 3 Increase the cost of holding vacant property.
- 4 Adopt program to foster greater utilization of underutilized buildings.

### PILOT PROJECT

- 1 target acquisition and assemblage in employment districts

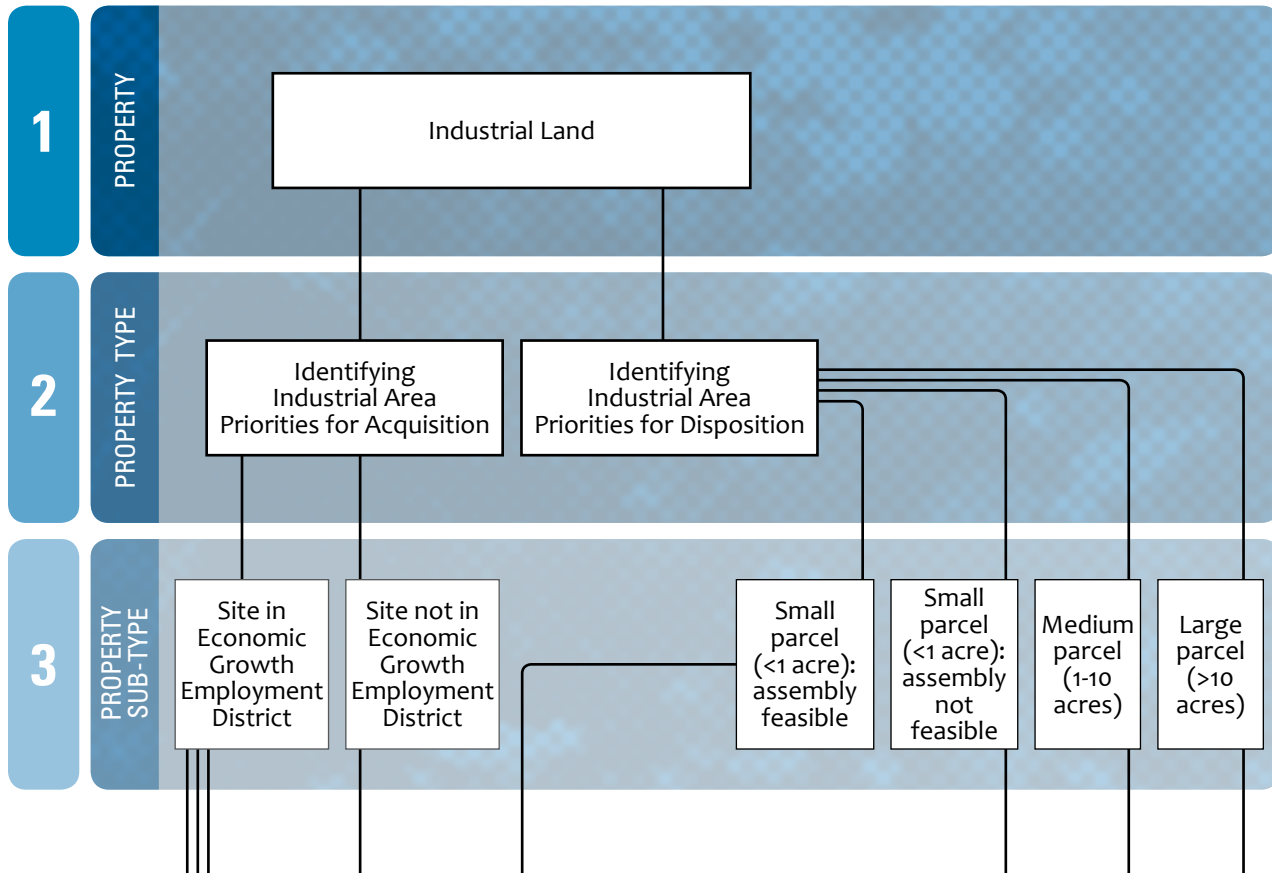
"Sitting on my front porch the other day with my daughter, we were just talking about the number of homes in the city that are vacant (a strange conversation to have with an 8 year old). The ironic part to this problem is that there are so many families living in a home far too small for them, are homeless, or are in the process of losing their home. Detroit has an obscene amount of houses that could be repurposed for families to use – but with all the bureaucracy the homes are left to sit, be vandalized, rot, and then burned down. Irony."

Tim, Detroit 24/7, 5/2012





## DECISION-MAKING MATRIX: INDUSTRIAL LAND ACQUISITION & DISPOSITION



## 4

## REUSE ALTERNATIVES

Do not acquire

Prioritize large sites

Prioritize sites closer to existing public land

Prioritize sites that are either  
(1) vacant land  
or  
(2) buildings in usable conditions

Bundle with other parcels for infill industrial or compatible development

Sell to adjacent property owner

Use for non-development purpose in area compatible with existing industrial fabric

Use for non-development purpose in area without intact industrial fabric

Sell to adjacent property owner

Sell individually for infill industrial or compatible development

Bundle with other parcels for infill industrial or compatible development

Sell to adjacent property owner

Sell individually for infill industrial or compatible development

Bundle/create assemblage with other parcels for infill industrial or compatible development

Hold with interim use for future redevelopment

Use for non-development purpose in area compatible with existing industrial fabric

## 5

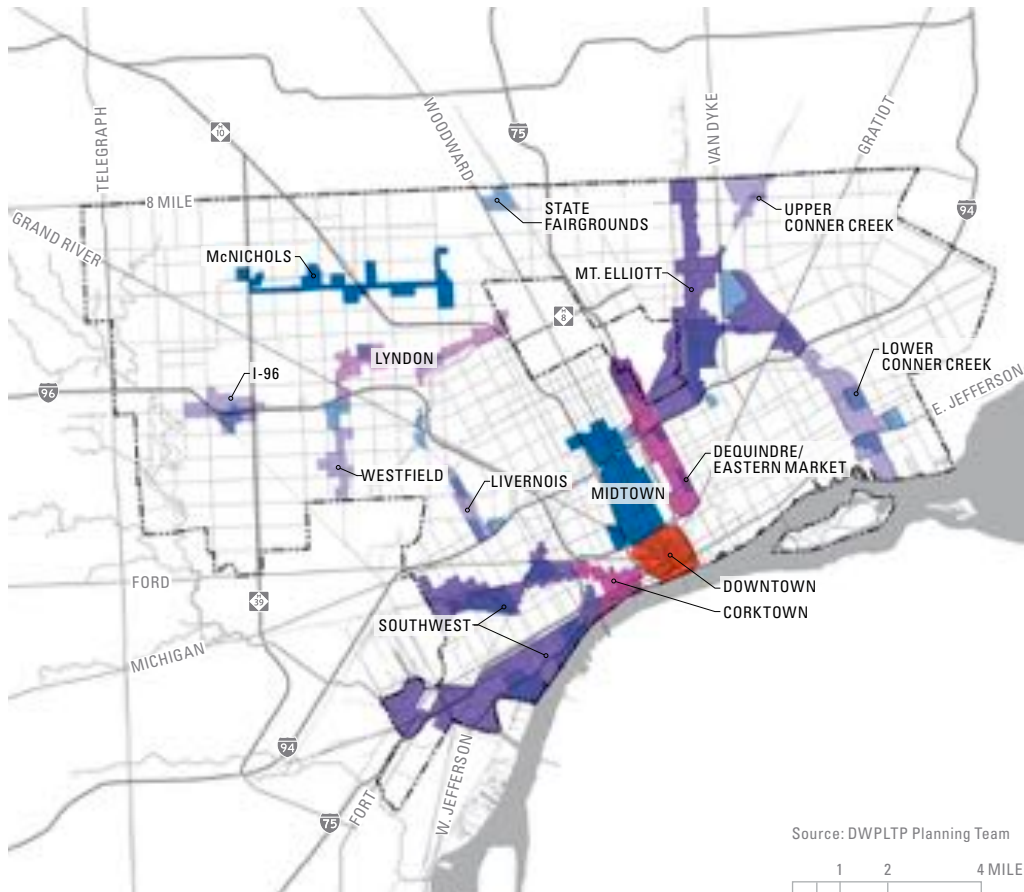
## PREFERRED SELL HOLD OPTIONS

Hold for assembly

- (1) Sell to adjacent viable industrial user, or
- (2) Use for non-development purpose

- (1) Sell to adjacent viable industrial user or if viable development parcel,
- (2) Sell to developer for industrial development, or (3) Hold where substantial assembly opportunity exists

- (1) Sell to developer to build industrial (or compatible mixed-use) building or buildings,
- or (2) Hold where substantial assembly opportunity exists



## AREAS OF POTENTIAL ECONOMIC GROWTH

### PRIMARY EMPLOYMENT DISTRICTS

- DIGITAL / CREATIVE
- EDS & MEDS AND DIGITAL / CREATIVE
- INDUSTRIAL / CREATIVE
- GLOBAL TRADE / INDUSTRIAL

### SECONDARY EMPLOYMENT DISTRICTS

- INDUSTRIAL / CREATIVE
- INDUSTRIAL

- ▨ POTENTIAL ECONOMIC GROWTH & INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Detroit's public land inventory can be a major asset for the future economic growth of the city. To ensure that there is ample land to allow for future growth, a strategic and targeted approach is needed for acquisition, assembly, and disposition of public land.

Source: DWPLTP Planning Team



**TARGET PUBLIC LAND STRATEGIES TO SPECIFIC DISTRICTS.** Every economic growth district presents different opportunities stemming from the existing patterns of land ownership, the concentration of potentially developable land and the needs of the economic clusters best suited to each district. These factors directly influence the approach to assembly, disposition, and management of publicly owned land. The needs of specific economic clusters, in particular, dictate three distinct approaches for publicly owned land in economic districts.

**INDUSTRIAL USE DISTRICTS.** The market for industrial real estate is different from the market and needs of other economic activities. Industrial users are looking for land in large, easy-to-develop sites that are close to infrastructure and generally near other industrial activity. With the exception of adaptive reuse of former industrial structures, it is difficult to attract new industrial development to sites of less than 5 acres, as space—either in a building or on the grounds—is required for different combinations of truck staging, material storage, warehousing, fabrication, packaging and parking. Large, market-ready sites for industrial development are rare in established cities, including Detroit. Proactive and sustained approaches to land assembly are needed to

transform small, scattered vacant parcels into large, marketable development sites.

To support modern industrial development in Detroit, publicly owned land should be held and expanded through targeted acquisition strategies to create large, marketable sites for private investment within the core industrially based employment districts. These districts include Southwest, Mt. Elliott, and Dequindre-Eastern Market.

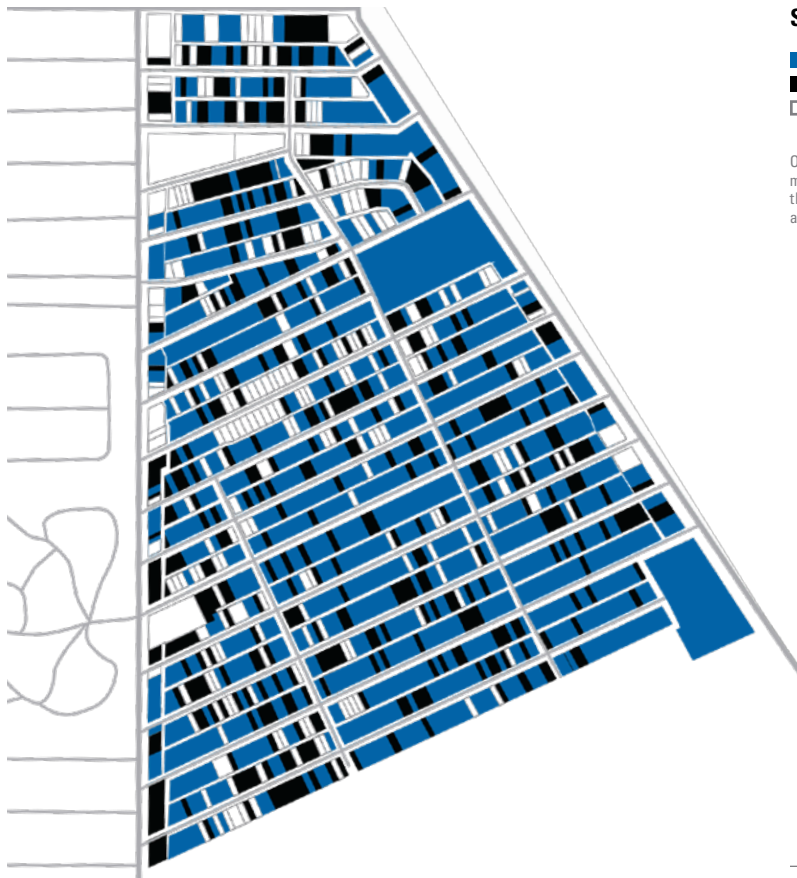
**NON-INDUSTRIAL USES.** Unlike industrial uses, where the availability of large development sites drives the market, the size of available parcels is often not the primary challenge faced by businesses in non-industrial clusters. Firms within the information technology, creative, and Eds & Meds clusters can utilize a wide range of sites and structures of different sizes, depending upon the needs of each individual business. Within economic growth districts that target non-industrial employment like McNichols, Midtown, and Downtown, the primary approach is to adopt disposition policies to ensure that properties are sold for the most appropriate reuse and to individuals and firms that are best qualified to redevelop the property, and that have a clear, sensible plan for its redevelopment. Public

agencies should consider offering established institutions, such as medical centers or other major employers, in these areas the right of first-refusal to acquire public land and buildings, in order to enable these institutions to assemble land to meet their facility needs.

**RETAIL ACTIVITY.** The land use framework plan calls for focusing retail in a series of established nodes designated as neighborhood centers and district centers. Public land within these centers should be assembled into marketable sites. Where market demand exists, these properties should be released to investors and developers through a competitive request for proposals; in some areas, however, they will have to be held in public ownership for some period in order to avoid creating an oversupply. It is preferable to hold valuable parcels, even for many years, rather than sell them in the short run for development that, by virtue of inadequate scale or quality, will hinder achievement of the district's economic potential in the long run.

**POTENTIAL GROWTH AREAS.** Given Detroit's long-term economic development potential, the inventory of land and buildings inside the areas currently designated as employment districts may

not be adequate to accommodate potential long-term growth in jobs and economic activity. In order to provide the opportunity for orderly expansion of these districts in the future, and to forestall pressures for expansion into inappropriate areas such as sound, well-established residential districts, the Strategic Framework identifies a number of high-vacancy areas with substantial public land holdings adjacent to employment districts. These areas, called priority hold areas, are designated as land reserves for future employment district expansion. Public land acquisition activities should be pursued in these areas in order to advance long-term assembly of large buildable parcels. While interim green uses may be appropriate, land in these areas should not be committed for long-term use incompatible with future economic development and job-generating reuses.



### SAMPLE DETAIL OF POTENTIAL GROWTH AREA

- PUBLICLY OWNED LAND
- VACANT LAND
- PRIVATELY OWNED LAND

One of the main challenges that cities like Detroit face is a lack of market-ready sites for industrial development. In appropriate areas of the city, public agencies can build off of the current public land portfolio and begin to create market-ready sites for development.

# **B** USE VACANT PUBLIC LAND AS A TOOL FOR NEIGHBORHOOD STABILIZATION

Detroit contains a continuum of neighborhoods and residential areas, varying by vacancy, market activity, physical condition, social and economic dynamics, organizational strength, and other factors. At one end, we find areas that are largely vacant, with scattered occupied houses surrounded by vacant land and abandoned buildings; at the other, sound, well-maintained residential neighborhoods with high rates of homeownership. Even many of Detroit's strongest neighborhoods, however, are dotted with vacant land and buildings, often neglected and inadequately maintained, while in many of Detroit's highest-vacancy, most heavily disinvested areas, one finds intact streets or blocks, and dedicated homeowners and civic associations.

The different conditions of different neighborhoods, particularly with respect to their physical characteristics and market activity reflected in the framework zones, dictate different public land strategies. Most of the city's vital neighborhoods are in the Low-Vacancy framework zone. At the same

time, while there are vital neighborhoods in the other framework zones, the proliferation of vacant land and buildings in higher-vacancy areas has undermined the fabric of many once-vital neighborhoods, leading to the need for different approaches to public land management and disposition in many of these areas. Within each framework zone, moreover, we find certain areas that by virtue of location or physical characteristics stand out from the rest of the areas in the framework zone and call for public land strategies that may be significantly different from those generally recommended for the zone. These areas are identified as atypical areas.

**LOW-VACANCY.** As noted, most of Detroit's stronger neighborhoods are in the low-vacancy framework zone, with the strongest (outside the Greater Downtown area) characterized as Low-Vacancy 1. These areas are one of the city's most important assets and critically important for its future, yet threatened by the growing presence of vacant land and abandoned buildings. This presence, coupled



with declines in homeownership and market values, places even the strongest areas at risk of destabilization and deterioration. These areas need strategic policies to treat vacant and abandoned properties in ways that minimize their blighting effect, and ultimately begin to contribute to the stability of the neighborhood. These neighborhoods also have many of the strongest neighborhood associations, which can become effective partners with respect to carrying out many of the public land initiatives.

These strategies need to focus on minimizing the destabilizing impact of vacant land and buildings, as well as poorly maintained, deteriorating housing, and transform these properties into neighborhood assets. Where vacant buildings cannot realistically be restored to productive use, they must be demolished. While infill development may take place on some key vacant lots within low-vacancy areas, most will remain vacant, and must be maintained and reused—using the varied treatments described in the Land Use Element to make them attractive parts of the neighborhood landscape.

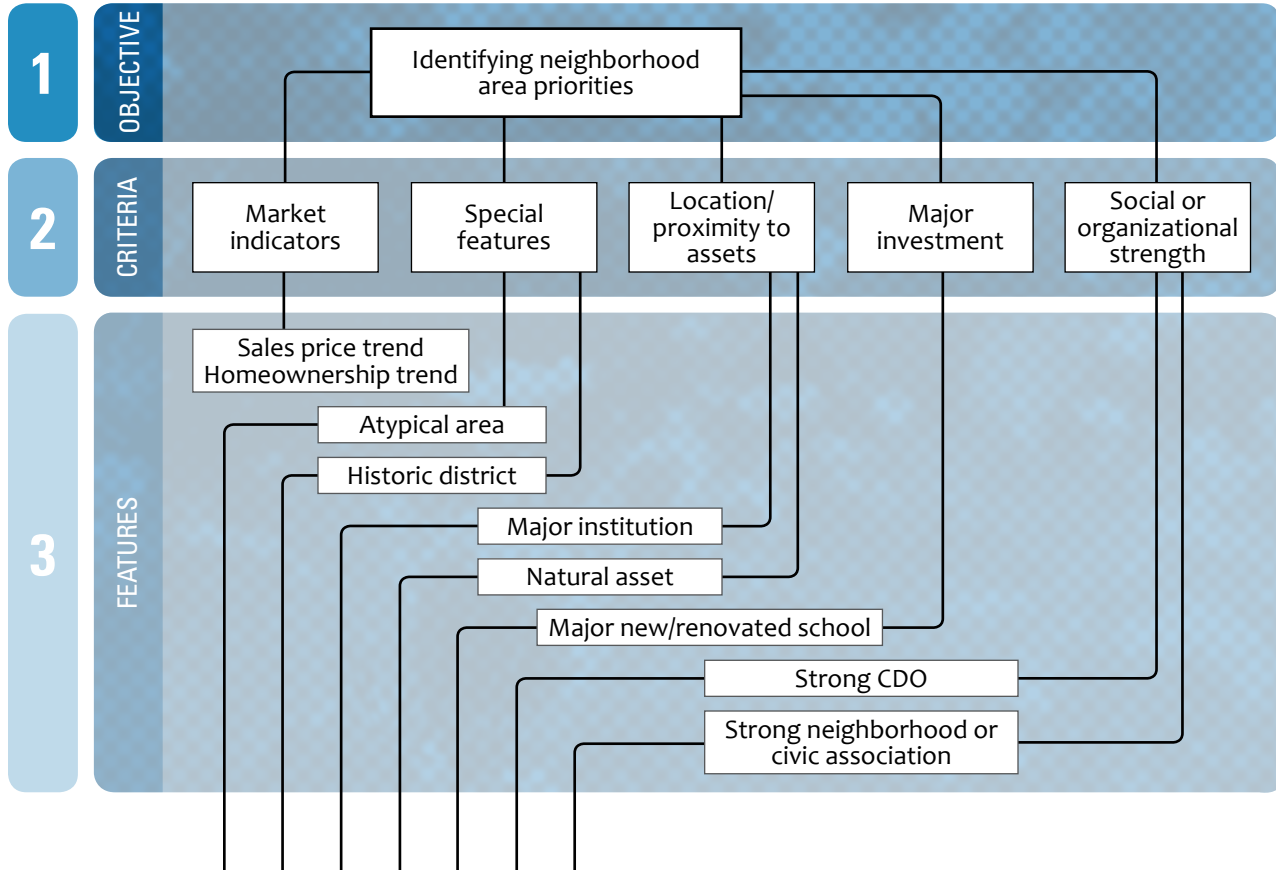
#### IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

- 1 Reuse vacant lots to enhance neighborhood stability.
- 2 Adopt targeted demolition strategy based on stabilization priorities.
- 3 Address problem landlords.
- 4 Increase the cost of holding vacant property.
- 5 Pursue targeted neighborhood stabilization strategies.

#### PILOT PROJECTS

- 1 Target property disposition only in low-vacancy and other areas of strength
- 2 Create restructured process to facilitate strategic disposition of inventory

## DECISION-MAKING MATRIX: NEIGHBORHOOD AREA PRIORITIES



# 4

## EXAMPLES

Morningside, Jefferson Village

Hubbard Farms

University of Detroit Mercy

Detroit River

Mumford High School

Grandmont Rosedale Development Corporation

Focus: HOPE

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FEEDBACK

- Creatively use and maintain unsold municipally owned land and structures that are currently not serving as public spaces
- Lease City-owned property for public art installations and events
- Create small parks in (City-owned and privately owned) vacant lots
- Use closed schools as community centers
- Create one collective agency to manage publicly owned homes

“Start a ‘keep it dry’ campaign for vacant buildings. If a vacant building is dry, it can sit there for 200 years.”

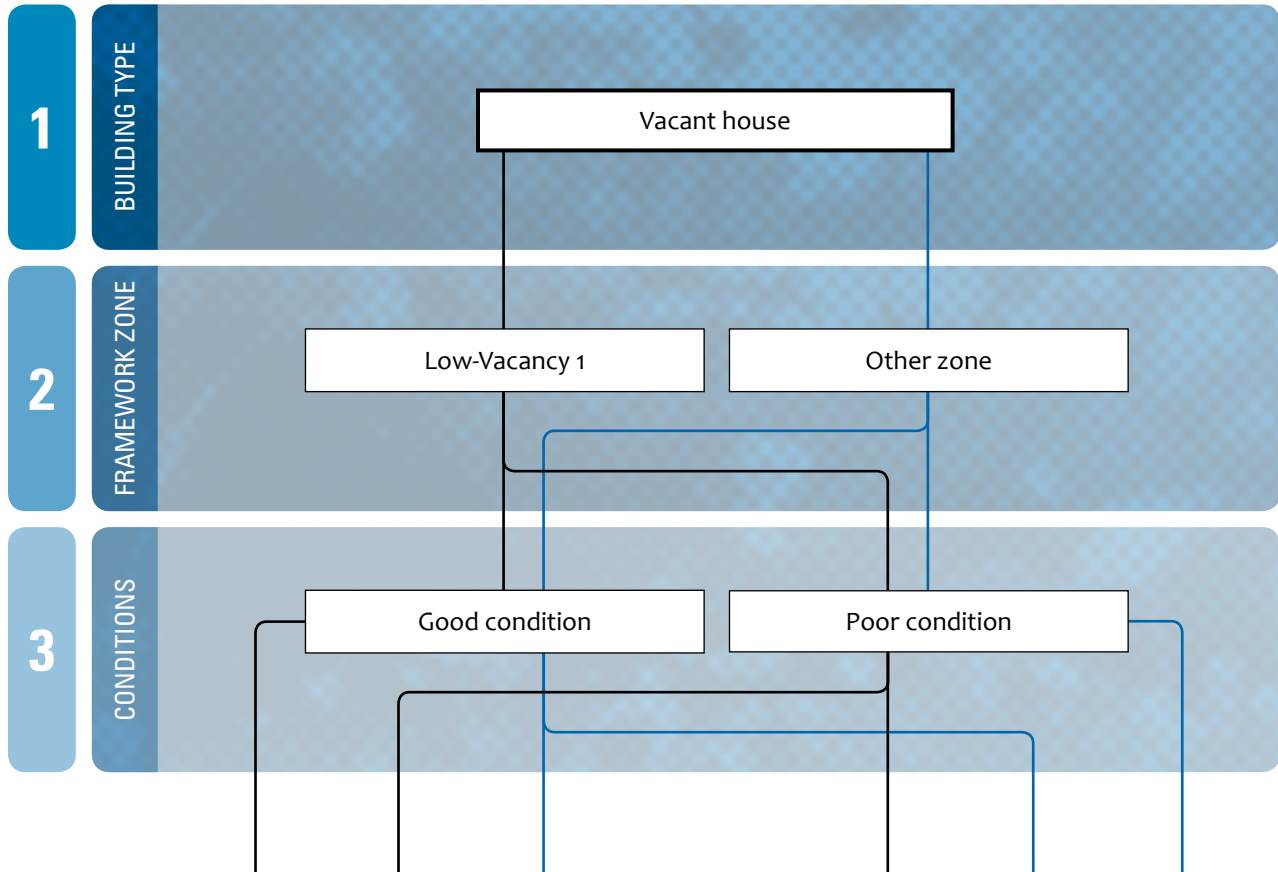
Creative Cluster - Working Session

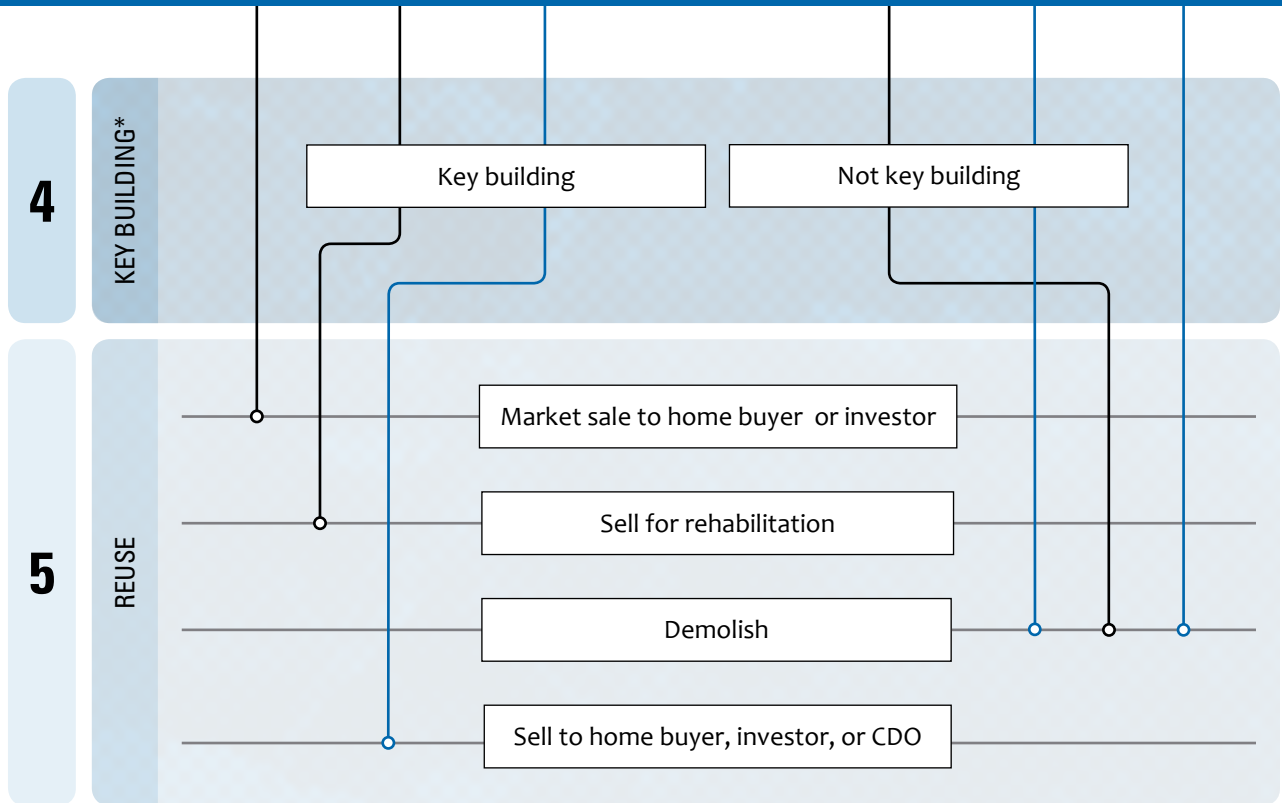


“We have devalued property in the city of Detroit, but for seniors, their home is the only value they have to pass along to the other generations. But if you have abandoned homes on your street, then your house has no value in the market. How can we engage the seniors to find how to bring value back into their home?”

Seniors Round Table, 2/15/2012



**DECISION-MAKING MATRIX: VACANT HOUSE**



Each parcel in public ownership has a different set of characteristics that can be used to determine the most appropriate action to improve the area around that parcel. These include whether the parcel is completely vacant or contains a building, the condition of the building, and the condition of the surrounding neighborhood.

\*Building that is architecturally or historically valuable, or which contributes to maintaining the texture of the block or neighborhood

One of the major problems facing many neighborhoods is the decline in homeownership, and the growing number of houses owned by absentee landlords, many of whom are short-term speculators with little concern for the neighborhood's future. In tandem with strategies that focus on vacant properties, the city—in partnership with CDOs and neighborhood organizations—should mount a concerted strategy to establish and enforce standards for responsible absentee ownership, prioritizing strong neighborhoods being destabilized by absentee buying. At the same time, strategies to encourage more people to buy houses in these neighborhoods for owner-occupancy should be actively pursued by the City and its neighborhood partners. These areas generally fall into the category of traditional neighborhoods in the typology presented earlier in the Framework, and as a rule, the public land strategies are designed to enable these areas to maintain their current character, while strengthening them so that they can continue to contribute to the city's vitality.

**MODERATE-VACANCY.** Moderate-vacancy areas are in some respects the most widely varying residential areas in Detroit, ranging from areas that have the potential to remain vital—although they are plagued by higher levels of vacancy than the low-vacancy

areas—to areas that are clearly trending toward greater disinvestment and abandonment. As a result, future planning efforts need to be based on a finer-grain assessment of these areas, in order to identify which areas should be targeted for strategies largely similar to those proposed for low-vacancy areas, which may include areas located in close proximity to major assets or to strong neighborhoods; and which should be addressed in ways similar to those proposed for high-vacancy areas.

While the low-vacancy areas are likely to retain their current character in the typology, the higher level of vacancy in the Moderate-Vacancy framework zone suggests the possibility of some areas transitioning over the coming years from traditional neighborhoods to other forms of neighborhood, most probably the Green Mixed-Rise or Green Residential areas in the typologies. Over the next few years, the City should closely monitor trends in housing market activity, investment, and disinvestment in these areas, in order to identify which are on a clear trajectory toward lower densities, and potential future changes in character. As these trends are identified, strategies should be put in place to use vacant properties for longer-term green reuses, and to foster land use transitions in

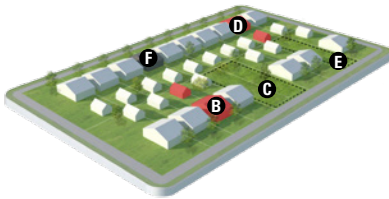
ways that maintain the quality of life for remaining neighborhood residents.

**HIGH-VACANCY.** The High-Vacancy framework zone contains some key areas that should be prioritized for neighborhood stabilization and revitalization, but also contains many other areas where the neighborhood fabric has largely been lost through abandonment and disinvestment. Over the coming years, strategies must be pursued to further an orderly transition of these areas into green residential areas or landscape areas. While strategies in the stabilization priority areas are likely to be similar to those in low-vacancy areas, those areas are likely to make up only a small part of the land area in the High-Vacancy framework zone. The strategies in most other areas within this zone are designed to focus more on facilitating reuse for blue/green infrastructure or similar landscape treatments, and may include initiatives to help ease the burden of moving for those families who want to relocate to other parts of the city.

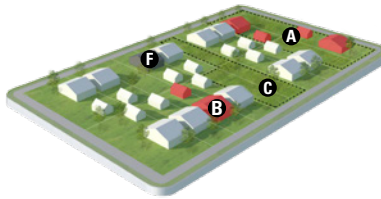


NEIGHBORHOOD ILLUSTRATIONS  
BY FRAMEWORK ZONE

## LOW-VACANCY



## MODERATE-VACANCY







## HIGH-VACANCY



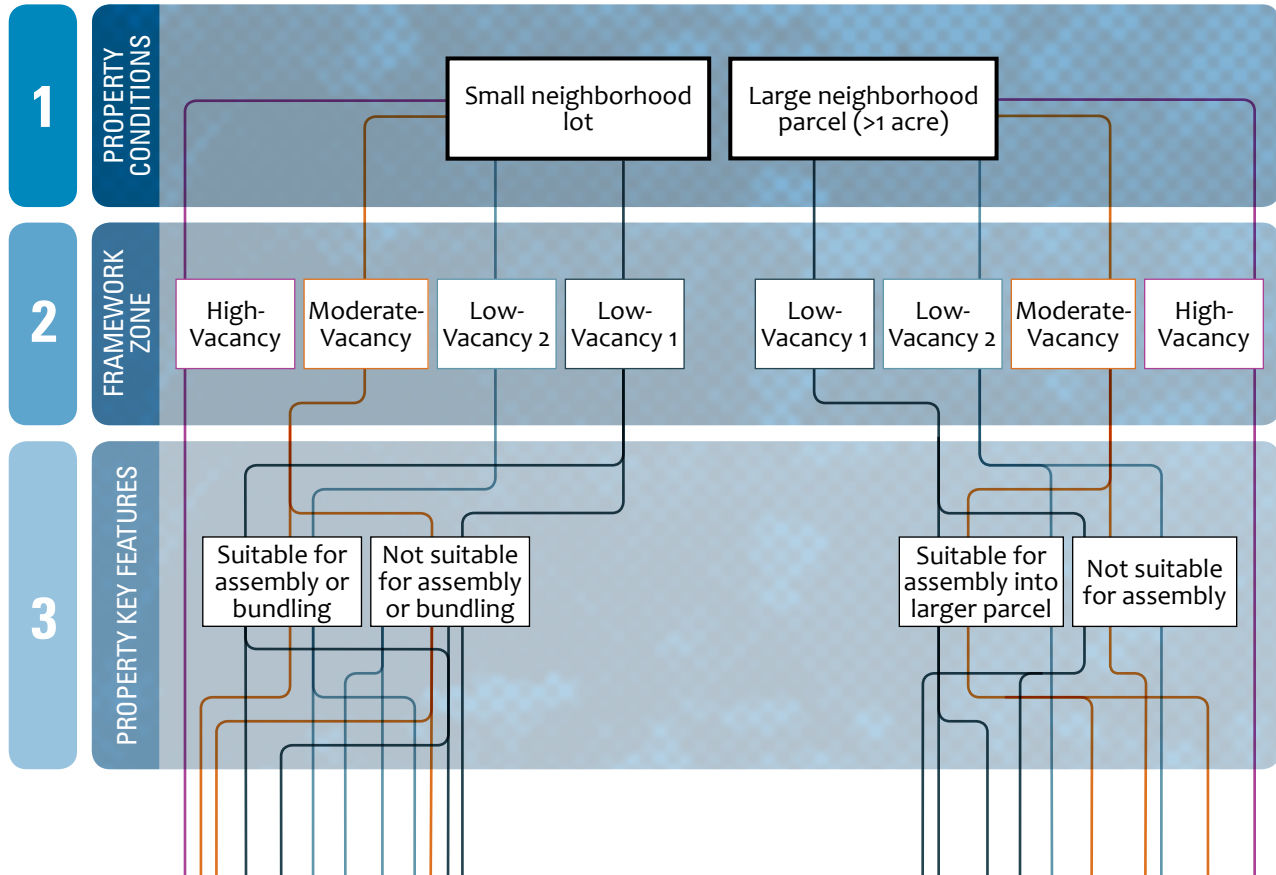
## STRATEGIES

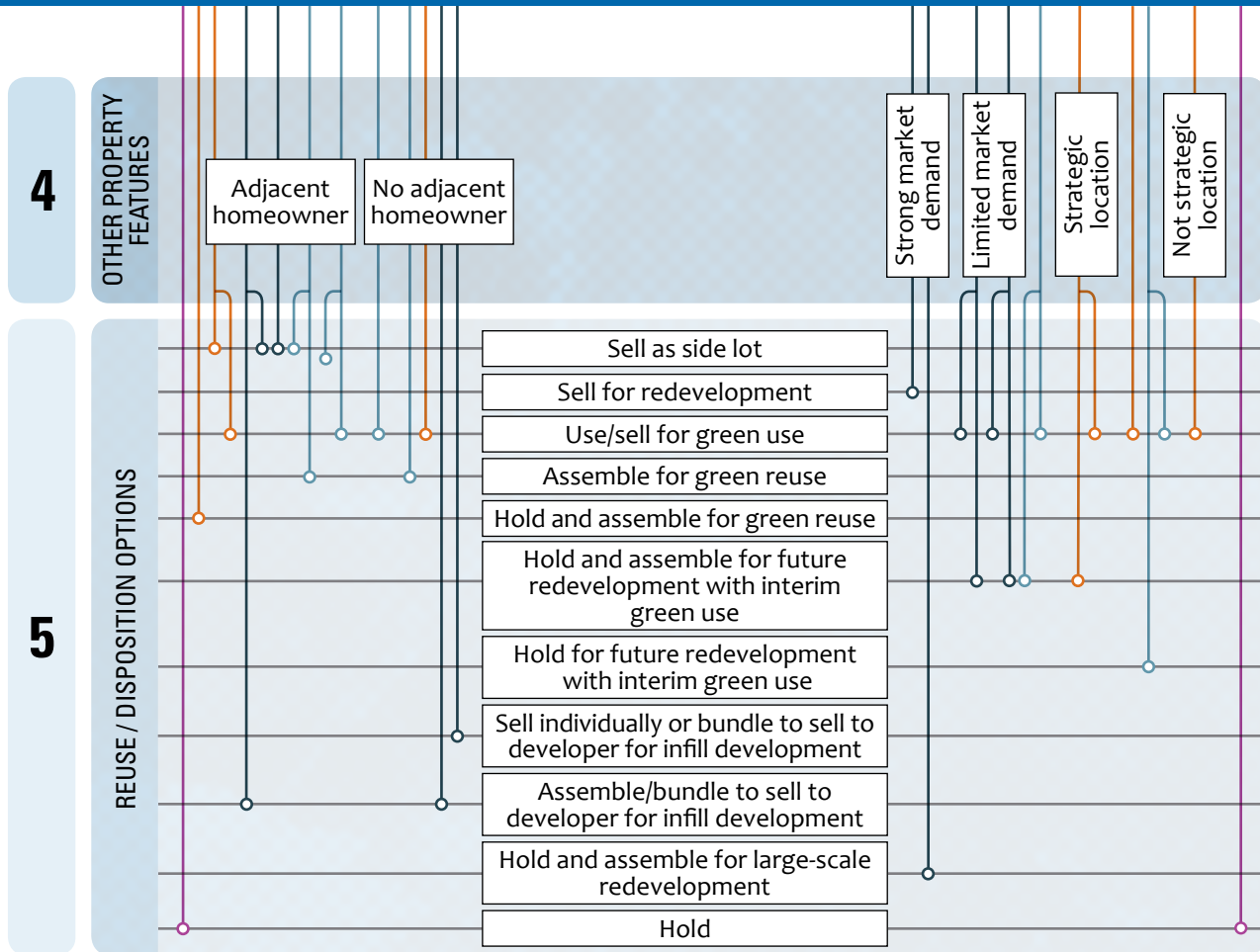
- A** Demolish and consolidate for green reuse or economic growth.
- B** Demolish and sell as side lot or minimum treatment.
- C** Green reuse or minimum treatment.
- D** Rehabilitate and sell to home buyer.
- E** Sell as side lot for adjacent home.
- F** Sell to home buyer.
- G** Assemble for large scale reuse.

## LEGEND

-  OCCUPIED RESIDENTIAL STRUCTURE
-  VACANT RESIDENTIAL STRUCTURE
-  VACANT RESIDENTIAL STRUCTURE IN NEED OF MAJOR REPAIR
-  VACANT LOT

## DECISION-MAKING MATRICES: SMALL LOT AND LARGE PARCEL REUSE

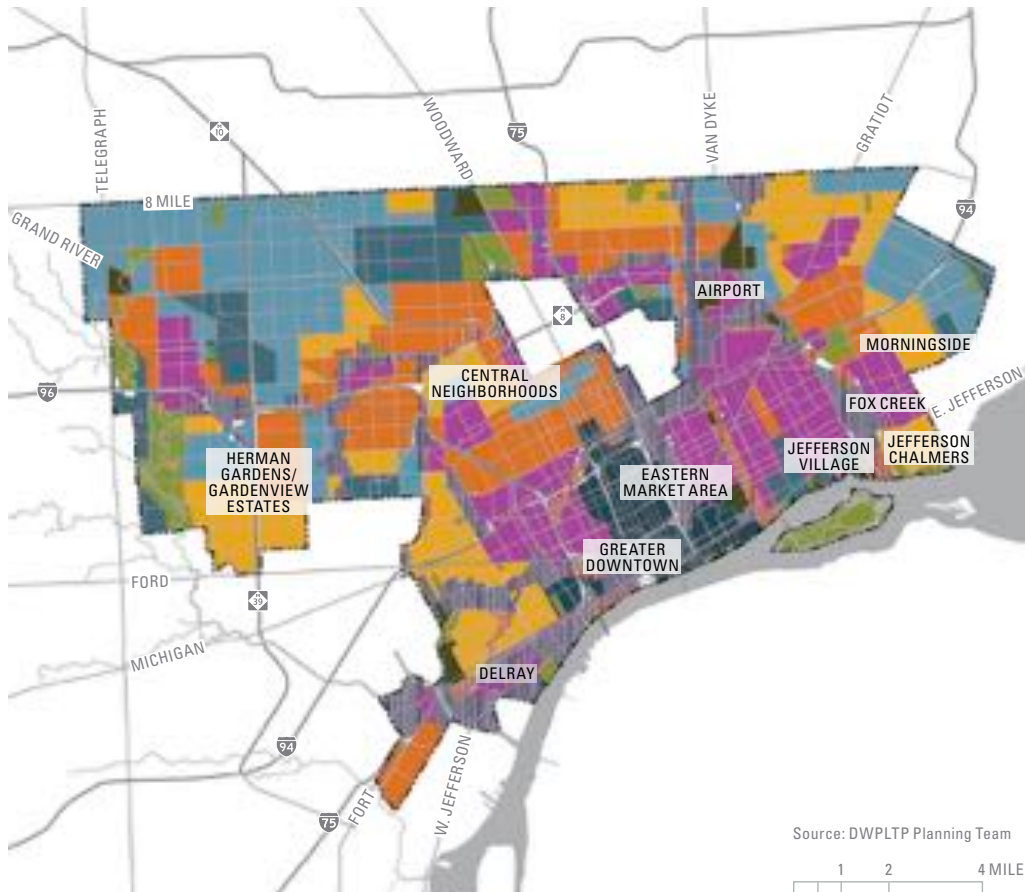




**ATYPICAL AREAS.** Atypical areas are smaller geographic areas within a particular framework zone that have distinctive features that make them stand out from the rest of the framework zone, and which call for public land strategies that are likely to be significantly different from those generally recommended for the zone. Those distinctive features typically include one or more of the following:

- location, such as being situated on the Detroit River waterfront;
- concentrations of public land that may make an area suitable for a particular reuse strategy;
- large-scale public investment in infrastructure or area improvement; or
- strong neighborhood or civic infrastructure, such as civic associations or a strong CDO.

The identification of these areas as atypical does not imply that they should be given priority over other areas in the same framework zone. Whether they should also be treated as priority areas will depend on how they fit into the city's land use and economic growth strategies.



### ATYPICAL AREAS BY FRAMEWORK ZONE

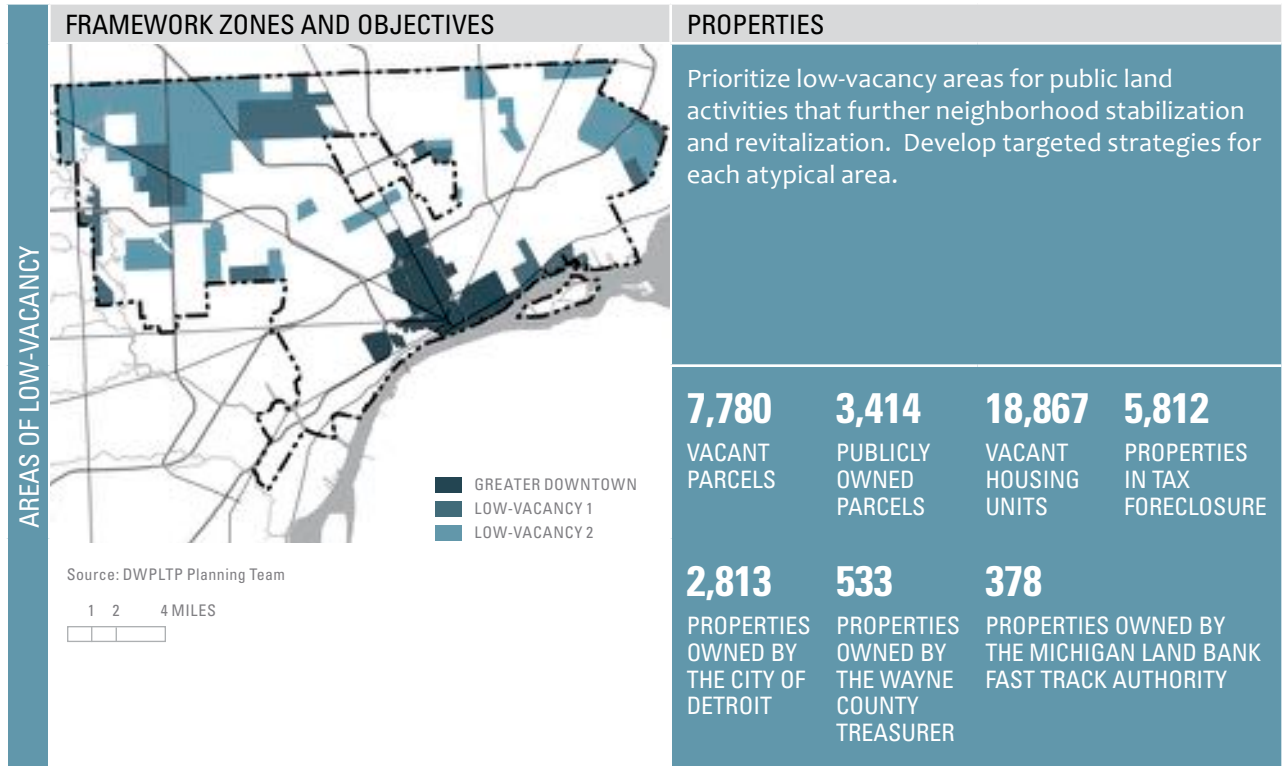
- GREATER DOWNTOWN
- LOW-VACANCY 1
- LOW-VACANCY 2
- MODERATE-VACANCY 1
- MODERATE-VACANCY 2
- HIGH-VACANCY
- INDUSTRIAL LAND USE STRENGTH
- INDUSTRIAL LAND USE CHANGE
- PARKS
- CEMETERIES

Throughout the city, several areas will require strategies that differ from the general strategies for their respective framework zones. While atypical areas are not priority areas, they have distinctive features that should be taken into account when creating strategies for these areas.

Source: DWPLTP Planning Team



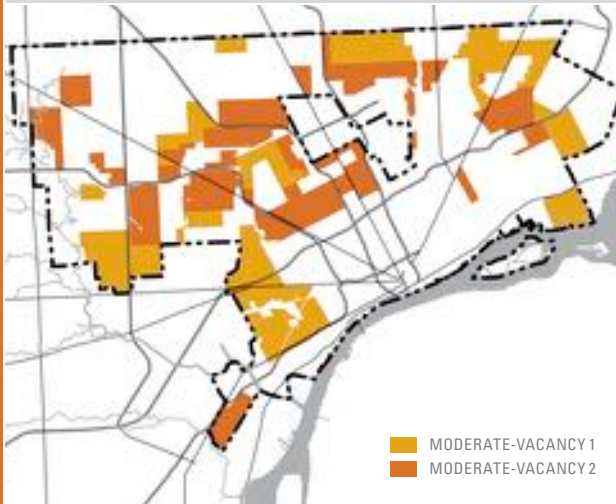
## NEIGHBORHOOD IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS



ACQUISITION AND ASSEMBLY	DISPOSITION AND REUSE	PRIVATE PROPERTIES	MAINTENANCE	DEMOLITION
<p>Acquire properties in key locations, such as areas around new/ expanded school projects or high visibility sites.</p>	<p>Dispose of individual or bundled parcels to qualified users, including side lots to adjacent homeowners and properties to neighborhood organizations for green uses. Dispose of properties to developers for infill development only in key locations and Low-Vacancy 1 areas. Do not hold properties for assembly except in special cases.</p>	<p>Implement strategies to increase maintenance standards and accountability of owners of vacant land. Implement targeted strategies to address problems of absentee landlords. Enlist neighborhood organizations and CDOs as partners to increase enforcement capacity.</p>	<p>Provide higher level of property maintenance. Enlist neighborhood organizations and CDOs as partners. Use alternative site treatments to reduce maintenance costs and stabilize neighborhoods.</p>	<p>Prioritize demolition of blighting vacant structures where they are likely to affect neighborhood stability.</p>

## AREAS OF MODERATE-VACANCY

## FRAMEWORK ZONES AND OBJECTIVES



## PROPERTIES

Identify key moderate-vacancy areas, based on criteria such as proximity to low-vacancy areas or particular physical, civic or locational assets, where public land activities should be prioritized to further neighborhood stabilization and revitalization. Facilitate transition in other areas to Green Residential or other typologies. Develop targeted strategies for each atypical area.

**36,403**VACANT  
PARCELS**24,339**PUBLICLY  
OWNED  
PARCELS**39,717**VACANT  
HOUSING  
UNITS**11,199**PROPERTIES  
IN TAX  
FORECLOSURE**20,651**PROPERTIES  
OWNED BY  
THE CITY OF  
DETROIT**4,094**PROPERTIES  
OWNED BY  
THE WAYNE  
COUNTY  
TREASURER**2,969**PROPERTIES OWNED BY THE  
MICHIGAN LAND BANK FAST  
TRACK AUTHORITY



ACQUISITION AND ASSEMBLY	DISPOSITION AND REUSE	PRIVATE PROPERTIES	MAINTENANCE	DEMOLITION
<p>Acquire properties only in key locations within priority and atypical areas.</p>	<p>Dispose of individual parcels to qualified users, including side lots to adjacent homeowners in stabilization priority areas and properties to neighborhood organizations and other users for green uses. Do not hold properties for assembly except in special cases.</p>	<p>Implement strategies to increase maintenance standards and accountability of owners of vacant land in stabilization priority areas, including targeted strategies to address problems of absentee landlords. Enlist neighborhood organizations and CDOs in those areas as partners to increase enforcement capacity.</p>	<p>Provide higher level of property maintenance in stabilization priority areas, including enlisting neighborhood organizations and CDOs as partners. Use alternative site treatments to reduce maintenance costs and stabilize neighborhoods in stabilization priority areas.</p>	<p>Prioritize demolition of key blighting vacant structures where they are likely to affect neighborhood stability in stabilization priority areas.</p>

## FRAMEWORK ZONES AND OBJECTIVES



## PROPERTIES

Identify key high-vacancy areas, based on criteria such as proximity to low-vacancy areas or particular physical, civic or locational assets, where public land activities should be prioritized to further neighborhood stabilization and revitalization. Develop targeted strategies for each atypical area.

**49,160**VACANT  
PARCELS**36,499**PUBLICLY  
OWNED  
PARCELS**13,908**VACANT  
HOUSING  
UNITS**2,856**PROPERTIES  
IN TAX  
FORECLOSURE**32,244**PROPERTIES  
OWNED BY  
THE CITY OF  
DETROIT**1,826**PROPERTIES  
OWNED BY  
THE WAYNE  
COUNTY  
TREASURER**3,482**PROPERTIES OWNED BY  
THE MICHIGAN LAND BANK  
FAST TRACK AUTHORITY

ACQUISITION AND ASSEMBLY	DISPOSITION AND REUSE	PRIVATE PROPERTIES	MAINTENANCE	DEMOLITION
<p>Acquire selected properties only in key locations within priority and atypical areas, or where needed to further blue/green infrastructure strategies.</p>	<p>Dispose of individual parcels in stabilization priority areas to qualified users, including properties to neighborhood organizations and other end users for green uses. Retain public ownership of land to be used for blue/green infrastructure.</p>	<p>Implement strategies to increase maintenance standards and accountability of owners of vacant land in stabilization priority areas, including targeted strategies to address problems of absentee landlords. Enlist neighborhood organizations and CDOs as partners in those areas where available to increase enforcement capacity.</p>	<p>Maintain properties in stabilization priority areas where neighborhood organizations and CDOs are available to enlist as partners. Use alternative site treatments to reduce maintenance costs and stabilize neighborhoods in stabilization priority areas.</p>	<p>Prioritize demolition only of key blighting vacant structures where they are likely to affect neighborhood stability in stabilization priority areas.</p>



# TRANSFORM LARGELY VACANT AREAS THROUGH BLUE AND GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

Detroit contains thousands of acres of vacant land largely in public ownership for which no substantial redevelopment potential—in the sense of new buildings—exists within the time frame of this plan. At the same time, Detroit faces significant challenges to quality of life and air and water quality, particularly with respect to stormwater management and pollution from interstate highways and heavy industry. By reusing large amounts of the public land inventory for blue and green infrastructure—to address air quality and stormwater management issues—the City can improve its quality of life, transform blighting expanses of vacant land into productive public assets, and realize significant fiscal benefits with respect to future sewerage system expenditures.

**BLUE INFRASTRUCTURE.** In addition to the fiscal benefits it offers, creation of blue infrastructure can help further two major citywide goals: maximizing

stormwater runoff reductions and stabilizing neighborhoods. These goals can be advanced in different parts of the city through different strategies. In high-vacancy areas, large parcels can be used to retain large amounts of stormwater, while in lower-vacancy areas, smaller-scale approaches such as creating rain gardens and small retention ponds capture smaller amounts of stormwater but provide attractive assets for neighborhoods, helping to stabilize or increase property values. Land currently in public ownership can be used for all of these purposes, and additional public acquisition is encouraged in areas where selective acquisition can help assemble larger or better-configured sites capable of yielding particularly high runoff reductions. Once placed into service for blue infrastructure, these uses should be seen as permanent ones. Future land use changes should only be considered where carried out in close consultation

with the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) to ensure that the land use change does not affect the capacity of the system.

The Rouge River watershed is currently being pursued by DWSD as a priority area for runoff reduction, while downtown Detroit should be seen as a future priority area.

**MAXIMIZING RUNOFF REDUCTION.** High-vacancy areas will be the priority locations for designating existing public land and targeting future acquisition for blue infrastructure for maximum runoff reduction, with the possible addition of selected Moderate-Vacancy 2 areas trending toward significant population decline. In addition to the priority areas noted above, priority parcel criteria include

- frontage on or close proximity to stormwater boulevard;
- location in advantageous topographic areas;
- location within relatively low points in city topography;
- location along Rouge or Detroit Rivers;
- location along wet buffers (these can include edges between framework zones or along interstate highways, where particularly well-

suited for stormwater collection due to runoff direction/topography); and

- size greater than a half-acre or feasibility of assembly into larger parcels through consolidation of public holdings or selective public acquisition.

Sites with strong potential for blue infrastructure should be retained in public ownership in order to ensure that they can be incorporated into the emerging system. DWSD would be responsible for maintenance of properties designated for blue infrastructure.

#### IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

- 1 Hold land between interstates/industrial areas and neighborhoods for green infrastructure (do not release for future residential development).
- 2 Acquire available land for blue infrastructure in key locations.

#### EARLY ACTION

- 1 DWSD Blue Infrastructure Project

#### PILOT PROJECTS

- 1 Stormwater Boulevard
- 2 Blue Infrastructure Master Plan

**SITES FOR NEIGHBORHOOD STABILIZATION.** Since the plan recognizes that demolition in low-vacancy areas over the coming years is likely to substantially exceed the amount of infill construction likely to take place, a substantial number of additional vacant lots are likely to be created in these areas. Blue infrastructure is a highly appropriate use for these properties, because it offers the opportunity to create attractive, productive uses for these sites, many of which can be maintained by neighborhood organizations, block groups, or individual homeowners. Blue infrastructure can also be added to the grounds of closed schools or to limited maintenance parks, which can include recreation elements like paths and sitting areas. For larger sites like these, DWSD may need to be involved in maintenance. While larger parcels (> ½ acre) or parcels which can be assembled into larger sites are most desirable, small parcels can also be used for blue infrastructure in low-vacancy areas.

**NEAR-TERM PRIORITIES FOCUS ON HIGH-IMPACT, LOW-COST SOLUTIONS.** Near-term top priorities for blue infrastructure are two-fold:

- Use blue infrastructure as a neighborhood stabilization approach (in Low-Vacancy areas);

- Implement inexpensive techniques that are highly effective in reducing stormwater runoff, and that do not require any additional land acquisition (in High- or Moderate-Vacancy 2 areas).

These are generally smaller-scale strategies that can begin right away on suitable land that is already in public ownership. Small to moderate-scale projects in high-vacancy areas provide the opportunity to test new ideas at relatively low costs. For instance, curb cuts and minimal regrading of site topography is a simple, low-cost option for converting vacant lots along major roads to retention/detention sites, which can capture stormwater runoff. Following construction, impact of these projects should be measured to quantify the benefits (gallons of runoff diverted, treatment costs avoided, maintenance costs reductions, etc.). The focus of this kind of project is to deliver high results for reducing stormwater runoff with low costs.

Smaller-scale projects should also be tested in lower-vacancy areas, to measure the impact of these uses on neighborhood stability. These uses might take the form of rain gardens or small retention ponds

on vacant, publicly owned residential lots, slightly larger blue infrastructures on the grounds of a closed school, or the conversion of a limited maintenance park to an infiltration park that combines stormwater management with recreational features. Here, measuring runoff avoided is still valuable, but feedback from residents and metrics of property values and changes in vacancy rates will be even more important.

Near-term priorities should also include planning necessary for future projects. An Infrastructural Master Plan should be undertaken right away, and targeted acquisition of key parcels for blue infrastructure should begin (for example, purchasing suitable vacant lots at auction).

Statewide, environmental policy does not fully recognize the benefits of blue infrastructure, requiring investments in expensive conventional (“hard”) infrastructure for long-term control plans. Advocacy is needed to change state policies and allow value of blue infrastructure to be counted in these plans, so that additional investments in conventional infrastructure are reduced. Instead, future infrastructure investments should be in more multi-functional systems that clean stormwater and provide other environmental benefits and can include recreational components.

In the longer term, projects like large lakes that have high detention/retention capacities should be prioritized. These are the projects with the greatest impact on reducing runoff that enters the combined system, but will require land acquisition first. Interim maintenance strategies can be implemented on acquired sites while additional acquisition is ongoing. Construction of the systems should proceed as soon as sufficient land is available.

**PILOT PROJECT****STORMWATER BOULEVARD**

In partnership with DWSD and SEMCOG, convert short segment of arterial road to stormwater boulevard. Narrow the road, install swales and bicycle lanes, and construct retention ponds on adjacent vacant, publicly owned land.

Image Source: Delaware Center for the Inland Bays

**EARLY ACTION****DWSD BLUE INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS**

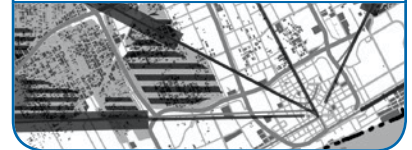
DWSD is implementing small-scale blue infrastructure pilot projects in coordination with SEMCOG and Greening of Detroit in northwestern Detroit. Additional blue infrastructure projects should be aligned with their efforts.

Image Source: SEMCOG Low Impact Development Manual

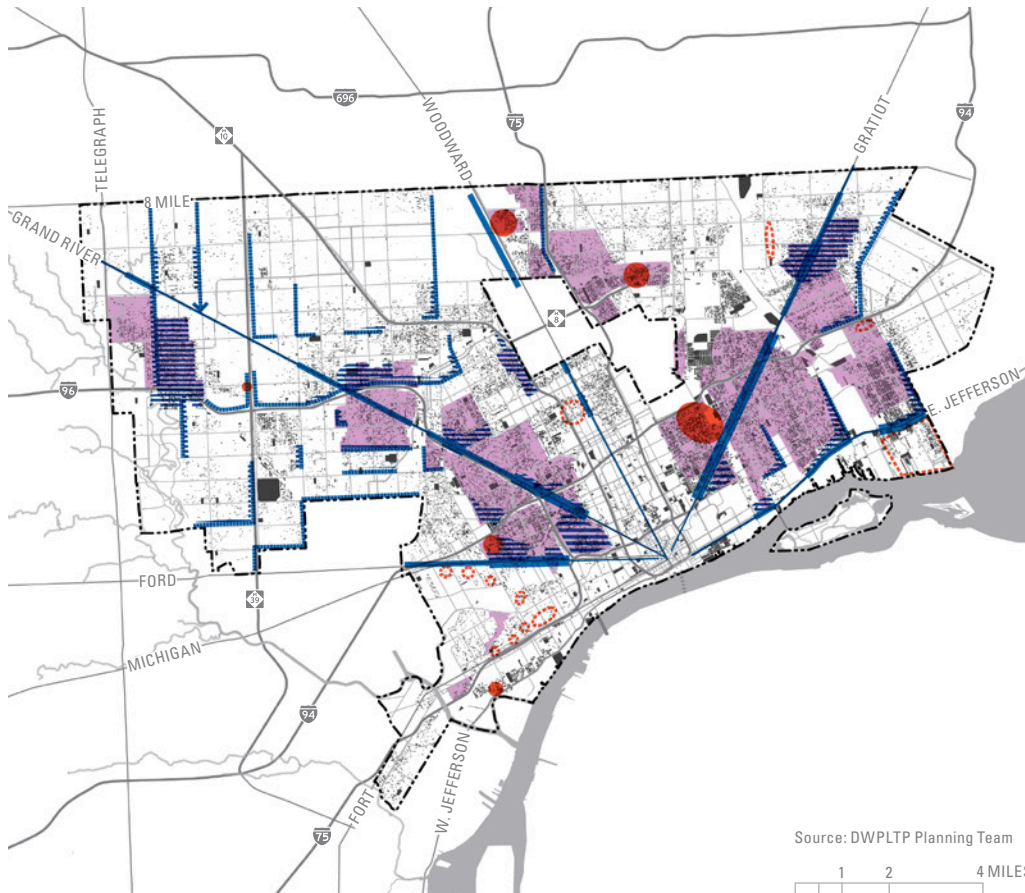
**PILOT PROJECT****INFRASTRUCTURE MASTER PLAN**

In partnership with DWSD and SEMCOG, undertake a citywide master planning process for blue infrastructure. Use more detailed data (LiDAR, etc.) to refine DFC vision.








Image Source: DWPLTP Planning Team







## BLUE INFRASTRUCTURE PRIORITY AREAS

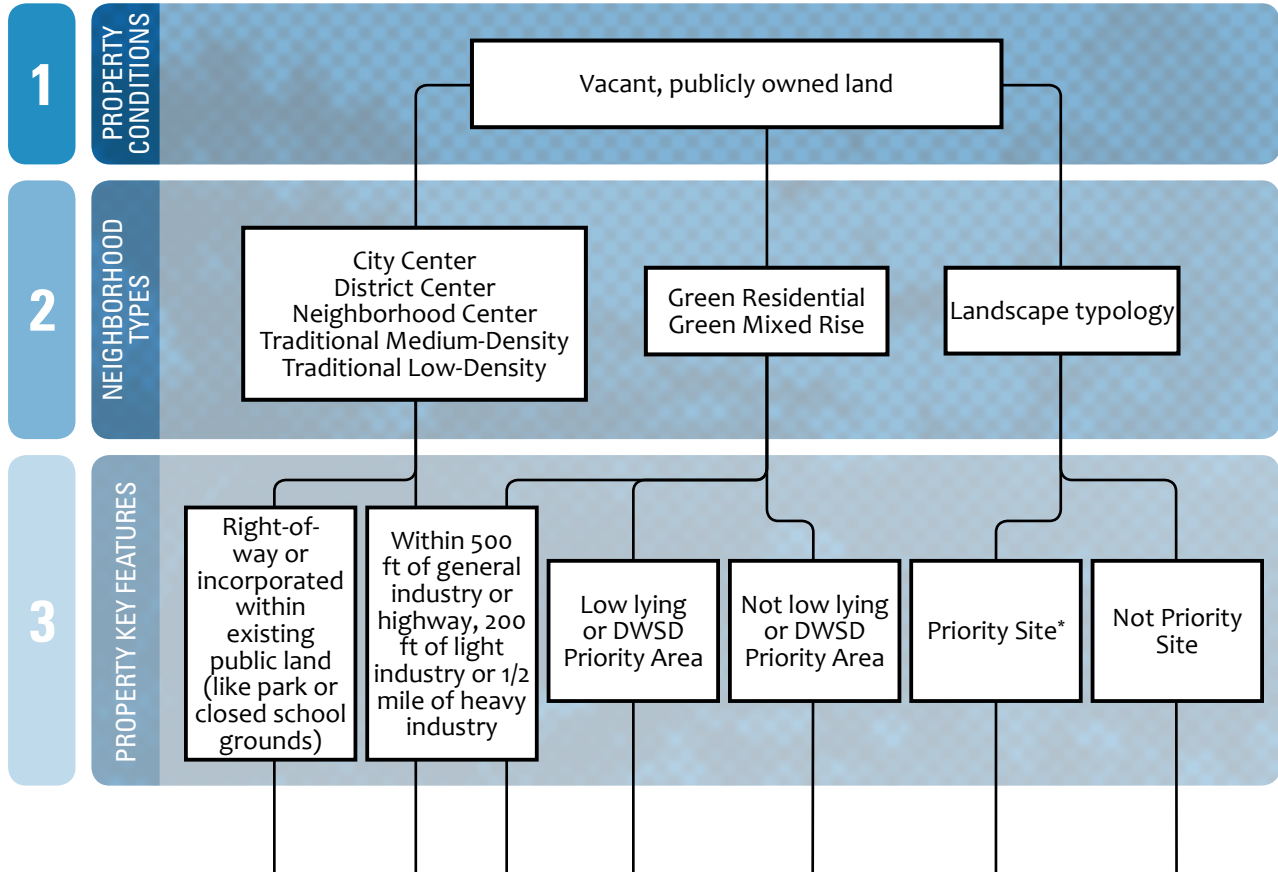
-  STORMWATER BOULEVARD
-  50-YEAR INNOVATION LANDSCAPE TYPOLOGIES: HIGHEST PRIORITY
-  50-YEAR INNOVATION LANDSCAPE TYPOLOGIES: SECONDARY PRIORITY
-  LOW TOPOGRAPHY: HIGHEST PRIORITY
-  LOW TOPOGRAPHY: SECONDARY PRIORITY
-  WET BUFFER
-  PUBLICLY OWNED VACANT PROPERTY

High-vacancy areas present the greatest opportunities for blue infrastructure because of the availability of vacant land. Within high-vacancy areas, low-lying areas and edges of infrastructure and framework zones are especially effective locations for blue infrastructure.

Source: DWPLTP Planning Team



## DECISION-MAKING MATRIX: IMPLEMENTING BLUE / GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE



## 4

## REUSE / DISPOSITION OPTIONS

Implement  
small- to  
medium-  
scale blue  
infrastructure

Plant as  
green buffer

Implement  
small scale  
blue  
infrastructure

Not  
recommended  
for blue  
infrastructure

Implement  
medium  
to large  
scale blue  
infrastructure

Not  
recommended  
for blue  
infrastructure

\*Site that is architecturally or historically valuable, or which contributes to maintaining the texture of the block or neighborhood

## GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

Green infrastructure uses include carbon forests and industry buffers that can improve air quality and enhance the quality of life and attractiveness of the city. Priority parcels for green infrastructure are those located within 500 feet of an interstate or major arterial highway, and parcels located between major industrial (or polluting infrastructure facility) areas and residential neighborhoods.

As with blue infrastructure, these uses should be seen as permanent ones, with future land use changes limited to those that do not affect the capacity of the system.

Implementing these new uses may take time, especially in areas where suitable vacant land is scarce. Parcels in public ownership that meet these criteria should not be released for new development (with the exception of some areas, which may be suitable for industrial use where demand exists), and should be planted densely with seedlings.

### CONSTRUCTION COSTS AND MAINTENANCE

**REQUIREMENTS.** Planting a forest like this is very inexpensive. Seedlings typically cost around \$1 each, and if planted using a 10' x 10' grid spacing, so that

the cost per acre is less than \$450. Maintenance efforts required will include the following.

- Biomass maintenance (take care of fallen trees, etc.)
- Succession maintenance (thin out/remove trees as needed; seed later species)
- Trash removal
- Maintain visual access/ sightlines for safety
- Maintenance of any trails incorporated into forests

Neighborhood residents, other volunteers, researchers, or students could undertake these tasks. Research activities could be incorporated with maintenance, as these forests provide opportunities for measuring urban air quality, carbon sequestration, and other related topics.

Tree selection can also reduce maintenance needs. Initially, fast-growing trees should be planted. These trees will help shade out grasses, improving visibility through the forest floor for improved safety. Later, interplant with slow-growing dominant forest-type

species that will ultimately grow and out-shade the fast-growing species. Finally, the forest floor can be seeded with diverse forest floor species, creating a rich ecological experience for residents and habitat for local wildlife and migrating birds.

#### **COOPERATION NEEDED FOR IMPLEMENTATION.**

Carbon forests will require cooperation from many different local, regional, and state agencies. Many different landowners will need to be involved, especially for carbon forests. Within 500 feet of an interstate, land is typically owned by at least three different parties:

- Interstate right-of-way owned by Michigan Department of Transportation
- Adjacent local road owned by Wayne County
- Adjacent lots may be privately or publicly owned, by any number of agencies

Industry buffers too may combine vegetation planted on the same lot as the industrial use as well as forests beyond the site border.

Outside of industry parcels or road rights-of-way, these forests could be owned by the City, Land Bank, Trust, DOT, DWSD, or institution and could incorporate recreational features like trails.

"Projects like the RiverWalk's wetland filter clean the water and bring back animals. More of those would be helpful, especially around River Rouge. You can see the dirty water from Google Earth. :( "  
Detroit 24/7, 5/2012

"I appreciate adding the green aspects to the city for true sustainability, especially buffering the industrial areas."

Karen, DWP email comment, 9/2012





## GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE PRIORITY AREAS

- CARBON FOREST
- INDUSTRIAL BUFFER
- INDUSTRIAL LAND USE STRENGTH
- PUBLICLY OWNED VACANT PROPERTY
- SECONDARY EMPLOYMENT DISTRICT

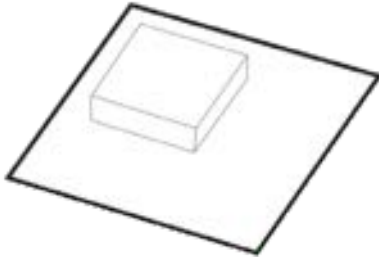
Vacant land in public ownership that lies between neighborhoods and major sources of air pollution (industry corridors and interstates) should not be released for future residential development. Instead, it should be planted as a forested buffer to absorb pollutants.

Source: DWPLTP Planning Team



## ENVIRONMENTAL MITIGATION STRATEGIES

## ILLUSTRATION



## DESCRIPTION

No buffer is needed.

## APPLICABLE AREAS

- Industrial land use change adjacent to any land use.
- Industrial land use strength adjacent to high- vacancy area.
- Areas where existing adjacencies between industrial and residential land uses will likely dissipate.

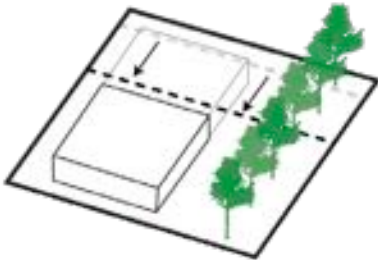
## MITIGATION/BUFFERING OPPORTUNITIES

Not applicable.

NO BUFFER NEEDED

## ENVIRONMENTAL MITIGATION STRATEGIES

## ILLUSTRATION



## DESCRIPTION

Some buffer needs can be addressed through changes to zoning regulations: adjust setback distances and landscape requirements.

## APPLICABLE AREAS

- Current industrial areas that are likely to undergo substantial renovation or construction in the future.
- Land that is not currently industrial, but which is targeted for potential conversion to industrial in future.

## MITIGATION/BUFFERING OPPORTUNITIES

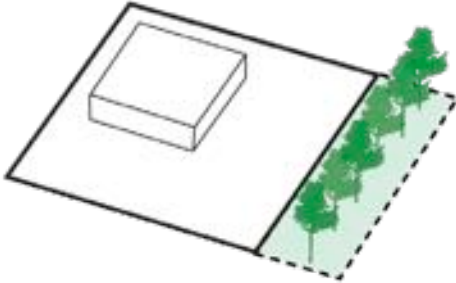
Buffering opportunities:

- Required setback distance needs additional consideration



## ENVIRONMENTAL MITIGATION STRATEGIES

## ILLUSTRATION



## DESCRIPTION

In the near term, zoning changes will have limited impact on many existing industrial uses. In these cases, look for opportunities outside of industrial parcels for short-term impacts.

## APPLICABLE AREAS

Existing industrial areas where current businesses are unlikely to change in near- to mid-term (zoning changes would not impact these businesses, which would likely be grandfathered in until a change in ownership or significant construction triggered compliance with new zoning). For buffering to occur, look for opportunities immediately outside of the industrial parcel on publicly owned land.

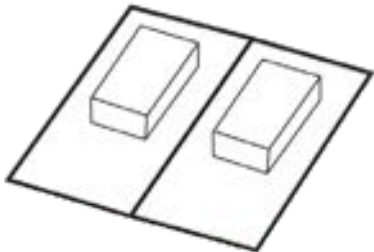
## MITIGATION/BUFFERING OPPORTUNITIES

Buffering opportunities:

- Underutilized commercially zoned land lying between industry and residential can be converted to a green buffer
- High vacancy residential blocks adjacent to industry can provide room for a green buffer
- Parks or vacant school sites can be planted to act as buffers

## ENVIRONMENTAL MITIGATION STRATEGIES

## ILLUSTRATION



## DESCRIPTION

In these situations, alternative means of reducing negative impacts on nearby residents should be pursued.

## APPLICABLE AREAS

Existing industrial areas where current businesses are unlikely to change in near- to mid-term, and where opportunities for creating physical buffer are minimal. For example, many areas of Southwest Detroit contain low vacancy residential blocks that are adjacent to industry.

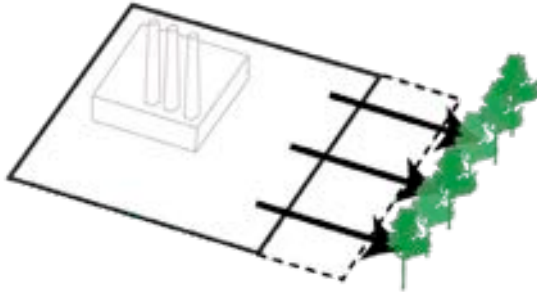
## MITIGATION/BUFFERING OPPORTUNITIES

Mitigation opportunities:

- If industry exceeds allowable pollution discharge limits, increase enforcement of standards
- If industry is within allowed discharge limits, but still negatively impacts neighbors, consider raising standard to higher level

## ENVIRONMENTAL MITIGATION STRATEGIES

## ILLUSTRATION



## DESCRIPTION

Acquisition plans for new Industrial land should incorporate buffering considerations.

## APPLICABLE AREAS

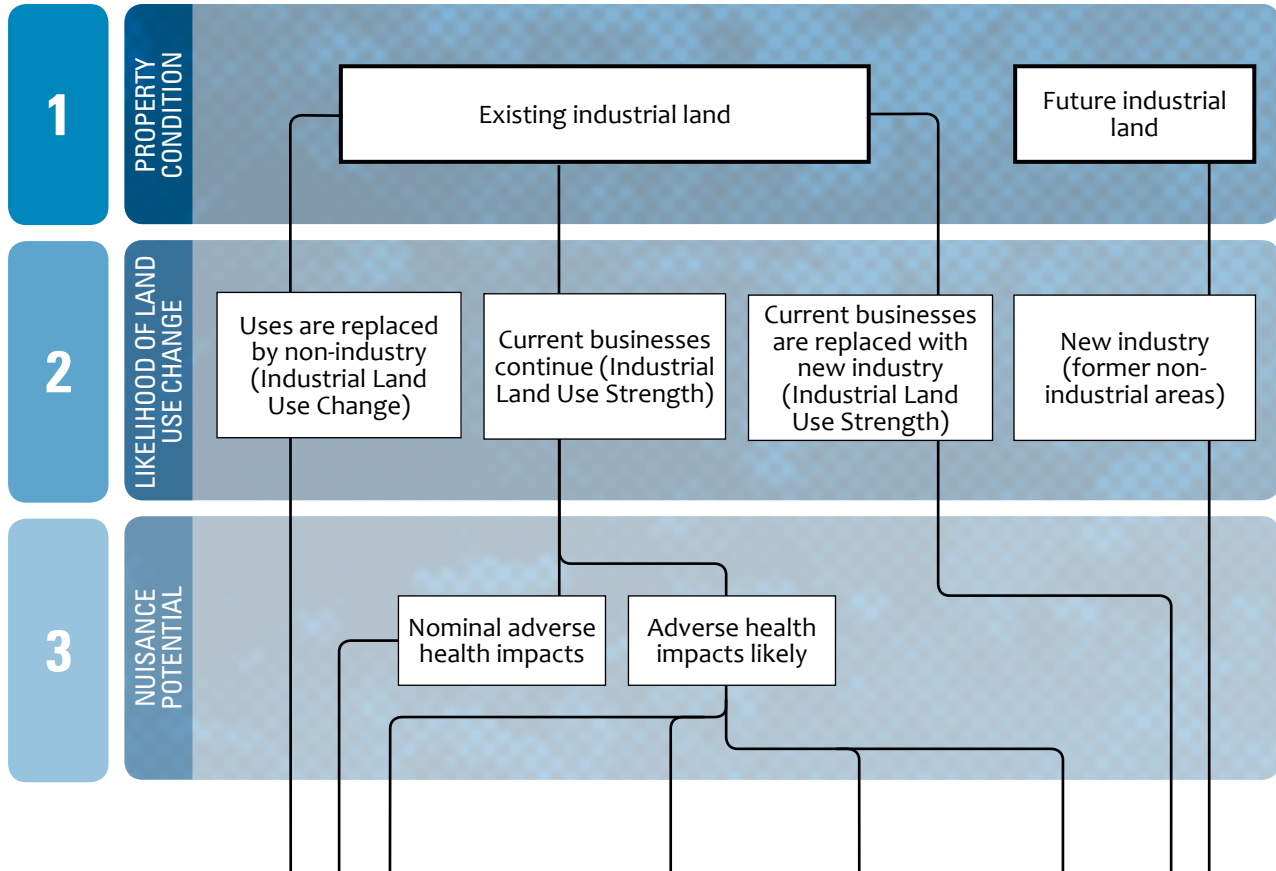
In areas that are not currently industrial, but are identified for future industry, multiple options exist for buffering. Changes to the industrial zoning rules can create buffers on-site for new industrial uses. In addition, any zoning changes or land acquisition can allow sufficient buffering space between future industry and current/future residential neighborhoods.

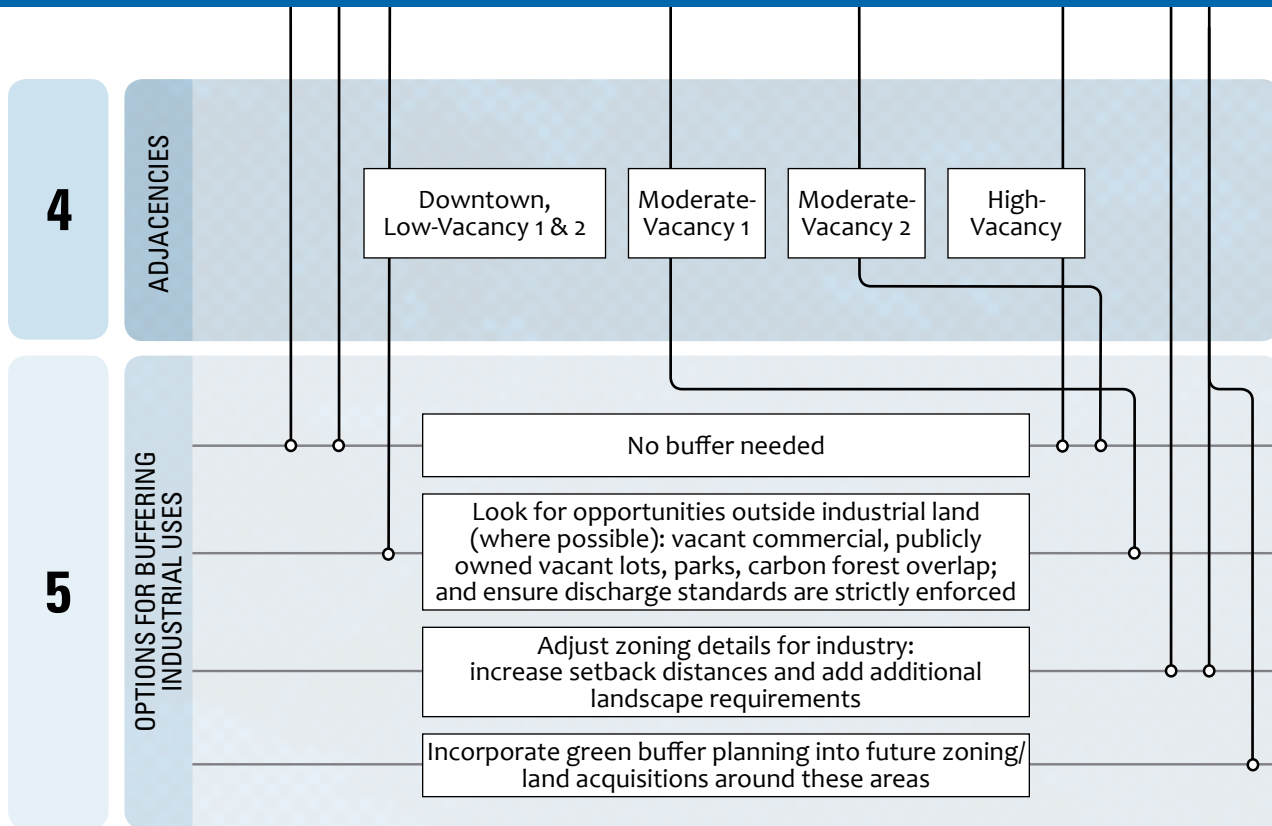
## MITIGATION/BUFFERING OPPORTUNITIES

Buffering opportunities:

- On-site: change rules of industrial zones to increase set-back distances and create buffers on-site
- Off-site: coordinate land acquisition and zoning changes with current/future adjacent land uses

## DECISION-MAKING MATRIX: GREEN INDUSTRY BUFFERS





# **D** LINK PUBLIC FACILITY AND PROPERTY DECISIONS TO LARGER STRATEGIES

Of the many different facilities that government maintains, the future of the city's schools and parks has the most direct impact on residents' quality of life, and is likely to have the greatest impact on Detroit's future. Over the past decades, many schools have been closed, and many parks have been closed or neglected. What to do with closed facilities, and how to make decisions about future school closings and park maintenance issues, are critical decision-making areas for the city's public agencies and residents.

**DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS.** In recent years, faced with shrinking enrollment, the Detroit Public School District (DPS) has closed many schools around the city, while investing significant resources in building, expanding, and upgrading other schools for the remaining enrollment. In light of the trends, still more schools may be closed in future years. The reuse of vacant school facilities, as well as the selection of which schools may be closed in the future, should take place strategically—in conjunction with the

city's land use and neighborhood stabilization goals—in order to reduce the blighting effect of vacant buildings and the potential destabilizing effect of future closings. At the same time, targeted neighborhood strategies around new or significantly upgraded schools along with co-location of other community-serving activities can maximize their value as neighborhood assets. Maximizing the value of schools as community assets, however, may require some rethinking or reworking of the current DPS citywide open enrollment policies.

Closed public schools and their sites can become neighborhood assets. Some closed public schools are already being used for charter schools or for other purposes. Options include adaptive reuse for community benefit facilities such as child care or community centers; secure mothballing of historically or architecturally significant buildings for future reuse; or demolition to facilitate reuse of the site for economic development, open space or large-scale stormwater retention projects.

An effective strategy to deal with the future of Detroit's public school facilities should include a number of key elements:

- A decision framework should be developed to guide the use of closed school facilities, which looks at the facility itself, as well as its environs, its location with respect to the framework zones and neighborhood stabilization priority areas, as well as within the blue/green infrastructure strategy.
- Neighborhood stabilization criteria as discussed below should be integrated into and made an explicit part of future school closing decisions.
- Areas in close proximity to major newly constructed or substantially expanded or upgraded schools facilities should be prioritized for stabilization and revitalization activity.

The principle behind the use of neighborhood stabilization criteria is straightforward, and involves three distinct questions:

- How will closing this school affect the stability and vitality of the neighborhood in which it is located?

- Are there alternative ways of using the school that will keep it open (either as a public school or some other community-serving facility) to maintain its benefit to the neighborhood?
- What other activities are underway, by government, CDOs, neighborhood associations or others, to stabilize or revitalize the neighborhood that would be affected by the school closing?

This is particularly important in the Low-Vacancy framework zones and in other areas designed as priority stabilization areas.

Schools can become centers of community. The use of high-quality school facilities as anchors for neighborhood stabilization should be actively promoted, along with other measures to strengthen those schools, including prioritizing demolition of derelict buildings in their vicinity, while fostering rehabilitation of reusable buildings and community-serving vacant lot treatments. These strategies can include conversion of schools into community- or neighborhood-based schools and co-location of other facilities and services that provide community benefits into school facilities.

### IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

- 1 Create priority system for public land and parks acquisition.
- 2 Create joint policies and system for disposition of public property.
- 3 Adopt coordinated maintenance strategy for public land.
- 4 Adopt targeted demolition strategy based on stabilization priorities.
- 5 Use new and upgraded schools as community anchors for stabilization.
- 6 Review criteria for school closing to reflect neighborhood stability factors.
- 7 Park management: update parks and recreation facilities planning to reflect current and future populations and budgets (update aspects of 2006 Strategic Master Plan by the DRD).
- 8 Parks and recreation planning at neighborhood scales: refine citywide strategy of DWP through smaller-scaled analysis.



“Detroit Public Library is helping to improve the city by bringing in programs and speakers to help the community feel together and do things that can bring a sense of community to the users.”

Kathi, Detroit 24/7, 5/2012

### PRECEDENTS

- 1 Natur-Park Sudgelande
- 2 Romanowski Farm Park

### EARLY ACTION

- 1 Priority Greenway Projects

- 1 School Investment Target Area
- 2 Nature Park

### PILOT PROJECT

#### SCHOOL INVESTMENT TARGET AREA

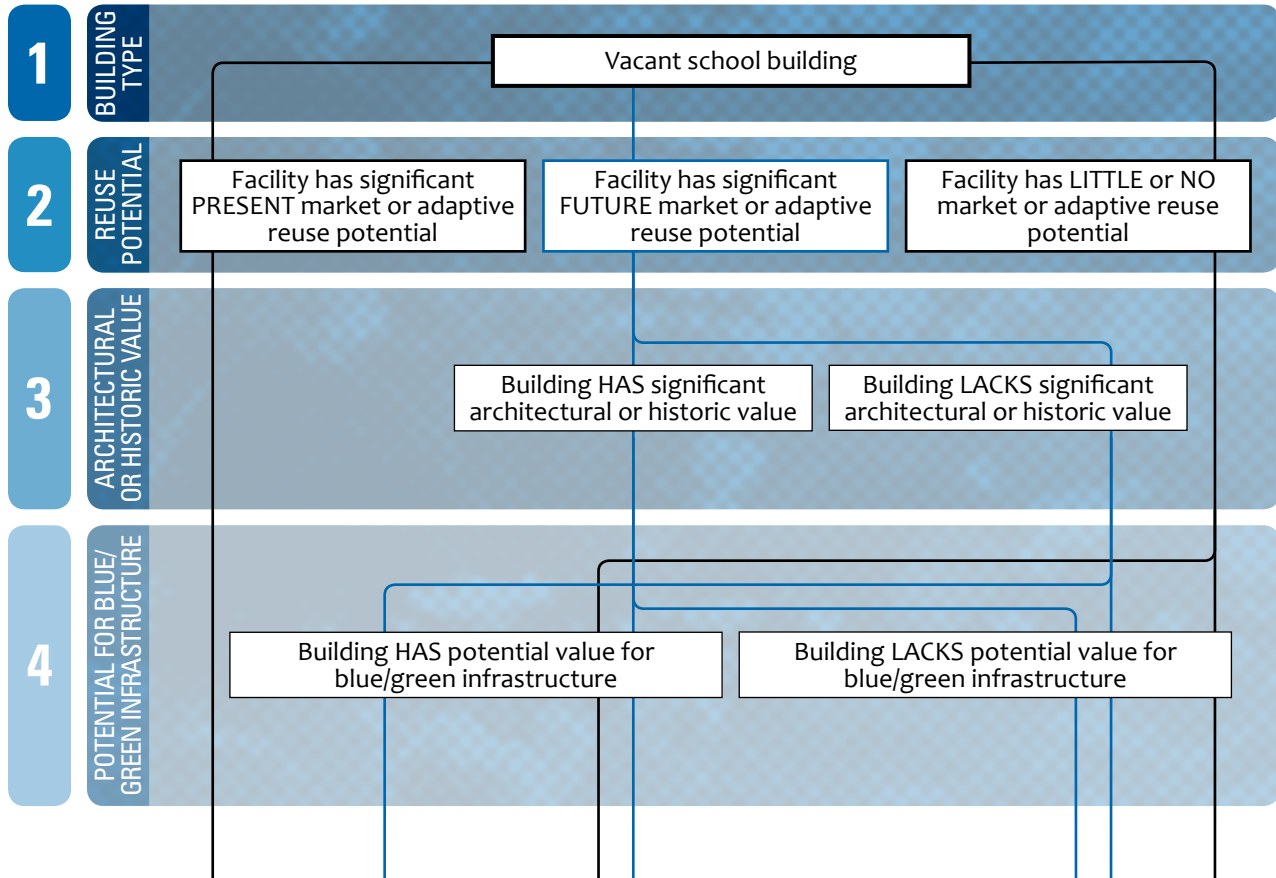
Develop and implement a strategy in partnership with DPS and community stakeholders to maximize the impact of a major school investment, focusing on vacant properties near the facility and building the school’s role as a center of community.

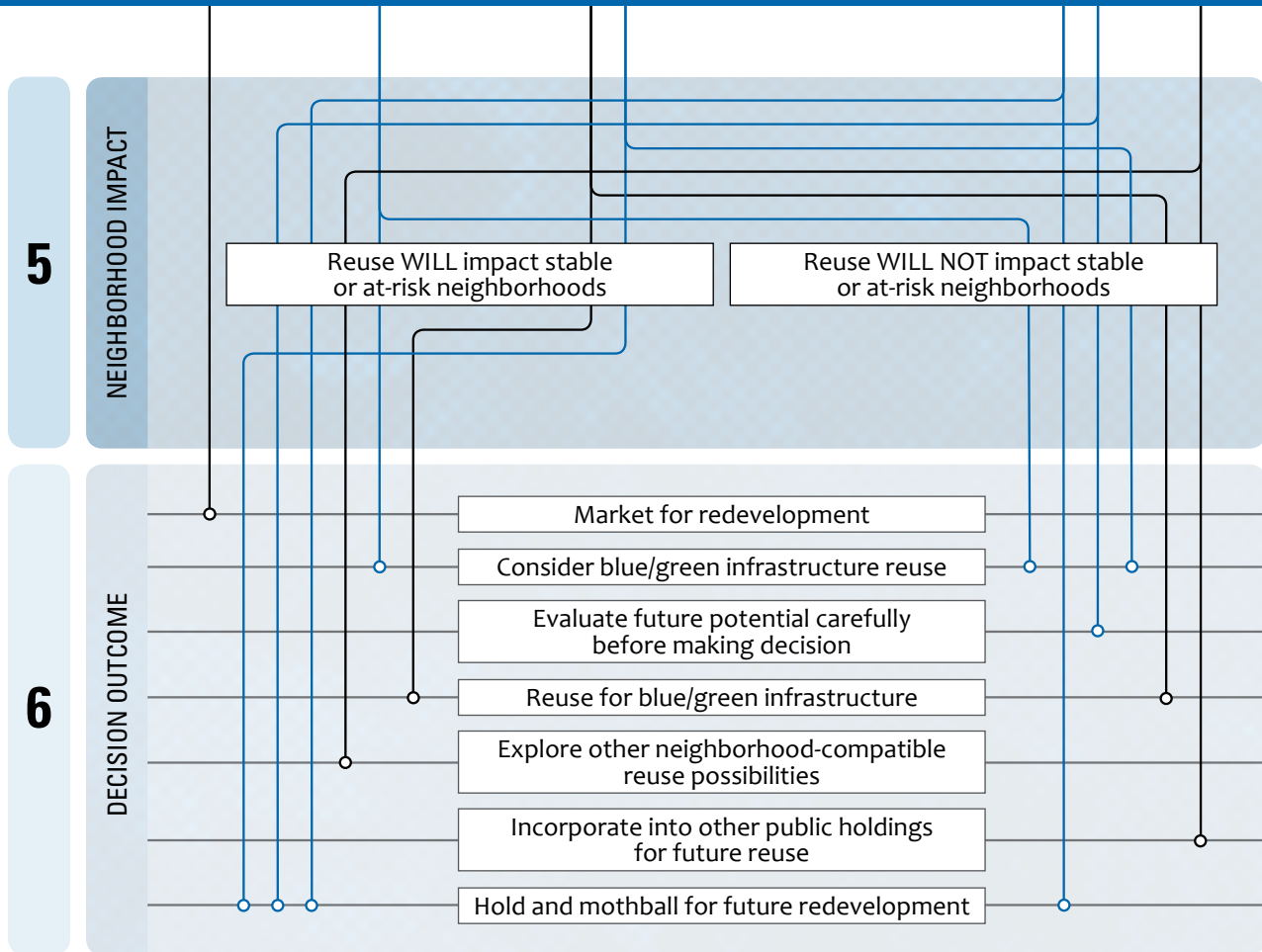
Image Source: Detroit Public Schools





## DECISION-MAKING MATRIX: VACANT SCHOOL REUSE OPTIONS





## PARKS AND RECREATION

**TOWARD PARK REALIGNMENT.** All parkland is important, but not all parks should remain traditional parks. Detroit's park system is both too expensive to maintain and is not well-aligned with current population patterns. Since adoption of the strategic master plan for the city park system in 2006, conditions have changed dramatically; both populations and fiscal resources have declined more sharply than anticipated. As a result, it is necessary to:

- find alternative park models that cost less to maintain,
- identify potential future funding and maintenance partners, and
- reposition existing parks based on current and projected future population densities.

Well-maintained, actively used parks in low-vacancy areas play important roles in maintaining property values, stabilizing neighborhoods, and building communities. Parks in these areas should include recreation opportunities, but can also be adapted

to include new uses such as blue infrastructure or urban gardens.

In higher-vacancy areas, parks offer key opportunities for blue infrastructure and ecological landscapes or wildlife habitats, representing key nodes in the citywide landscape network.

In addition to traditional, multi-use, and infiltration parks, the proposed landscape networks would broaden the range and availability of recreational open spaces. Blue and green infrastructure could include recreation elements. For example, stormwater boulevards and carbon forests could integrate bike trails and paths, and larger stormwater infrastructure like retention ponds could be engineered to function more like surface lakes to accommodate boating, or could be designed as quickly draining basins that could be used for sports fields during dry weather. Greenways can be created to link neighborhoods across the city, fostering healthy lifestyles and encouraging greater environmental consciousness.

Some areas of the city have inadequate access to local parks. In low-vacancy areas with insufficient park access, parks should be a priority reuse option for vacant land, particularly where alternative maintenance and funding opportunities exist, particularly by engaging neighborhood organizations, CDOs, and local businesses.

"I think that all of Detroit is beautiful, but one of my favorite places to go is the river. From the Ambassador Bridge, to Hart Plaza to Chene Part and Belle Isle, the riverfront is one of the most beautiful places in the city limits. It is serene and picturesque and the one place you are guaranteed to see an entirely different country just by standing near a window."

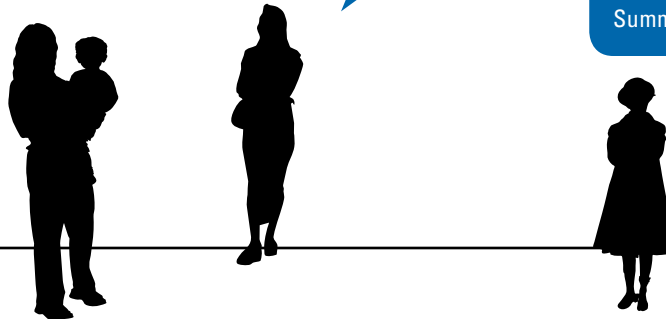
Aria, Detroit 24/7, 5/2012

"The vacant land or buildings should be used to make a park, or something equivalent to that. These buildings are being broken down and used to make houses, which I honestly don't think we need more of. Let's give the kids a reason to get off their butts and go outdoors!"

Samia, Detroit 24/7, 5/2012

"I like the idea of farms and parks, bike trails and flower gardens!"

Evone, Environmental Summit, 5/5/2011



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**MAKING MAINTENANCE AFFORDABLE.** If Detroit is to have a functioning park system, it must align its maintenance costs with its budget realities. Key steps may include

- reducing the total number of parks;
- adapting existing parks to uses that still benefit communities but are less expensive to operate and maintain, such as stormwater management or wildlife habitats;
- finding potential park maintenance partners, such as neighborhood groups, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and others;
- partnering with other city agencies to adapt and maintain parks to fulfill multiple goals, such as partnering with DWSD to create a blue infrastructure/infiltration park that both captures stormwater and provides recreation opportunities; and
- exploring partnerships with state or regional agencies for maintenance of large parks.

As parks fulfill different roles in Detroit, their maintenance requirements will change in response.

**CREATING AN OPEN SPACE NETWORK.** The future open space network will provide more diverse recreation opportunities to Detroiters and visitors, and will be better aligned with existing and future residential densities, supplementing traditional parks with a wide range of new park configurations, including nature parks, infiltration parks, and

multi-use parks, and linked by a robust network of greenways. Additional recreation features will be incorporated into areas reused for blue and green infrastructure. The new network will be significantly less expensive for the City to maintain, both by changes in its physical configuration and by the opportunities it will provide for a wide range of neighborhood groups, nonprofit organizations, and others to participate in park maintenance.

### CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FEEDBACK AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

- Hold, maintain, improve, and increase access to city-owned parks
- Keep parks clean and safe, even in the evening
- Increase access to parks
- Empower residents/neighborhood organizations to maintain existing parks
- Diversify types of parks (e.g. add more parks with natural areas)

**PRECEDENT****ROMANOWSKI FARM PARK**

Residents met for months to discuss, design, and vote on what they wanted to see in their park. In three years, the formerly derelict field was transformed into a recreation park and community resource with a new playground, athletic fields, a pavilion, and several gardens.

Image Source: The Greening of Detroit

**EARLY ACTION****PRIORITY GREENWAY PROJECTS**

Current Detroit projects underway:

- Kercheval Greenway
- Belt Line Greenway
- Bicycle lanes along Jefferson Ave.
- Extensions to Dequindre Cut and RiverWalk
- Bicycle/pedestrian access on NITC

Image Source: Detroit RiverFront Conservancy

**PILOT PROJECT****NATURE PARK**

Create a Nature Park in partnership with local non-profit group in a limited maintenance park or on a large vacant lot with mature vegetation. Park construction should incorporate a monitoring/research component in partnership with local universities or high schools on urban ecology topics.

Image Source: Detroit Conservation Leadership Corps





## PARKS, OPEN SPACE, AND RECREATION

- EXISTING PARK
- GOLF COURSE
- CEMETERY
- CONVERT TO MULTIUSE PARK
- CONVERT TO INFILTRATION PARK IN NEAR TERM
- CONVERT TO INFILTRATION PARK IN LONG TERM
- AREAS TO CONSIDER NEW PARKS
- EXISTING GREENWAY, OFF STREET
- EXISTING GREENWAY, ON STREET
- PRIMARY GREENWAY, OFF STREET
- PRIMARY GREENWAY ON STREET
- PROPOSED ON STREET BICYCLE PATH
- PROPOSED ON STREET BICYCLE LANES
- OTHER PROPOSED GREENWAY
- RECREATION CENTER

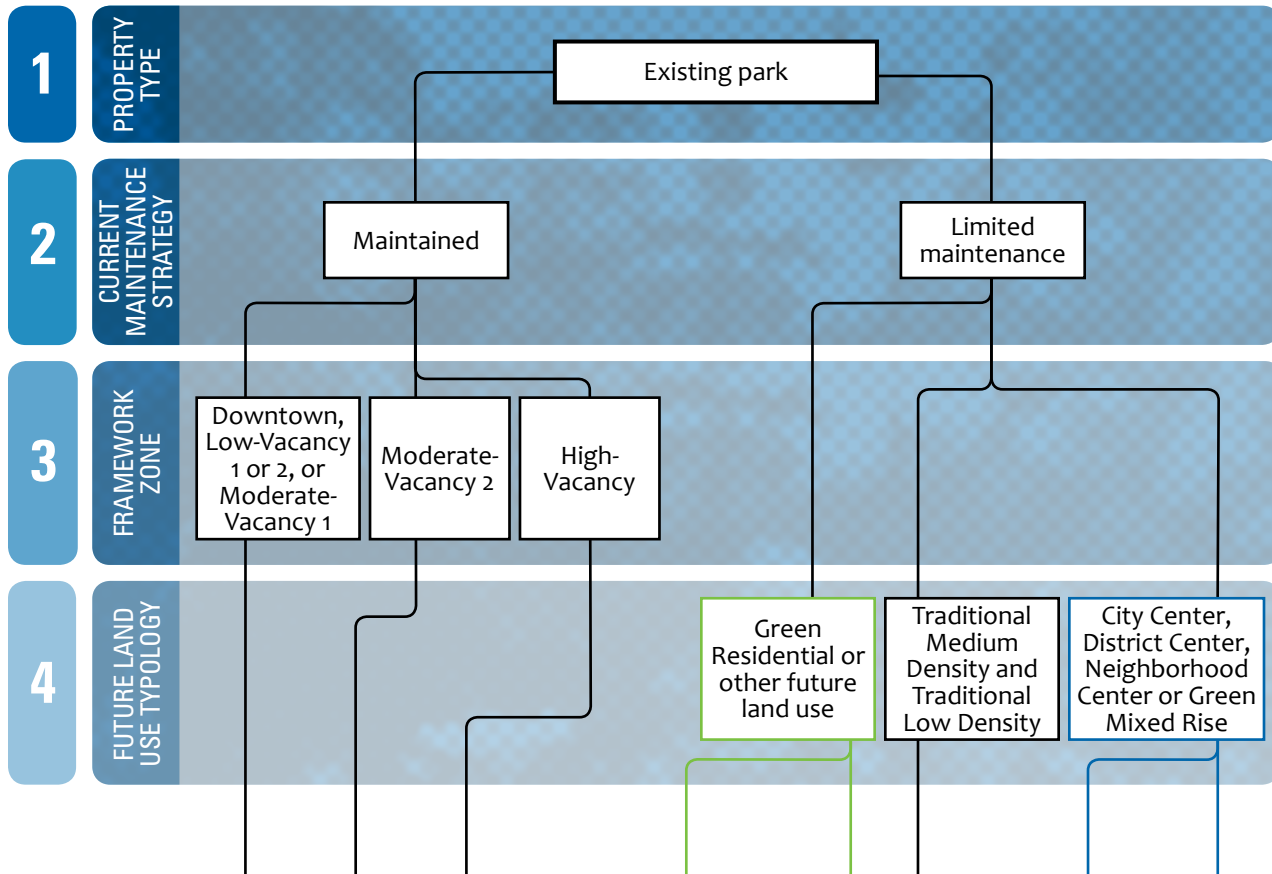
The future Park System will provide new opportunities for open space in Detroit. While many parks will remain open, some can be converted to multi-use or infiltration parks, which will include elements of blue infrastructure or ecological landscapes.

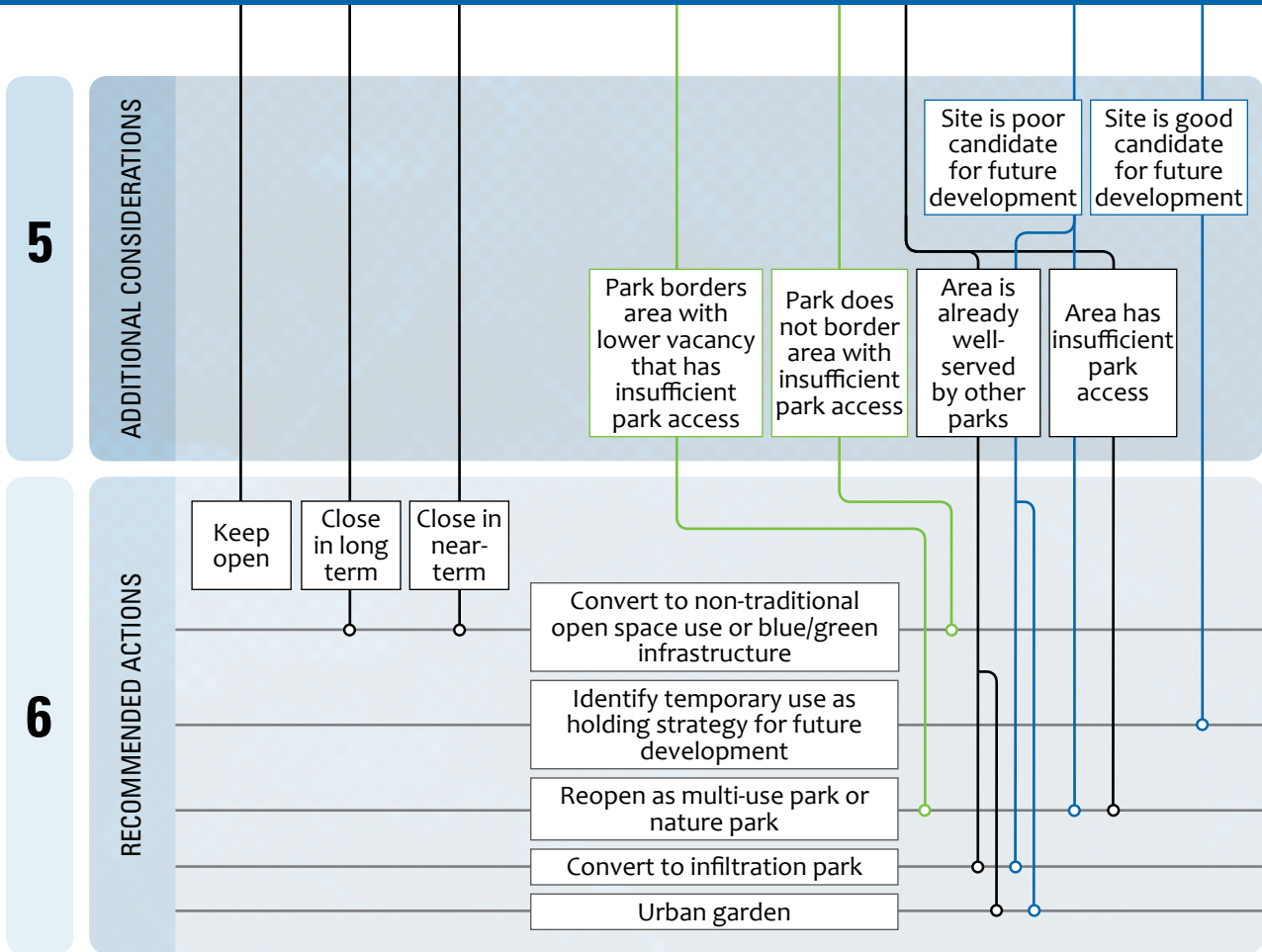
Sources: Detroit Recreation Department, DWPLTP Planning Team





## DECISION-MAKING MATRIX: PARK MAINTENANCE OPTIONS





# **E** INCORPORATE MORE INNOVATIVE VACANT LAND MAINTENANCE APPROACHES

How maintenance is handled can determine whether or not the current condition of a vacant parcel degrades residents' quality of life. For example, resident concerns with unmowed vacant lots include safety, perception, and other issues:

- **SAFETY:** Residents have real concerns about personal and property crime associated with unmowed lots; residents often walk in the middle of streets rather than on sidewalks because of concern that someone could be lurking in shadows of tall grass next to the sidewalk.
- **PSYCHOLOGY:** Unmowed lots are perceived as blight, give the impression that no one is looking after them, and invite illegal dumping and other illicit activities.

- **PRACTICALITY:** Some residents use vacant lots for parking, and advocate for mowing so they can continue to do so.

More use should be made of creative landscape interventions that reduce maintenance costs, or shift maintenance responsibilities to other entities. Individual lots in low-vacancy areas should be sold or leased where possible to private entities, whether sold to homeowners as side lots, used as community open space, or maintained by neighborhood associations or block groups. Simultaneously increasing enforcement of maintenance standards on private owners of vacant properties will motivate them to take responsibility for their properties or pay the City to maintain them.

Vacant lots provide opportunities for a wide range of new uses, including interim uses if permanent uses are not anticipated for some time. General maintenance strategies include the following:

- Identifying potential non-development reuse alternatives for vacant parcels.
- Finding opportunities to engage residents, neighborhood organizations, and others in vacant land maintenance.
- Using alternative lot treatments to reduce the cost of maintaining those parcels that need continued public sector maintenance.
- Reducing maintenance of public land in high-vacancy areas except to the extent needed for blue infrastructure purposes.
- Adopting and enforcing minimum maintenance standards for privately owned vacant land, including developing enforcement partnerships with neighborhood associations.

As properties are demolished, particularly in low-vacancy areas, the demolition specification should incorporate the preferred basic landscape treatment for each property, and wherever possible, a maintenance plan developed in partnership with the residents of the neighborhood in which it is located.

The typology of vacant lot strategies presented here is only the beginning. Additional work will be needed to make possible a systematic maintenance strategy for vacant lots, including refining the typology, developing more precise cost estimates, estimating the benefits, and reaching out to potential community partners.

**IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS**

- 1 Adjust city maintenance standards, strategies, and practices to vary by framework zone and future land use (do not mow all vacant lots in city regardless of location, but instead adopt different lower cost maintenance strategies in different areas); look for partnerships to help with land maintenance.
- 2 Form partnerships with community groups and other organizations, businesses, and individuals to help maintain land.
- 3 Refine set of landscape maintenance typologies and develop cost estimates to implement.

**PRECEDENT**

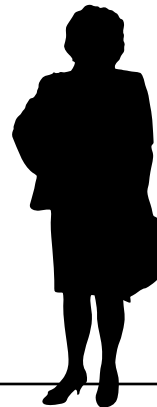
- 1 Vacant Lot Program: Philadelphia

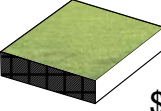
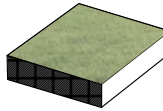
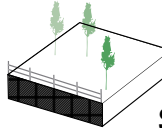
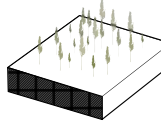
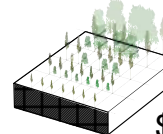
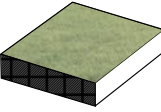
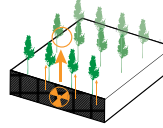
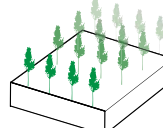
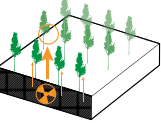
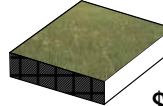
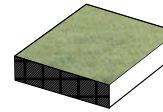
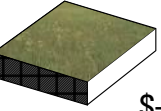
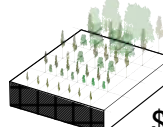
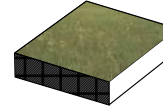
**PILOT PROJECT**

- 1 Implement maintenance pilot projects across multiple framework zones

"I would like to see smart uses for vacant land, including partnering with Greening of Detroit for low- maintenance landscaping ([versus] wasteful mowing of parcels)."

Renee, Planning Cluster-based Meeting, 2/15/2011



MAINTENANCE STRATEGIES (TEMPORARY OR PERMANENT)	LOW-VACANCY AREAS	MODERATE-VACANCY AREAS		HIGH-VACANCY AREAS	
	LOW COST PUBLIC MAINTENANCE FOR NEIGHBORHOOD STABILITY AND / OR HOLDING		SPECIAL CASE: ADJACENT TO LOW / MODERATE-VACANCY	NON-ACTIVE PUBLIC MAINTENANCE	SPECIAL CASE: ADJACENT TO LOW / MODERATE-VACANCY
	 \$\$\$	 \$\$	 \$\$\$	 \$0	 \$\$
	MAINTAINED LAWN	LOW GROW LAWN	MAINTAINED LOT	EMERGENT FOREST	RAPID REFORESTATION
	 \$\$	 \$\$			 \$0
LOW GROW LAWN	PHYTOREMEDIATION			ORCHARD	
 \$\$	 \$\$			 \$\$	
PHYTOREMEDIATION	MEADOW			LOW GROW LAWN	
 \$-\$	 \$-\$	<b>LEGEND</b>		 \$\$	
MEADOW	RAPID REFORESTATION	\$0 NO COST TO CITY \$ VERY LOW COST TO CITY \$\$ MINIMAL COST TO CITY \$\$\$ HIGH COST TO CITY		MEADOW	

## CODE ENFORCEMENT

Because even the vast public land inventory represents less than half of the estimated 150,000 vacant land parcels and vacant buildings in Detroit, the condition and ownership of privately owned vacant properties affects the City's neighborhoods, and affecting Detroit's ability to move forward on economic development and other strategies requiring land assembly and reuse. Many of the privately owned vacant lots and buildings in the city are neglected, while in many areas with strong economic development, potential owners sit on key parcels, doing nothing to improve or maintain them, and blocking the city from assembling sites for redevelopment and reuse. On top of that, many occupied buildings are underutilized—particularly in the city's industrial areas—or in the case of absentee rental properties, destabilizing vital but threatened neighborhoods. The problem has been made worse by the City's budget, and the low priority given to code enforcement among the many competing demands faced by the City. In many respects, effective code enforcement is as much a factor in the City's level of public safety as are effective police and fire departments. Public health

and safety issues are deeply interwoven with those affecting the public land inventory. Because private owners are responsible for more than half of all vacant properties in Detroit, code enforcement is critical to Detroit's turnaround. If the City does not act aggressively to enforce standards for private ownership, the effectiveness of the public land strategies recommended in this Framework will inevitably be compromised. Reflecting the City's fiscal constraints, it must address these issues in ways that do not unduly overburden the municipal budget, by building strong community code enforcement partnerships with business development groups, neighborhood organizations, and CDOs, and by focusing more aggressively on cost recovery from private property owners.

Two issues come to the forefront for urgent attention to code enforcement:

- addressing privately owned vacant land, and
- addressing the problems associated with absentee landlords.

Each of these priorities demand targeted enforcement strategies.

### **INCREASING THE COST OF HOLDING VACANT**

**LAND.** In Detroit at present, there is virtually no cost associated with holding vacant properties. Property taxes are modest and code enforcement is inadequate. Although the City enacted a vacant property registration ordinance in 2010, it does not apply to vacant lots and is not effectively enforced, while the ordinance itself fails to impose a registration fee on property owners. These issues should be immediately addressed:

- Amend the ordinance to include vacant lots.
- Establish clear minimum standards for vacant lot maintenance.
- Impose a reasonable fee through the registration process on owners of both vacant lots and vacant buildings.

Once these steps have been taken, a major effort should be made to obtain compliance with the ordinance. Fees collected under the ordinance should be dedicated to its enforcement.

In light of its fiscal constraints, the City may want to identify key target areas to initiate enforcement

of the registration ordinance and the minimum standards for maintenance. These can include economic development priority areas, as well as areas where strong neighborhood organizations and CDOs are available and willing to work as partners with the City. Engaging neighborhood partnership will not only leverage limited resources, but can support greater overall engagement by residents in their neighborhoods' future. Neighborhood residents are important eyes and ears on the street, identifying problems, resolving many matters before they enter the legal system, and following up to see that owners have indeed carried out their commitments or complied with City orders.

### **ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM OF ABSENTEE-OWNED RENTAL PROPERTIES.**

While Detroit's residential neighborhoods have historically been characterized by high levels of homeownership, many neighborhoods today are seeing homeownership rates decline as more and more houses are bought and rented out by absentee owners. Rental housing is not the problem in itself, but can become a problem when the owners are speculators with no long-term commitment to the property or the neighborhood, milking their properties for short-term gain without maintaining them or monitoring their tenants.



Widespread anecdotal reports suggest that this is far too often the case. While the long-term strategies for the city's neighborhoods must include steps to increase the number of homebuyers and stabilize homeownership rates, in the short as well as long term, strategies are needed to address absentee landlords directly.

"I wish the City would contact the owners of the vacant buildings and somehow enforce the cleaning of debris or demolishing of property."

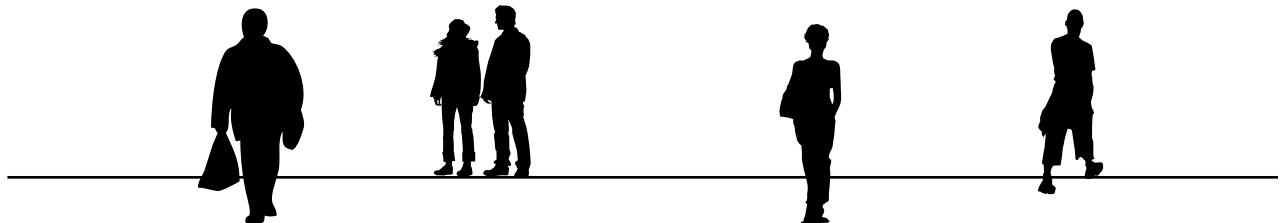
Detroit 24/7, 1/27/2011

"City-owned lots - Why aren't they made available for purchase (free or a nominal fee) to homeowners to put property back on the tax rolls?"

Planning Cluster-Based Meetings,  
"City Owned Lots"

"Support local community/ neighborhood organizations in efforts to maintain quality of housing stock (i.e. code enforcement, public light maintenance, etc)."

Planning Cluster-Based Meeting





## USE MORE AGGRESSIVE REGULATORY TOOLS

As with vacant properties, Detroit requires registration of all rental properties. That requirement is not effectively enforced, however, and in any event is but the first in a series of steps that must be taken to effectively address the challenge posed by absentee landlords. As a first step, the City should actively ensure that all properties are in fact registered. Inexpensive applications of web-based technology, combined with outreach to neighborhood organizations, can significantly increase the level of landlord registration at little cost to the City government. Once a reasonably complete list of absentee owners has been created, the City can create a database of ‘bad apples’ who can be targeted for enforcement by matching that list with tax payments, code violations, and police calls.

As with vacant properties, the City may want to initiate a landlord strategy in key neighborhoods where this issue is particularly important, and where a strong neighborhood organization or CDO is available and willing to work as a partner to

leverage the City’s limited resources. Engagement of a neighborhood organization or CDO can make the difference between a strategy that looks good on paper, and one that actually works. In the end, though, an effective rental strategy should provide not only penalties, but incentives. While strictly enforcing the law against problem landlords, the City of Detroit should design a program of incentives for responsible rental property owners. Many landlord incentives can be provided at little or no cost to the public sector.

While the goal of this strategy is not to further additional abandonment but to foster greater maintenance of privately owned properties, some owners may decide, if faced with serious enforcement of minimum standards, to abandon their properties rather than comply with maintenance standards. Other owners may continue to keep their buildings occupied, but fail to comply with orders to make repairs. Where the City government, as a result, must make repairs, maintain

vacant lots, or secure or demolish vacant buildings, it should develop an effective process for recovering those costs from the owners. Such a process should not be limited to placing liens on properties, which usually have little or no value, but also include aggressive pursuit of judgments against the owners and their other assets, whatever they may be.

#### IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

- 1 Increase the cost of holding vacant property.
- 2 Address problem landlords.
- 3 Create formal partnership with Wayne County Treasurer for tax foreclosure auctions.

#### PRECEDENT

- 1 Cleveland Code Enforcement Partnerships

#### PILOT PROJECT

- 1 Code Enforcement / Landlord Strategy

### CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FEEDBACK AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

- The City is not using its full set of tools to enforce codes that negatively affect residents' surroundings
- Vacant homes that are beyond repair create safety issues.
- No one is properly investigating illegal scrap buyers.
- No one is giving absentee landlords ("slumlords") and businesses fines for blight.
- Developers refuse to demolish or remediate contaminated industrial properties.

LANDLORD STRATEGY ELEMENTS			
REGULATORY STRATEGIES			
TRACKING LANDLORDS AND PROPERTIES	ESTABLISHING MINIMUM STANDARDS	ENFORCING MINIMUM STANDARDS	COVERING ENFORCEMENT COSTS
Rental property registration ordinance	Comprehensive code ordinances	Efficient code enforcement operation using effective systems and technology	Establish minimum rental registration fee with penalties for failure to register
Absentee landlord registration database	Rental licensing ordinance requiring health and safety inspection as condition of receiving rental license	Targeted deployment of code enforcement resources	Establish schedule of penalties for failure to correct violations and other bad actions
Systems for finding unregistered properties/ landlords - increasing coverage of registration ordinance (online system, landlord finders)	Point of sale or turnover ordinance requiring certificate of occupancy inspection when property is sold or re-rented	Code enforcement or re-inspection strategy targeting 'bad apples' - landlords/properties with poor track record	Establish differential fee structure based on landlord track record
Linking registration database to other relevant information - complaints, code violations, health violations, fires, police calls	Adopt responsible landlord guidelines for non-code areas (tenant screening, working with police, etc.)	Community partnerships to leverage municipal code enforcement resources (diversion strategy)	Create efficient <i>in person</i> collection procedure for fines, penalties, and nuisance abatement costs
Create 'bad apple picker' - system for classifying landlords based on track record		Create efficient nuisance abatement program focusing on nuisance conditions with significant impact on neighborhood stability	
		Create remedial program for 'bad apples'	
		Offer educational and training programs for landlords	
		Establish efficient administrative violation enforcement process	

LANDLORD STRATEGY ELEMENTS	
INCENTIVE STRATEGIES	
PROVIDING NON-FINANCIAL INCENTIVES	PROVIDING FINANCIAL INCENTIVES
<p>Create 'Good Landlord' program with clear standards for designation</p> <p>Tie educational and training programs to Good Landlord program</p> <p>Provide better access for Good Landlords to public officials (hot line, regular meetings, etc.)</p> <p>Provide regulatory flexibility and/or fast-track approvals to Good Landlords</p>	<p>Provide fee waivers to qualifying Good Landlords</p> <p>Provide preferential access to housing vouchers for Good Landlords</p> <p>Provide free or reduced-price goods and services for Good Landlords</p> <p>Provide low-interest loans for property improvements for Good Landlords</p>

As many properties have switched from owner-occupied to renter-occupied, it is important that the City develops and implements an effective landlord strategy. This should be a targeted strategy that focuses on enforcement of ordinances for "bad apples" and creates incentives for "good landlords."

**PRECEDENT****CLEVELAND CODE ENFORCEMENT PARTNERSHIPS**

The City of Cleveland and neighborhood-based community development corporations (CDCs) jointly work with landlords to help them understand their responsibilities for maintaining their properties and help them obtain available resources.

Image Source: Center for Community Progress

**EARLY ACTION****TARGETED PROPERTY ACQUISITION**

Partner with Wayne County to obtain properties in key target areas at the tax foreclosure auction, including one key economic growth area and one key neighborhood strategy area.

Image Source: Hamilton Anderson Associates

**PILOT PROJECT****CODE ENFORCEMENT/ LANDLORD STRATEGY**

Build a code enforcement partnership between the City, a CDO and a neighborhood association in a single neighborhood target area focusing on strategies to deal with problem absentee landlords.

Image Source: Hamilton Anderson Associates



## TAX FORECLOSURE

When a property owner in Detroit fails to pay property taxes for three years, the property is put up for tax auction by Wayne County. The number of properties being auctioned by the county has more than doubled in the last three years, reaching more than 20,000 in the fall of 2012. This number would be far larger if the county brought every eligible property to tax auction. Under the Michigan land bank statute, the county can move these properties to a land bank entity created under state law; otherwise, properties are sold to the highest bidder. In recent years in Detroit, this has created a revolving door of properties being sold to speculators, and ending up back on the foreclosure list a few years later.

While the tax auction process contributes to the problem, it can also contribute to the solution, by being a vehicle through which the city can pursue a targeted, strategic property acquisition effort, by building an ongoing partnership between the public landholding agencies and the Wayne County Treasurer's office. The first step is for the key agencies and decision makers involved with public land to

develop priorities for acquisition of properties into the public inventory. These may include key properties needed to create site assemblies for economic development, key properties affecting neighborhood stability, properties needed to consolidate land into suitable parcels for blue infrastructure, or other priorities. Based on those priorities, and working through land bank entities (either at the city, county, or state level), the City of Detroit should develop an ongoing process involving key public and quasi-public agencies such as DPD, DEGC and DSWD to identify specific acquisition priorities in advance of each year's tax foreclosure auction, and work with the Wayne County Treasurer to create a straightforward process to utilize the provisions of the state land bank statute to enable properties to come into public ownership at minimum cost.

This process represents potentially the single most effective way for public agencies to obtain control over key properties that will further the goals of the long-term framework plan at manageable cost. Through partnerships with CDOs and others, it can

also be used as a way to help keep homeowners in their homes, and prevent further abandonment in key low-vacancy areas. At the same time, it must be recognized that the sheer scale of tax delinquency in Detroit at present—and the resulting volume of properties coming to tax auction—vastly exceeds the capacity of the public agencies to take control, or to intervene effectively in the outcomes, of all but a small percentage of these properties. The only long-term or sustainable solution to the tax auction revolving door will be found in rebuilding Detroit's economy and its neighborhoods, and restoring its quality of life so that property owners once again have confidence in the city's future, and their place in that future.

#### IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS

- 1 Build community partnerships to leverage limited public resources. Work with the Wayne County Treasurer (WCT) to obtain properties at the tax foreclosure auction, identifying a limited number of properties in key target areas, which should include one key economic growth area and one neighborhood strategy area.
- 2 Develop an ongoing process involving key public agencies to identify acquisition priorities in advance of each year's tax foreclosure auction.
- 3 Work with the WCT to create a straightforward process to utilize the provisions of the state land bank statute to enable properties to come into public ownership at minimum cost.
- 4 Build an ongoing partnership with the WCT to ensure that key properties come into public ownership on an annual basis and to discourage land speculation through the tax foreclosure process.

#### EARLY ACTION

- 1 Targeted Property Acquisition