

Vacant Property Campaign

From Eyesore to Opportunity

By Jamie Schriener-Hooper

While Michigan is certainly on the road to recovery, both our post-industrial legacy and the foreclosure crisis have left our great state with a number of pockmarks and scars. In some communities, those scars can be vacant buildings—from a single family home to a shuttered factory—while in other areas those scars take the form of vacant land in what should be a vibrant place.

We didn't get to the point we are today overnight, and we know we won't recover overnight. Michigan's recovery will take a number of different forms with a number of different players. What we do know, however, is that these many different forms and players need to work together in order to be efficient and effective.

As a means of addressing Michigan's vacant property issues, four statewide organizations came together several years ago to discuss how they could work together to begin to better address Michigan's vacant property crisis. Those four organizations were the Michigan Municipal League, the Center for Community Progress, which is a national expert in land banks and vacant property in post-industrial cities, the Community Economic Development Association of Michigan (CEDAM), which provides technical assistance, training and advocacy work to primarily nonprofit

organizations doing community-based economic development, and Michigan Community Resources (formerly Community Legal Resources), which provides pro-bono legal services to nonprofits and hosts the Detroit Vacant Property Campaign.

Collaboration Leads to a Campaign

While each of the four organizations were working in different ways to address vacant property and blight and preaching collaboration to the communities and organizations with which they were working, the four organizations were not taking a coordinated approach with their efforts. They quickly decided to resolve this issue and collectively work to address vacant property across the state. From these discussions and this new collaboration, the Michigan Vacant Property Campaign (MVPC), was born.

Pro-Bono Services

Supported by the Michigan State Housing Development Authority and Michigan Local Initiative Support Corporation, the MVPC offers primarily pro-bono services to communities large and small, urban, suburban and rural, to begin to address their vacant property issues. Each of the four partner organizations brings a

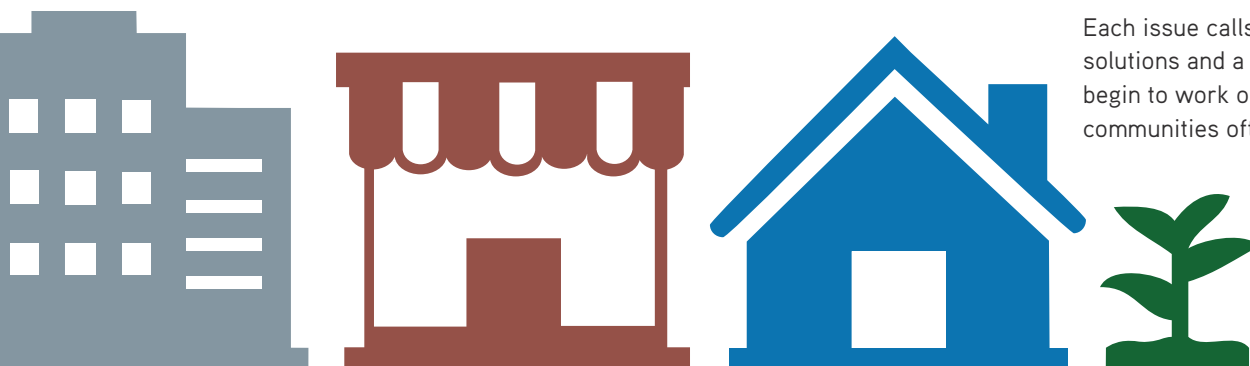
unique skill set and experience base to the table, allowing for a robust analysis of a community's needs. In addition, the MVPC has an advisory committee consisting of state government agencies, utilities, historic preservation organizations, land banks, and many others who provide feedback and contribute to statewide policy issues.

MVPC Understands Every Community Is Unique

Every community is unique and faces a unique set of challenges. Because of this, the MVPC treats each community differently and provides unique recommendations. Grand Rapids does not face the same issues as Flint which does not face the same issues as Bessemer. Each community comes to the MVPC with a unique issue with which they need assistance. In the last year that the MVPC has provided its services, those issues have ranged from:

- how to sell/maintain city-owned vacant property with an ever-dwindling budget;
- how to attract businesses into a struggling downtown filled with vacant buildings;
- how to determine who owns property in rural areas; and
- how to fund demolition and rehabilitation projects.

Each issue calls for a unique set of solutions and a diverse group of people to begin to work on those solutions. What communities often don't realize is that



they often already hold the skill set and expertise in their community to address their vacant property issues.

Many communities have great non-profits, city/village/township government, neighborhood groups, volunteer clubs, block clubs, faith-based institutions, schools, etc., which are working to address the vacant property issues in their community. What these great organizations often don't realize is that they are often being redundant in their efforts, as their neighbors are likely working to address the same issue. The municipality may be working on code enforcement issues and trying to build a vacant property registration while neighborhood groups may be creating their own vacant property registry and cutting the grass and picking up trash at the vacant homes in their neighborhood. Or, a municipality may be trying to find a way to have the community maintain its vacant lots while a nonprofit may be trying to find a place to install and maintain a com-


munity garden. These are all great and needed efforts, but would be much more effective if the groups simply worked together. Bringing these groups and their efforts together into a cohesive plan is a large part of what the MVPC offers to communities.

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Anyone Can Request Assistance

If you are interested in speaking with the MVPC about issues your community faces, the MVPC website offers a simple questionnaire to help the team better understand your community's vacant

property issues. Anyone can request assistance. A team member will follow up with a telephone call and likely set up a day to conduct a pro-bono site visit in your community and provide a brief report with very specific recommendations. In addition, the MVPC may be able to provide specific technical assistance at a significantly reduced rate.

To join the Michigan Vacant Property Campaign in its mission to turn eyesores into opportunities and for additional information such as data, reports, and toolkits, please visit michiganvacantproperty.org. 

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