

Event: Reclaiming Vacant Properties Conference, Cleveland, Ohio; Jordan Rockwell

<http://reclaimingvacantproperties.org/>

Date: October 13-15, 2010

My Role: Student Scholarship Recipient/Representative for the Florida Community Land Trust Institute

On October 13-15, the Center for Community Progress (CCP) organized their third annual “Reclaiming Vacant Properties” conference in Cleveland, Ohio. This event brought together some of the foremost advocates and practitioners working in the area of reusing vacant urban properties as well as interested professionals from various tangentially related fields such as media, politics, and law. The CCP estimates that there were nearly 1000 attendees over the course of the conference, making it their largest to date by a large margin.

The conference included keynote speeches from Shaun Donovan, Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Representative Dennis Kucinich, Dan Kildee, President of the CCP, and author Alex Kotlowitz. Also, the mayors of Flint, Michigan, Memphis, Tennessee, Cleveland, Ohio, and Youngstown, Ohio were involved in the conference. Presenters at breakout sessions included redevelopment executives, nonprofit leaders, code enforcement professionals, planners, foundation representatives, judicial leaders (e.g. housing court judges), and others. The presence of many high-level policy makers and advocates, including Mr. Donovan, as well as the vibrancy of the breakout sessions, indicates the emergence of vacant and abandoned property reuse as a growing national movement.

The conference provided an opportunity for practitioners from different backgrounds to share best practices and increase awareness of the variety of challenges and opportunities that vacant urban properties present to communities around the country. Several core topics were addressed in-depth during the conference, including legal and market barriers to redevelopment, coalition-building, creative reuse strategies, land banking, housing court programs, and code enforcement strategies.

The conference featured representatives from cities across the country facing urban decline, including Pittsburgh, Cleveland, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Camden, NJ, and Detroit,

MI, among others. Each community uses a different mix of programs and strategies to encourage redevelopment of existing core neighborhoods and commercial districts. The strategies available to a particular city are limited by state laws governing expropriation, code enforcement procedure, tax delinquency, and disposition of acquired properties.

Reversing the Trend of Disinvestment

Typically, there are a number of legal reforms that must take place before a local government can effectively facilitate substantial reinvestment in abandoned communities. This is the case due largely to archaic state and local laws governing blighted property acquisition and disposition, land-use and zoning, and existing transportation and housing policies that encourage suburban and exurban low-density development. For example, A.C. Wharton, mayor of Memphis, TN, referenced research indicating that for every urban freeway or beltway constructed the City of Memphis lost around 10% of its population to suburban and exurban developments. Also, often times the administrative structure of local government is not adequate to organize and implement the types of public actions and investments needed to catalyze redevelopment, such as infrastructure updating, parcel assemblage, and land banking. The causes of the trend of disinvestment in existing communities are varied, as was clear at the conference; the purpose of the conference and the movement headed by organizations like the CCP is to build an arsenal of tools to reverse this trend by stopping sprawl and strengthening existing communities.

Land Banking

In an attempt to give local government the tools to reverse this trend of sprawl and decay, some states have adopted 'land banking laws,' designed to catalyze reinvestment in core urban areas. These update archaic state property laws, enable creation of central land banking entities and make it easier for local governments to facilitate redevelopment of core neighborhoods in a number of important ways. Currently there are a handful of states—mostly in the Midwest—that have adopted these laws. Successful adoption of a land banking law generally requires robust intergovernmental cooperation between local and state

governments; this can often act as an obstacle to passage, as has been the case in Pennsylvania and Louisiana, two states that desperately need these reforms.

Attendees heard from several existing land banks, including Cleveland, Ohio, Flint, Michigan, Atlanta, Georgia and St. Louis, Missouri. Although each land bank differed in many important respects regarding its authorized methods and procedures, they shared a common mission: to return substantial numbers of vacant and abandoned properties to productive reuse. An important tool of the majority of land banks is the power to hold tax delinquent and code violated properties in triage, thereby removing them from the sheriff sale or public auction process which routinely subjects properties to speculation and further vacancy. Also, land banks are generally given the power to assemble multiple properties, clear title expeditiously, and negotiate deals with developers that are beneficial for both the developer and the public (e.g. affordable housing requirement in exchange for below-market price of land).

Other Strategies

Not every city is able or willing to convince their state legislature of the necessity of authorizing land banking, however. There were several sessions relating to aggressive code enforcement, effective adjudication of hazardous properties, and other strategies to strengthen existing communities and encourage redevelopment. For example, the City of New Orleans has decided to focus heavily on code enforcement, as this offers the most promise in light of legal uncertainty and title issues with expropriation/eminent domain and tax foreclosure. Additionally, as Secretary Donovan highlighted, the federal government has an important role to play in incentivizing sustainable infill development and strengthening existing communities through grants and policy initiatives.

Also, neighborhood organizations such as CDCs and Community Land Trusts (CLTs) were represented and participated in many of the breakout sessions. They play a crucial role in the success of any redevelopment policy.

Conclusion

This conference as well as the fifth annual land bank conference held in June in Lansing, MI, are part of a larger movement to re-imagine and reinvest our professional and political resources in the nation's existing great cities. Planners and housing professionals realize the strategic benefit that existing urban areas generally have over new fringe developments, including accessibility to transit, pedestrian-oriented design, familiarity with density, and a mix of housing types. Also, investing in existing communities is a core principle of smart growth and sustainability. Thus, it is important to our quality of life that we continue to focus on restoring our great cities and reversing the trend of decay.