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An Effort to Save Flint, Mich., by Shrinking It

By [DAVID STREITFELD](#)

FLINT, Mich. — Dozens of proposals have been floated over the years to slow this city's endless decline. Now another idea is gaining support: speed it up.

Instead of waiting for houses to become abandoned and then pulling them down, local leaders are talking about demolishing entire blocks and even whole neighborhoods.

The population would be condensed into a few viable areas. So would stores and services. A city built to manufacture cars would be returned in large measure to the forest primeval.

"Decline in Flint is like gravity, a fact of life," said Dan Kildee, the Genesee County treasurer and chief spokesman for the movement to shrink Flint. "We need to control it instead of letting it control us."

The recession in Flint, as in many old-line manufacturing cities, is quickly making a bad situation worse. Firefighters and police officers are being laid off as the city struggles with a \$15 million budget deficit. Many public schools are likely to be closed.

"A lot of people remember the past, when we were a successful city that others looked to as a model, and they hope. But you can't base government policy on hope," said Jim Ananich, president of the Flint City Council. "We have to do something drastic."

In searching for a way out, Flint is becoming a model for a different era.

Planned shrinkage became a workable concept in Michigan a few years ago, when the state changed its laws regarding properties foreclosed for delinquent taxes. Before, these buildings and land tended to become mired in legal limbo, contributing to blight. Now they quickly become the domain of county land banks, giving communities a powerful tool for change.

Indianapolis and Little Rock, Ark., have recently set up land banks, and other cities are in the process of doing so. “Shrinkage is moving from an idea to a fact,” said Karina Pallagst, director of the Shrinking Cities in a Global Perspective Program at the University of California, Berkeley. “There’s finally the insight that some cities just don’t have a choice.”

While the shrinkage debate has been simmering in Flint for several years, it suddenly gained prominence last month with a blunt comment by the acting mayor, Michael K. Brown, who talked at a Rotary Club lunch about “shutting down quadrants of the city.”

Nothing will happen immediately, but Flint has begun updating its master plan, a complicated task last done in 1965. Then it was a prosperous city of 200,000 looking to grow to 350,000. It now has 110,000 people, about a third of whom live in poverty.

Flint has about 75 neighborhoods spread out over 34 square miles. It will be a delicate process to decide which to favor, Mr. Kildee acknowledged from the driver’s seat of his Grand Cherokee.

He will play a crucial role in those decisions. In addition to being the treasurer of Genesee County, whose largest city by far is Flint, Mr. Kildee is chief executive of the local land bank. In the last year, the county has acquired through tax foreclosure about 900 houses in the city, some of them in healthy neighborhoods.

A block adjacent to downtown has the potential for renewal; it would make sense to fill in the vacant lots there, since it is a few steps from a [University of Michigan](#) campus.

A short distance away, the scene is more problematic. Only a few houses remain on the street; the sidewalk is so tattered it barely exists. “When was the last time someone walked on that?” Mr. Kildee said. “Most rural communities don’t have sidewalks.”

But what about the people who do live here and might want their sidewalk fixed rather than removed?

“Not everyone’s going to win,” he said. “But now, everyone’s losing.”

On many streets, the weekly garbage pickup finds only one bag of trash. If those stops could be eliminated, Mr. Kildee said, the city could save \$100,000 a year — one of many savings that shrinkage could bring.

Mr. Kildee was born in Flint in 1958. The house he lived in as a child has just been foreclosed on by the county, so he stopped to look. It is a little blue house with white trim,

sad and derelict. So are two houses across the street.

“If it’s going to look abandoned, let it be clean and green,” he said. “Create the new Flint forest — something people will choose to live near, rather than something that symbolizes failure.”

Watching suspiciously from next door is Charlotte Kelly. Her house breaks the pattern: it is immaculate, all polished wood and fresh paint. When Ms. Kelly, a city worker, moved to the street in 2002, all the houses were occupied and the neighborhood seemed viable.

These days, crime is brazen: two men recently stripped the siding off Mr. Kildee’s old house, “laughing like they were going to a picnic,” Ms. Kelly said. Down the street are many more abandoned houses, as well as a huge hand-painted sign that proclaims, “No prostitution zone.”

“It saddens my heart,” she said. “I was born in Flint in 1955. I’ve seen it in the glory days, and every year it gets worse.”

Mr. Kildee makes his pitch. Would she be interested in moving if the city offered her an equivalent or better house in a more stable and safer neighborhood?

Despite her pride in her home, the calculation takes Ms. Kelly about a second. “Yes,” she said, “I would be willing.”

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