



Flint, Mich. and the Incredible Shrinking American City

By Mary Kane 4/22/09 10:39 AM

The New York Times gives high-profile treatment today to efforts in Flint, Mich. to deal with a deluge of abandoned and vacant properties by literally shrinking the city — demolishing the houses, urging people to leave, cordoning off the decay and leaving it to nature. The Times focuses on Genesee County Treasurer and Land Bank Chairman Dan Kildee, a leading proponent of the shrinking city movement:

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.”

Kildee’s land bank has become a national model for other communities wanting to take control of abandoned and trashed properties, clear blight, and find other uses for the land. TWI has reported extensively on land banks and the problems of vacant properties, as well as the proposals in Flint to begin shrinking the city. Flint isn’t alone, either. The New York Times reported last month that in Saginaw, Mich., and other hard-hit cities, Habitat for Humanity concentrates on tearing down blighted houses, rather than building new ones.

All of this is a testament to the dramatic crisis in some cities that hasn’t seemed to draw the attention of national policymakers. Lenders and

the government can modify all the loans they want and hold off on new foreclosures, but that will do nothing to address the dilemma posed by vacant properties. It's the back-end of the foreclosure process, and the damage is becoming permanent. The drastic measures in Flint — there's no other way to describe cordoning off abandoned portions of the city and leaving them behind — should be a wake-up call. But it's not clear anyone is listening.

Communities that have land banks — and there aren't enough of them — need major resources from the federal government to address the scope of the problem. There's no way they can do it on their own. Until that happens, if it ever does, expect more troubled communities to resort to things like shrinking their cities and enlisting charitable groups to tear down deteriorated houses.

As the mortgage crisis continues, it's become clear that in some markets, banks and lenders dumped their trash and walked away, leaving cities that already weren't thriving even worse off. It's almost unbelievable to hear local officials in these areas discuss abandoned swaths of their land. (Kildee talks about creating a new "Flint Forest.") But that's the reality these days, in the American cities and neighborhoods we've simply left behind.