

Strengthening our Community in the Face of Population Decline

On October 8th, 27th, and November 5th, the Genesee County Land Bank coordinated with the City of Flint, Mt. Morris Township and community partners to host three forums called *Strengthening our Community in the Face of Population Decline*. The purpose of the forums was to explore land use trends, learn about government and community based efforts to improve land and neighborhoods, and hear fresh ideas about how to strengthen Flint and Beecher despite population decline.

Flint's population is now about forty five percent smaller than it was in 1960. Thirty two percent of residential properties are abandoned. With a surplus of abandoned properties, sale values continue to decline. This year, the average sale value of a single family home in Flint is \$16,400. Given these and many other challenges, the forum provided an opportunity to discuss the challenges we face and propose new strategies to strengthen neighborhoods and make better use of abandoned land with limited resources.

Presenters included community leaders and activists and representatives from the city and county government and the U.S. Census. Some of the strategies presented included developing a neighborhood plan, converting vacant lots into a large community park, gardening and maintaining vacant lots, continuing to create a lively community to attract and retain young people attending local universities, strengthening existing neighborhoods while giving residents living in areas with lots of abandoned land the option to move into more dense neighborhoods.

Forum participants responded to these ideas and shared their thoughts about how to strengthen the community during small group discussions. The most commonly cited themes that came up during these discussions were:

1. Community engagement and empowerment and positive communication
2. Eliminating blight - demolishing blighted structures, enforcing codes to improve housing, cutting weeds and removing trash from abandoned properties
3. Supporting education and programming for youth
4. Using vacant lots to create gardens and natural and/or cared for green spaces
5. Developing citywide (master plan) and neighborhood plans
6. Creating new jobs and providing training opportunities

What the Land Bank is doing in response to the community input

The Land Bank is implementing programs and activities in the areas where people want to see change most. Since community engagement/empowerment and positive communication was the most frequently cited theme, the City of Flint Police Department, the Genesee County Land Bank, Applewood Initiative for Gardens and Community, Salem Housing Community Development Corporation, and other

individuals involved in community capacity building, joined together to organize **Building Neighborhood Power** training sessions. The sessions began with an introductory workshop on Starting and Strengthening a Block Club. More 70 residents have attended this first workshop series, which was repeated three times in January and February. The workshop will be repeated one more time on February 18th from 5:30-7:30 at Durant-Tuuri-Mott Community Center. During the following six sessions, including three two-hour long Wednesday evening sessions on March 7 and April 14th, and two half-day Saturday sessions on February 27th and March 27th, participants will learn how to organize and sustain a block club and plan for and create the community they want to live in. For more information about the trainings or this partnership, please call (810)237-6926 or (810) 257-3088 ext. 536.

To eliminate blight, the Land Bank will continue its aggressive program to remove dumping and clear abandoned lots. This past summer, the Land Bank hired 60 workers in collaboration with Career Alliance and Mott Community college to clean and maintain vacant lots. Since they started work in June, the crews have removed 800 tons of garbage and mowed 9,000 Land Bank and privately owned abandoned lots. The Land Bank crews will continue to board houses, make property improvements and maintain properties through the year.

To make property available for gardens, yards and neighborhood greenspace, the Land Bank will continue its Side Lot, Adopt-a-Lot, and Clean and Green Programs. These programs provide resources to help residents and groups garden and improve vacant lots.

The City of Flint is hosting Neighborhood Action sessions throughout the city to empower residents to improve their neighborhoods and guide government decisions about services and programs. The Land Bank is participating in and supporting this process and will use the information collected to help inform Land Bank decisions.

A complete report from the forum and a description of what the Land Bank and others are doing in response to the community input provided will be available for download at www.thelandbank.org or upon request at 810-257-3088 ext. 527.