

# Cities in Transition - Interview

*Vacant Property Research Initiative*



**Dan Kildee**  
Washington, D.C.

## Profile

Between 1997 and 2009, Dan Kildee was Treasurer for Genesee County, Michigan. After creating the state's first land bank, the Genesee County Land Bank Authority (GCLBA), in 2002, he received national recognition for taking advantage of Michigan's reformed tax foreclosure law to transform GCLBA into an active community development tool for managing vacant and abandoned properties in and around the City of Flint.

Kildee's tenure as Treasurer ended in 2009. Prior to being elected Treasurer in 1996, he served as a Genesee County Commissioner for 12 years. Kildee is currently President and Chief Executive Officer of the Center for Community Progress, which he co-founded as a successor to the National Vacant Properties Campaign and the Genesee Institute.

## The Importance of Leadership for Cities in Transition

By David Morley, AICP

### Identifying a New Strategic Planning Paradigm for Flint

Dan Kildee believes his most significant accomplishment as Treasurer of Genesee County was changing a system focused on liquidating assets into a system that puts vacant and abandoned homes on a rational path away from stagnancy. Thanks to Kildee's work with Genesee County Land Bank Authority (GCLBA), vacant properties in Flint are less likely to suffer further neglect in the hands of investors.

After looking at the city's 40-year-old master plan in 2005, it became clear to Kildee that Flint needed a new strategic planning paradigm to guide decision making about demolitions and redevelopment. The plan anticipated a population of 250,000, but in reality, the city's population peaked in 1960 at 196,940 and had fallen steadily since.

As Kildee puts it, "it became clear that it was not just a question of rationalizing supply and demand but re-patterning the city in a way that made the successful or sustainable neighborhoods the kind of higher-density neighborhoods that people really wanted."

### Leadership for Cities in Transition

In Kildee's view, although change can't happen without leadership, that leadership need not come from elected officials. It can come from non-elected government representatives and from the non-profit and business communities.

"Leadership is often manifest by someone who is willing to point out a reality that is not currently being considered and to create some disequilibrium or anxiety, which makes people uncomfortable and forces them to deal with questions that otherwise they wouldn't have to deal with," says Kildee.

He cautions leaders against falling into the trap of promising growth and expansion as a placeholder for progress or for prosperity. Planners can help change the conversation. "Local political leaders need planners to pursue a broader set of objectives than just expansion and growth," he says, "and to actually think about how planning supports quality of place and the quality of life for the people who live there."

He concedes that significant technical challenges face cities in transition. Yet Kildee thinks adaptive change is essential. "The technical tools are in a constant state of change; one thing that is harder to change is the way people approach their work and their willingness

to change the way they do their work,” he says.

### The Importance of State and Federal Leadership

In the bigger picture, Kildee believes the United States needs to think much more carefully and strategically about how to plan for regional growth and development. “Despite the fact that most people would say they favor the reuse of existing land and infrastructure and rebuilding within the built environment, we still make it easier and less expensive to build on a greenfield than rebuild in an existing place.”

According to Kildee, states have the most authority to set the tone for substantive change because they govern land use, infrastructure development, and public investment. Still, he does see an important role for the federal government to create “not just incentives for better land-use planning or better sustainable development systems, but penalties for not adhering to those principles.”

Kildee worries that the 2008 recession and housing bust will make it difficult for communities to say no to any new development. “We need to think about what the next period of growth will actually look like,” he cautions. “While it might be more expensive in the short term to redevelop within the built environment, in the long term it’s more sustainable to create more vibrant cities.”

Kildee believes interesting and vibrant cities will create the next economy. He points to the history of cities as places where ideas are born and commercialized: “When people have a choice between a real suburb and a pretend suburb in the city, they’ll take the real thing every time,” says Kildee. “We need to provide city life and a city experience, and the only way to get there is to create stronger, denser neighborhoods, which might be interspersed among open green space but still have to be real urban neighborhoods.”

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