Cities in Transition - Interview

Vacant Property Research Initative

Bob N. Brown, AICP

Cleveland, Ohio

Profile

As Director of Planning for the City of Cleveland, Robert N. (Bob) Brown, AICP works with his 25-member staff to create and carry out a vision for in Cleveland's neighborhoods and downtown by leading projects, which includes Cleveland's Civic Vision 2000 Citywide Plan and the city's Census 2000 Complete Count Initiative. Most recently, he has overseen the Connecting Cleveland 2020 Citywide Plan. Brown has been with the City of Cleveland since his appointment as Assistant Director of City Planning in 1985. Prior to joining the City, he was a managing planner for the Cuyahoga County Planning Commission for nine years. With over 37 years of experience as a planning practitioner, he has helped prepare numerous comprehensive plans and zoning codes for several communities.

Brown has served as the President and Vice-President of the governing board for Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA), the metropolitan planning organization serving Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, and Medina counties; and served on the Board of Trustees for University Circle Inc. He also represented Mayor Frank G. Jackson on the Cuyahoga County Planning Commission. Brown received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Urban and Regional Studies from Case Western Reserve University in 1973 and participated in Master of Urban Planning at Columbia University.

VirginiaTech
Invent the Future

Cleveland's Subtle Approach to Right Sizing

By Joe Schilling, PhD and Natalie Borecki, AICP

Many cities in the Great Lakes Region have confronted shrinking population in a very public or political way. Cleveland, Ohio, is one of the few to take a different path. It's not that Cleveland's experience of population decline is much different from that of other cities: According to the latest U.S. Census information, Cleveland population fell to 396,815, a loss of 17.1 percent from 2000, and to its fewest inhabitants since 1900. From 1950 to 2000, Cleveland's suburbs grew to encompass twice the amount of land they once had, further adding to population decline from the city to the suburbs and exurbs over this period.

An important difference between Cleveland and other cities in transitions is that Cleveland's problems are far less spatially or geographically concentrated. Cleveland did not have to absorb entire neighborhoods and areas of broad-scale vacancy and abandonment in a relatively short time, as did Detroit and Youngstown. Cleveland's gradual downward trend over a much longer time horizon allowed the city to adjust slowly and permitted them to use tools and mechanisms they had early in place, such as subsidizing the neighborhood housing market, slowly replacing outdated housing stock; employing tax abatements, and coordinating the city's vacant parcel land bank, which was created in the 1970s with Cuyahoga County. Ultimately, Cleveland has taken a more subtle planning approach to addressing neighborhood change and decline.

New Answers Change the Old Planning Paradigm

Since a strong market economy has been absent in Cleveland for some time, the city hasn't needed to establish a formal or public right-sizing policy or program. A more incremental, transactional approach evolved to focus energy, resources, investment, and development in targeted areas. Cleveland targeted stronger market neighborhoods and locations around areas with major assets (such as institutions, physical ecological environment, or geographic areas, like downtown or water fronts). Brown remarks that for practicing planners in such as Cleveland, the challenge is identifying positive interventions to stabilize or improve the quality of life and basic services for the population still living in areas with disinvestment.

The reimagined smaller Cleveland evolved from their 1990

comprehensive plan, Cleveland Civil Vision: 2000 Citywide Plan. The plan opened the window to a new way of thinking about the city, but then the 21st century brought challenges that were wholly unanticipated, notably the economic downturn of 2008.

As early as 2000, Cleveland set out in an effort to update the comprehensive plan to reflect a smaller city and more focused economic opportunities. The new planning process identified neighborhoods, corridors, and institutional assets with specific market strengths. Based on 12 planning elements—population, housing, retail, economic development, recreation and open space, sustainability, arts and culture, education and community service, transportation and transit, safety, preservation, and opportunity and equity—Cleveland designated 36 focus neighborhoods, grouped into six districts (statistical planning areas). The city is using this framework to connect its people, places, and assets with strategic opportunities and resources in a city that will offer diverse opportunities and an improved quality of life and health.

In 2008, Cleveland's priority development areas strategy was expanded upon for parts of the city outside its core development areas, to specifically address vacant properties and other areas needing attention in the inner-ring suburbs of Cleveland.

Reaching Out

Often in CiTs, planners find themselves having to cross the conventional boundaries of discipline or agency function. Brown believe that much of this work is about relationship building with organizations already working in the community, linking groups that have been "doing their own thing." These new partnerships open opportunities for leveraging resources, solving problems, and advancing the

Courtesy of http://planning.city.cleveland.oh.us

city's overall vision.

Cleveland has openly welcomed and embraced new partners and ideas. For example, the city supports an initiative of the Ohio State University Extension service to grow local food on a previously vacant, 26.5-acre pilot site; the project was funded by a U.S. Department of Agriculture, Ohio State Department of Agriculture and the city of Cleveland's Department of Economic Department. This work reinforces both Cleveland's efforts to become a greener place to live, and public health initiatives.

Brown is careful not to suggest that urban agriculture is the salvation of the city: "Ultimately, it's still an urban place, not a rural place." Urban gardening and agriculture does answer several needs, however, especially where vacant land exists in a landscape of public health challenges and food deserts. "You are going to either let the land lie sallow and weed infest, where city has to send out mowers two or three times a year, or you are going to find some creative way to turn a liability into an asset." he says. Cleveland now has well over 200 urban gardens and a smaller number of larger-scale commercial garden operations, backed by non-profits to advance their missions, from health objectives to job training and youth activities. For example, a refugee resettlement group is using urban farming as part of their programming, in cooperation with the public housing authority.

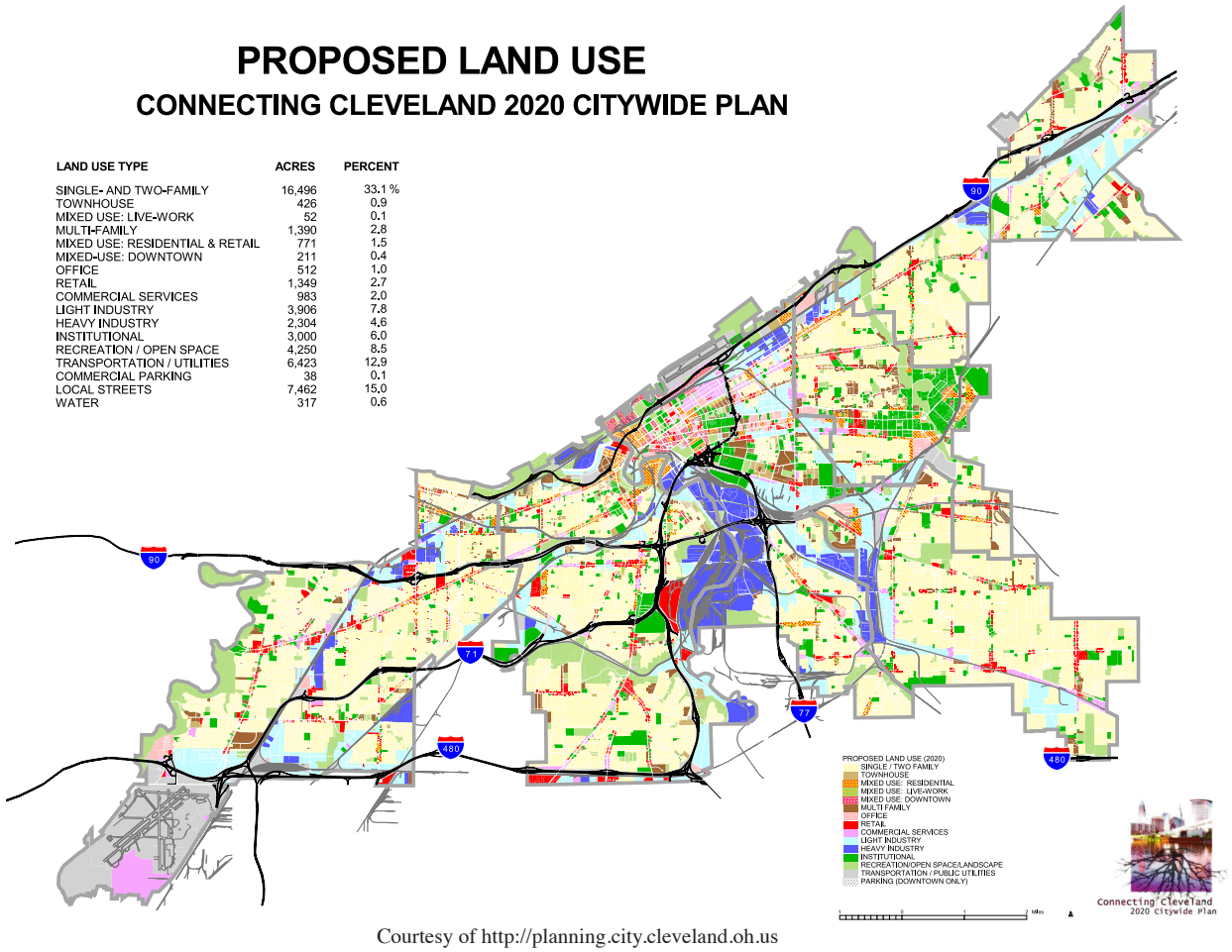
Vertical Integration of a Vision

Cleveland has been responding to political directives to trim its staff and organization slowly and methodically. As a result, the city has been able to maintain and strengthen and organizational working brain, linking various functions of the city and its departments with overarching goals that support its reimaged vision. This has allowed and the city's planning resources to remain comparatively stable during a period of decline.

With a strong-mayor form of government and key executive assistants (or chiefs) overseeing and coordinating various departments and government functions, Cleveland benefits from good internal coordination, keeping at bay contradictory actions and reducing conflict among separate agency agendas.

What the Horizon Holds

Brown suggests there's a lot to be optimistic about in Cleveland's future. Cleveland has seen an increasing preference for urban living and urban shopping among segments of its population. Residents want the city to return shopping, services, work, living, and recreation to the center. Younger generations have a greater propensity toward urban living, with an expectation for a variety of connected cultural, institutional, recreational, downtown, recreational, and open spaces (water and river fronts). Also in the midst of all recession, there's still economic and investment interest in Cleveland's priority areas, which a recent study indicated "$4.2 billion worth of real estate development occurring along corridors connecting its downtown university circle and Euclid Avenue."



Courtesy of http://planning.city.cleveland.oh.us

This is Research Project by the
Metroplitan Institute
College of Architecture and Urban Studiesm Virginia Tech
1021 Prince St, Ste. 100, Alexanria, VA 22314
Email: mivt@vt.edu
www.mi.vt.edu