

# Cities in Transition - Interview

*Vacant Property Research Initiative*



**John Gower**  
Cleveland, Ohio

## Profile

As retired-former director of the City of Dayton's Department of Planning and Development from 1978 until 2011, John Gower watched the transformation of the city as it lost population from the 1980s until the present. Gower oversaw the city's major comprehensive planning process in 1996 and the addition of an economic development component in 1999, as well as plan adjustments in the years since. Now retired, he continues to serve part-time as Urban Design Coordinator for the city.

**Tony Kroeger**  
Cleveland, Ohio

## Profile

Tony Kroeger is a senior planner with the city who worked with Gower and Gower's successor, Aaron Sorrell, on the 2008 Neighborhood Stabilization Plan.

## A Fluid Approach to Planning

By Joe Schilling, PhD and Natalie Borecki, AICP

### Suiting Process to Needs

Dayton, Ohio's last comprehensive plan was completed more than 15 years ago, in 1996. Unlike many cities, Dayton has not taken a "whole-cloth," visioning approach to revising the plan. Instead, the city has made "organic and incremental adjustments," in a process that John Kroeger describes as "updating and retelling the story" of Dayton, using planning as a vehicle for making reality checks, seeking agreement, and setting priorities. "It's a strategy that has been Iterative, interactive, and responsive," he says.

Dayton's 1996 comprehensive plan contained six major components, which have since been revised and expanded to eight. One of Dayton's major revisions was creating an economic strategy in 1999. Yet the 1996 plan did not fully acknowledge or foresee the range of challenges the city would face over the next 15 years. "The 1996 plan was somewhat silent on vacant properties," says Gower. The old plan was based on the assumption that Dayton would draw back its lost population. The subsequent revisions have resulted from the community "more or less going through its own twelve-step program" to reconcile itself with the population loss and move forward.

Today, says Gower, "we are stunningly overbuilt." A 2011 planning document characterizes Dayton as having "sprawled itself into a weak real estate market" where the "housing vacancy rate is in excess of 20 percent, contains a region with a flat population since the 1970's, yet has grown by 50 percent." Yet Gower is optimistic, sometimes about the very forces that have distressed Dayton: "What's emerging is something different, and ultimately something very strong. The vacating of old industry was ultimately a freeing event, like a monkey off our back."

In fact, even as the city population decreased by 40 percent during the past decade, a trend aggravated by the 2008 recession, Dayton's bond rating was actually upgraded because credit agencies deemed the city competent at managing hard times. Dayton realized early the importance of maintaining "organizational working brain" that would be able to maintain strategic capacity while managing key functions. This has proved essential to Dayton's success in running programs, acquiring and overseeing grant funding and making headway on typical CiT challenges, such as distress, downturn, decline and vacancy. For a CiT, maintaining an 'organizational working brain' means you can't cut services down to solely emergency responses (fire, police and courts) and library functions if you expect to make headway on stabilizing (associated) CiT challenges, say Gower and Kroeger.

An interesting development in Dayton is that although—as in other cities—planning and economic development are carried out by different departments, the addition of an economic development module to the plan in 1999 has led to better coordination of these functions. “Strategic development and investment [are] integrated” in Dayton, he says. In fact, “No effort stands alone. What’s good for community is good for institution, and vice versa. The Civil Engineering section, for example, views itself as a part of the place-making strategy in Dayton. “They are the ones advocating livable communities,” agree Gower and Kroeger. “They’re leading initiatives.”

### Role of the Planner

“In six years of working for the City of Dayton, I have never consulted the comprehensive plan,” says Tony Kroeger. Gower agrees that the plan, as it stands, is not especially useful as a prescriptive document. CiTs like Dayton experience disjuncture between their on-the-ground needs and the majority of tools and planning theories, which rely on a growth paradigm. Many of the typical planning exercises, structures, and organizational infrastructure are loaded with starting places and assumptions that fail to be of assistance in a CiT.

In 1996 when the first big update was done in over 20 years, a new conversation was just beginning. Gower was impressed with the city’s residents willingness to move past a growth mentality based on manufacturing, toward a new image for the city based on knowledge and assets management. In the absence of relevant models for this, Dayton and its community participants have been figuring what works and what doesn’t within their own environment ever since the 1996 plan was approved. Zoning code updates and thoroughfare plans have been used as “the mechanics of moving a vision forward” in collaboration with residents.

*This is Research Project by the*

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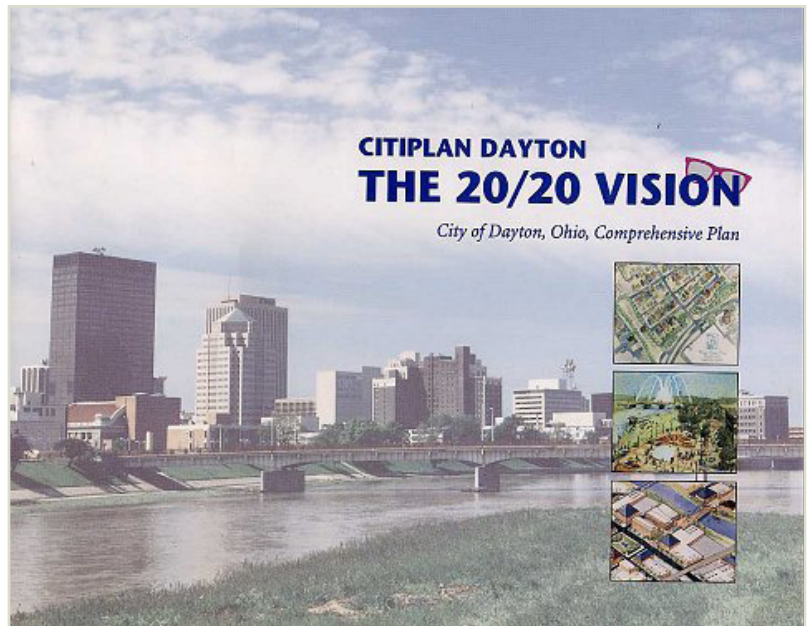


Photo courtesy of City of Dayton ([www.cityofdayton.org](http://www.cityofdayton.org))

“We operate in a collaborative environment,” says Gower. “Everyone is claiming ownership for parts of the planning for the city, versus one claiming all of it. We are working on updating the comprehensive plan to catch up with this vision of what we have done,” Gower states.

Today the conservation has evolved into Dayton’s Green and Gold (G&G) strategy, based on asset-based linked development (“gold”) and a green land reutilization vision (“green”). This strategy not only communicates a purpose but also reinforces Dayton’s Garden City philosophy.

### Place Matters

Revisiting and updating Dayton’s 1996 plan in an incremental, collaborative way created a pivot point that allows Dayton to move beyond its past. What has emerged from this approach is a new image for Dayton and a reimagined future for the city as a knowledge- and asset-based community and economy with far less population and density than in previous decades.

It is important to promote “sober, market-based conservations with your stakeholders and community,” says Gower. “Wish-based conversations might prove more harmful than good, at least initially in CiTs experiencing distress and decline.” These conversations are key to clear foresight into what a CiT’s market is, what it can support, and how it fits into the regional market economy.

Gower suggests “borrowing from places liberally, because good ideas belong to everybody, bad ideas are somebody else’s, but when the day is done you have to tailor make this to your own conditions and your own community.”