

Cities in Transition - Interview

Vacant Property Research Initiative



Christina Kelly
Flint, MI

Profile

Christina Kelly is the Lead Planner for the Genesee County Land Bank Authority. She works with the Authority's planning staff and community partners in Flint to transform abandoned and tax foreclosed properties into food gardens, community green space, and quality affordable housing. An important part of her work includes securing brownfield funding in order to demolish blighted structures and clean up contaminated properties. Christina works with Building Neighborhood Power, a collaborative of individuals and organizations that provides capacity building and planning support to neighborhood groups to help them create positive change in their community. As an active partner in edible flint, a local food growing network, Christina supports urban farming as a means to creating a more just and equitable food system. She works with graduate students from area universities to develop plans and applied research reports on urban abandonment, brownfields, vacant land re-use and neighborhood revitalization. Previously, she worked as a Researcher and Lecturer in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Michigan where she studied regional planning and land banking in Flint and taught applied graduate planning courses. Christina received a Masters in Urban Planning and a Masters of Science in Environmental Policy from the University of Michigan in 2001. You may contact her with any questions at clkelly@umich.edu.

Strategies for Engaging a Distressed Community and Plan Making Strategies for Cities in Transition

By Joe Schilling, PhD and Lauren Bulka

Strategies for Engaging in Distressed Communities

“Planners should be aware of their own social (class) location and unpack the privilege that they bring to the planning process,” says Christina Kelly. “Influences like gender, race, class and the ability of the planner can all have a positive or negative impact on the process and its outcomes.” Especially in terms of CiT community engagement, Kelly points out that “planners need to understand [that] the privilege they bring to the planning discussion can work against or with the process, setting the stage in building trust and credibility within the community.”

Although such self-awareness and integrity is not easy for any individual, it is necessary given that many highly distressed CiT neighborhoods have racial or social tensions, as in Flint's predominantly African American and Latino neighborhoods. When beginning a difficult conversation with a community, “starting from a very honest place becomes crucial in building trust with community residents.” Kelly also recommends integrating such stakeholders in key leadership positions, not just as community advisors but as part of the planning or facilitation team.

Confronting Past Planning Attempts

Many cities in transition, not just Flint, have trouble connecting the people with the plan and its process, says Kelly. At the root of this discussion is the need for transparency. For example, Flint residents had no knowledge that the majority of the planning and decision-making had been funded through foundations. Residents often have had little ownership over their community plans. Kelly notes, “In Flint most of the community was not connected to past planning efforts either through its development or its content.”

Kelly points to Youngstown, Ohio's recent activities for empowering residents through neighborhood-based planning efforts. “Part of Youngstown's success rests with nonprofits that focus on building relationships with and the capacity of neighborhood residents. It is better to spend time on that than on creating plans just for the sake of creating plans.” At the neighborhood level, where most of the work to engage residents takes place, Kelly believes it is important to slow down the planning process and not push the plan through without adequate buy-in from residents. She believes that all too often planners spend more time building GIS maps or elaborate presentation that—while they may help jump start conversations—ultimately do not do enough toward rebuilding relationships, which

is more critical to the long-term success of any planning effort.

“Planners need a certain level of humility when doing this work,” Kelly concludes. “You should not come armed with all of the answers and solutions, especially at the beginning of the process. Instead, we should be asking such questions as what’s hard, what’s working, and what’s broken.”

Kelly provides a quick checklist of requisites before entering a public meeting:

- Be culturally sensitive.
- Maintain a multi-cultural planning team.
- Have the facilitation skills necessary for public meetings and design and customize the meeting for interaction.
- If using consultants, make sure they are prepared to field questions about what they can bring to the community.
- Any design work should be done as a collaborative problem-solving process; the strength will come as designers are able to really listen to the community. “Trust the wisdom of crowds,” says Kelly.
- Provide an avenue that allows continuous feedback through the process.

Plan Making Strategies for CiTs

When it comes to a city’s planning function, local governments in CiTs have dwindling municipal revenues, rising costs, and thus typically have constrained city planning capacity. These underlying circumstances make it difficult for gathering and synthesizing basic data that supports any long range planning effort. Many of the existing plans in CiTs still contain prevailing structural assumptions based on growth and development; however, this runs counter to their current realities. Kelly remarked on her surprise “at how these assumptions are so embedded into how planners and policymakers think that we become fooled by lure of more growth.” As a result of these inherent growth assumptions, many CiT’s plans and policies apply rules and tools



Photos courtesy of Christina Kelly, Genesee County Land Bank Authority

that were designed for growing communities to declining neighborhoods and under severe distress. “As planners we are using the wrong tools and thereby limiting our ability to effectively plan and respond to challenges confronting CiTs.” Therefore, planners’ often find that planning in CiTs challenges their basic understanding of how local governments work and its’ role. “We really need to turn our current planning model on its head.”

In considering how planners in CiT might change how they plan and the types of plans they create, Kelly offers several suggestions and ideas. When it comes to developing plans for CiTs, one of the first questions to ask is who or what entity is in the best position to manage the planning process and also discuss who is going to carry out these planning recommendations. Perhaps the local government-planning department may not be the ideal place for leading

the process. “CIT planning requires collaboration with new partners, some who may have more planning expertise and resources than the local government planning department.” Thus, it becomes important for planners and policymakers to think outside of the box by supporting more collaborative planning processes. Kelly’s own position, within the Genesee County Land Bank, illustrates this new model where she works closely with city officials and community organizations and residents on neighborhood plans and recently on the city-wide revisions to their comprehensive plans.

Expanding the Scope of the Plan

In terms of the plan’s content, the elements of comprehensive land use plans in CiTs might cover more ground than standard plans. These plans would likely need to integrate transportation and housing elements with smart growth tools and green space principles.” Planners should consciously “unpack” the growth assumptions in existing plans and recalibrate the new plan in light of the structural socio-economic challenges that CiTs face.” In essence, a comprehensive plan that is tailored for the circumstances of CiTs would step outside the boundaries of current practice and stretch the prescribed rules of comprehensive planning. CiTs should redefine the planning activities or the normal planning process. For example, planners will have to work different types of data, perform different types of data analysis, and devise more collaborative partnerships to support implementation of the plan’s goals

Comprehensive Plans vs. Framework Plans

Despite these planning challenges, CiTs should still update their comprehensive plans as long as they are willing to experiment



with different models and processes that are more responsive to the dynamics of distress. However, given resource constraints and limited local planning capacity, what’s called for might not be a full revision. Alternatively, CiTs might instead create a framework plan that establishes new policy directions by covering a wider range of planning issues. By going through a framework planning process that includes public discussions, it will help the community and its leaders acknowledge the need for real structural changes. Perhaps a framework planning process might provide more opportunities for engaging external partners that have planning capacity or assist in the managing the planning process. Kelly contends that many CiTs will need state and/or federal resources to do this type of planning (whether it be an update of their comprehensive plan or devising a new framework policy plan), and while it may seem unrealistic in today’s political climate, supporting long-range planning can strengthen local planning capacity.

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