

Cities in Transition - Interview

Vacant Property Research Initiative



Bobbi Reichtell
Cleveland, OH

Profile

Bobbi Reichtell is Senior Vice President for Programs at Neighborhood Progress, Inc., a Cleveland-based nonprofit founded in 1988 to support the city's community development organizations and support strategic reinvestment in Cleveland. Since 2007, NPI has worked with numerous public and private partners to identify opportunities to use excess land to advance a comprehensive sustainability agenda for the city.

Re-Imagining Cleveland

By David Morley, AICP

In December 2008, the Cleveland City Planning Commission adopted Re-Imagining a More Sustainable Cleveland, which articulated strategic goals, strategies, and policies to encourage vacant land reuse. Building off of the Connecting Cleveland 2020 City-wide Plan, Re-Imagining a More Sustainable Cleveland contains a healthy dose of realism about the city's trend toward population decline, and focuses on vacant properties outside of the 2020 plan's priority development areas.

"The work that we did consisted of two parts," recalls Neighborhood Progress, Inc.'s Bobbi Reichtell. "There was the technical part, which was quantifying and qualifying the conditions of vacancy in the city and to begin identifying strategies for what could be done with vacant land. That was the first part. The second part was to start building and planting seeds for a movement, a 'do-it-yourself' grassroots approach to land stewardship. We weren't looking to have a Philadelphia Green kind of solution. That's totally driven by one nonprofit, developing and maintaining the projects. We wanted to seed a more grassroots approach."

Planting Seeds for a Greener Future

The strategies in Re-Imagining a More Sustainable Cleveland represent the first of three broad types of action NPI is taking to address vacant properties: stabilization and holding scattered sites through seed funds to a variety of stakeholders within communities. The other two categories—green infrastructure and larger-scale approaches to creating productive landscapes—are ambitious approaches that support a regional vision of sustainable land use.

Reichtell recalls that the initial challenge in developing the Re-Imagining plan was getting residents and stakeholders to talk about the uncomfortable subject of population decline and vacant properties. First, NPI had to quantify and qualify the conditions of vacancy in the city. Then they had to identify strategies for reuse. Finally, they had to create momentum for a grassroots approach to land stewardship.

The scattered-site projects are primarily greening strategies for single lots that individual residents or community groups can complete without drawing on outside expertise. "We had done research about how other cities were managing their vacant property programs," Reichtell explains. "They all seemed very intensive on city government or a larger nonprofit. Because our city has a strong history of community organizing, block clubs, and CDCs that engage residents, a top-down approach didn't feel right."

NPI commissioned the development of a pattern book to show the range of possible approaches, and to describe the approximate resources needed for such projects. After presenting the final plan to the city planning commission, NPI and its partners held community meetings to explain the initiative and to provide the pattern book as a guide to scattered-site greening. In the first round of pilot projects NPI received 110 applications from interested individuals and community groups and was able to assist 55 projects, including side yard expansions, landscaping, tot lots, vineyards, and orchards. The Surdna Foundation and other philanthropic contributors seeded the initiative; NPI was also able to take advantage of Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP) funding from HUD.

NPI also discovered the need for a second pattern book, which they called a resource and idea book. “The first pattern book was based on estimates from a landscape architect, and they were actually too high because he estimated them as if they were a turn-key kind of project, where a contractor comes in and does it,” Reichtell explains. “We had learned a lot about what people could do on their own and what they need contractors for, so the budgets [in the second book] were much more refined. We highlighted projects that actually were on the ground ... to spread the message that residents shouldn’t wait for the city or some other entity to come and solve the problem. We wanted to profile what real folks in Cleveland were taking on and being successful with.” As of late 2011, NPI was in the early stages of work on a second round of scattered-site pilots using \$1 million in NSP II funds.

Thinking Big

Approximately 75 percent of Cleveland has a combined sewer and stormwater system. This means that after some storms, the volume of water exceeds systems capacity, which leads to untreated wastewater being discharged into Lake Erie or the Cuyahoga River. In December 2010 the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reached a settlement in a decade-old lawsuit over violations of the Clean Water



Above: City Rising Farm; photos courtesy of Neighborhood Progress Inc. (<http://www.npicle.org/>)

Act. The sewer district agreed to spend \$3 billion over the next 20 years to ensure compliance with the act’s standards. Of this total, the district committed to spending \$42 million on green infrastructure projects.

After reaching this agreement, the sewer district conducted a study that identified 30 priority areas where green infrastructure projects would have the most benefit from a stormwater management perspective. Most of these areas were in neighborhoods with large numbers of vacant properties. NPI, Parkworks, the Kent State Urban Design Center, and other partners are now working with the sewer district to identify specific projects and locations where green infrastructure would have the most benefit from a community perspective.

In a parallel effort, in 2010, NPI and its partners started a new vacant land use study looking at identify opportunities for large-scale catalytic projects. This initiative dovetailed with Re-Imagining a More Sustainable Cleveland’s recommendations related to green infrastructure, and also addresses agriculture and alternative energy.

In practice, these projects would be undertaken primarily in coordination with CDCs. As Reichtell explains, “There are 24 CDCs across the city working on various community revitalization projects. These CDCs used to do a lot of housing development, but in the last four years they have really adapted to begin working on foreclosure prevention, getting vacant properties torn down when they’re a health hazard, and vacant land reuse.”

According to Reichtell, the most notable large-scale project so far is the Urban Agriculture Innovation Zone (UAIZ), which is a 26-acre area in Cleveland’s Kinsman neighborhood that has more vacant lots than occupied homes. The UAIZ is intended to be a centralized location for entrepreneurial agriculture projects in the city. The UAIZ has a special zoning designation that permits a wide range of agricultural activities, and as of late 2011, two different groups are using multiple acres for farming projects.

“Follow the Energy”

“It doesn’t take a lot to repurpose vacant land, but it does take some intentionality and organization and working with residents, getting people inspired to do it,” says Reichtell. Brownfield conditions are a big financial barrier, whether it’s lead-based paint in older residential structures or potential contamination from the commercial and industrial properties that ribbon Cleveland’s neighborhoods. Demolition funding remains a challenge as well. Fostering institutional capacity is important, says Reichtell, because federal funding sources such as NSP may come and go.

“Engaging the City of Cleveland has really been a key to the success we’ve had so far,” she says. “The city planning director and many of his staff participated in the initial planning work. For the second study, where



Above: City Rising Farm; photos courtesy of Neighborhood Progress Inc. (<http://www.npi-cle.org/>)

we were looking at large-scale projects, they actually established their own work group around seven different strategies to figure out where certain approaches would work best. That close relationship with the city has been so beneficial because various departments of the city have moved forward on many of the policies recommended by the study.”

Citizen interest in urban farming has lent unanticipated support to the city’s vacant land reuse initiatives. “We have seeded a number of new urban farms with boomerangs, people who left and then returned with college degrees,” says Reichtell. “There is really a growing movement around local food that is well-timed with the amount of vacant land we have.”

Reichtell’s advice for other communities is “to follow the energy.” In other words, efforts to regenerate Cities in Transition will be more successful if they capitalize on local interests and opportunities. “For us, tapping young people starting to farm is something that makes me so happy,” says Reichtell. “The lesson learned is to support grassroots creativity.”

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