



From

**Vacant**

to

**Viable**



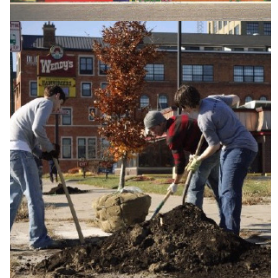
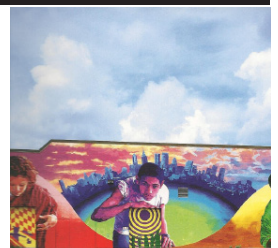
## Strategies for Addressing Commercial Corridors in Detroit

Lee Adams • Anne Choike • Erin Evenhouse • Xiqing Lin  
Benjamin Newman • Maeva Silveira • Zachary Smitt • Max Vera

Urban and Regional Planning Program  
Taubman College of Architecture & Urban Planning

 University of Michigan

June 2010



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# Executive Summary

Community Legal Resources (CLR) seeks to enable vacant commercial property stakeholders to take action to improve Detroit’s commercial corridors. Many business owners and nearby residents, nonprofits, business associations, and community development corporations (CDCs) – who will be referred to in this summary collectively as “vacant commercial property stakeholders” – can improve the current state of commercial corridors and supplement government efforts to address the problem of commercial vacancy.

*From Vacant to Viable: Strategies for Addressing Commercial Vacancy in Detroit* helps vacant commercial property stakeholders in Detroit improve safety and aesthetics, while holding commercial property owners accountable and transitioning land toward more viable uses. The strategies the plan proposes work toward these goals using primarily community-based tactics designed for immediate implementation. The plan applies the proposed strategies to sections of Livernois and East Warren Avenues as examples for commercial corridors with similar conditions. The plan also identifies administrative systems or policies in need of improvement.

## **Understanding Commercial Vacancy**

Changes in suburban development, the structure of the retail industry, and spending patterns of the past half-century have left once-bustling corridors with substantial vacancy, estimated at around 62 percent of both lots and buildings in a particularly empty eight-block stretch of East Warren and at about 25 percent in the Avenue of Fashion area of

Livernois. As a consequence, inactivity, abandonment, and decline define many commercial corridors in Detroit. Deteriorated properties hinder potential future owners' ability to reuse existing structures; unused and unmaintained property also hurt the viability of businesses.

This plan addresses commercial vacancy's negative impacts with strategies that will help commercial property stakeholders in Detroit accomplish four main goals:

- Improve safety and the perception of safety
- Improve appearance
- Promote commercial property owner accountability
- Transition and focus commercial corridor activity

Achieving these goals can alleviate prominent concerns about vacancy along commercial corridors and were determined through discussions with staff of Community Legal Resources, the Detroit Vacant Property Campaign, CEM Business Association, and University Commons Organization.

## **Determining Commercial Vacancy and Ownership**

Determining vacancy and ownership provide a foundation for addressing commercial vacancy issues. Specific information about commercial vacancy allows business association staff, residents, and city or county employees to decide the most appropriate strategies for addressing commercial vacancy along a particular corridor.

A well-formed commercial vacancy assessment tool allows almost anyone to collect reliable data. A commercial vacancy assessment can identify and determine the condition of vacant buildings and lots, a procedure that includes:

- Identifying suspected vacant commercial properties by external indicators of vacancy
- Evaluating lot and building conditions of suspected vacant properties
- Appraising the activity level of blocks where vacant properties are located, such as the number of days per week operating businesses on a block are open

Business association staff or neighborhood residents can then determine property ownership. Ideally, contacting property owners prompts their responsible resolution of any issues. Four sources provide



information that helps determine commercial property ownership, listed in order of increasing expense and comprehensiveness: (1) Michigan Corporate Entity/Business search, (2) City of Detroit's Online Property Tax Information System (3), Wayne County Register of Deeds, and (4) Title search.

## **Involving Vacant Commercial Property Stakeholders**

Community involvement focuses on ways to address vacant commercial areas with local resources and outlines steps for effective activity. Business owners, residents, and neighborhood organizations can make valuable contributions to addressing vacant commercial property. Strategies for addressing community involvement fall into four categories: conduct outreach, determine issues and resources, develop ongoing programs, and confront a target.

Conducting outreach includes going door-to-door, meeting with individuals one-on-one, meeting in groups, passing out fliers, and coordinating events. Determining issues and resources entails identifying problems associated with vacant commercial property and matching issues and individuals with the appropriate response. Such a response could culminate in developing ongoing programs (such as a business association; a clean and safe, security, or business watch campaign; or a policy advocacy program) or confronting a target (for example, by conducting a public meeting or a public demonstration aimed at making demands of an irresponsible property owner).

## **Improving Safety**

Strategies for accomplishing the goal of improving safety and perception of safety fall into two categories: securing commercial areas and monitoring commercial areas.

### **Securing Commercial Areas**

- Secure and repair vacant property to prevent unauthorized entry
- Eliminate fire damage and reduce the risk of fire in the commercial area

## **Monitoring Commercial Areas**

- Establish a business watch program
- Prioritize police resources to maximize results
- Employ community policing methods
- Ensure vacant properties are visible and attractive

## **Improving Appearance**

Beautifying commercial properties improves the appearance of commercial buildings and create a positive image for commercial corridors.

Vacant commercial property stakeholders can:

- Develop a clean-and-safe campaign
- Use art displays to beautify vacant commercial buildings
- Paint murals on vacant commercial buildings
- Recognize outstanding property-maintenance practices
- Plant low-maintenance native vegetation
- Partner with outside organizations for volunteer beautification events

## **Promoting Owner Accountability**

Vacant commercial property stakeholders can undertake three strategies for promoting owner accountability, including one strategy that reflects new legislation that Detroit City Council will likely pass in June 2010:

- Create a community agreement
- Use existing code enforcement resources strategically
- Educate property owners, businesses and residents about the vacant property registration ordinance

In addition to these three strategies that immediately address accountability, vacant commercial property stakeholders can lobby for policy and procedural change. Changes in policies and procedures can add to the few options that exist at present for business association staff, neighborhood association members, or nearby residents to hold neglectful property owners accountable. Recommendations in “Improving Policies and Procedures” summarize these policy changes.

## Transitioning Commercial Corridor Uses

The strategies presented here suggest ways to occupy vacant land and buildings without redevelopment and revitalization and to shift commercial development to areas with high business activity. Occupation of vacant land along commercial corridors maintains the appearance of activity, while concentrating commercial activity can benefit existing businesses and relocated businesses by sharing customers and increasing activity around the businesses.

### Occupying Vacant Land

- Green vacant lots
- Encourage temporary uses

### Concentrating Commercial Uses

- Advocate for rezoning of unused commercial land
- Reduce speed limit around areas of dense business
- Apply for a freeze on the taxable value of property in connection with redevelopment of selected buildings

## Developing a Plan for Livernois Avenue

The Livernois Avenue plan applies strategies to a four-block corridor of Livernois Avenue between Clarita and St. Martins that remains a busy commercial district. The characteristics of this area of Livernois call for strategies that first address safety and appearance; and second, create a long-term plan that focuses activity and non-profit efforts in the area on concentrated blocks. The five specific approaches are to:

1. Establish block-by-block business watches in commercially active areas of Livernois
2. Ensure visibility at key locations along Livernois
3. Improve the appearance of the corridor
4. Transition Livernois's commercial activity to a concentrated, well-established area of the corridor
5. Promote accountability of key vacant property owners

The plan recommends low cost approaches to transform this section of Livernois into a safe and aesthetically pleasing corridor in the short term and approaches that require slightly more resources to create clustered business with responsible property owners in the long term.

## **Developing a Plan for East Warren Avenue**

The East Warren Avenue plan applies strategies to an eight-block section of East Warren Avenue between Alter Road and Balfour Drive, a portion of the East Warren corridor that has high vacancy and disinvestment. Circumstances in this area of East Warren call for strategies that address immediate concerns, while encouraging future businesses to locate in denser parts of the commercial corridor. The East Warren Avenue plan recommends:

1. Prioritize code complaints
2. Improve safety by securing vacant buildings
3. Improve building appearance by painting murals
4. Improve appearance by landscaping vacant lots
5. Transition commercial corridor uses by rezoning land
6. Improve lighting

The plan recommends implementing these approaches over the next five years. In the long run, the plan creates a transitional area in the eight-block section of East Warren.

## **Improving Policies and Procedures**

Four policy and procedural changes would help grassroots efforts and city officials address commercial vacancy:

### **Policy changes to address commercial vacancy**

- Require vacant property owners to file a “statement of intent”
- Start a city nuisance abatement program and/or restart the county one

### **Procedural changes to address commercial vacancy**

- Process worst code violations as criminal infractions
- Implement a conditional bond program for commercial areas

## **Conclusion**

Business associations, neighborhood groups and individuals can implement the strategies outlined in this plan in different ways for different areas. Despite the complexity and scale of issues related to vacant commercial property in Detroit, grassroots efforts can do much to improve the condition of commercial corridors.



# Chapter 1

## Understanding Commercial Vacancy

The problem of commercial vacancy in Detroit is not new, yet comprehensive solutions elude even the most committed community organizations and business associations. Many prior plans for addressing commercial vacancy aimed to revitalize and redevelop Detroit's commercial corridors, but many of Detroit's formerly bustling commercial corridors remain empty and derelict. This plan recommends strategies that can curb the negative effects of vacant buildings and lots in both the short and long term. Addressing safety, appearance and owner accountability can improve commercial vacancy in the short term. Concentrating commercial activity can strengthen some business clusters and transition other areas to different uses in the long run.

### **Commercial Vacancy Causes and Context**

High vacancy rates in commercial corridors persist throughout Detroit due to changes in suburban development and spending patterns of the past half century. Similar to many central cities across America, Detroit's industrial and residential development decentralized into suburbs, and retailers followed. Additionally, consumer preferences shifted from small neighborhood shops to regional "big box" retailers. Furthermore, the automobile became a central tool in the shopping experience. The shift in consumer preferences left Detroit's commercial corridors with more properties than demand dictated. Overbuilt commercial properties left corridors with pressing vacancy issues. The physically obsolete and economically risky character of older, declining

commercial corridors continues to discourage investment by current and potential owners. Business associations and local leaders have used business attraction techniques, but few have employed strategies for addressing the buildings and lots left behind. This plan outlines strategies that address issues surrounding vacant properties<sup>1</sup>

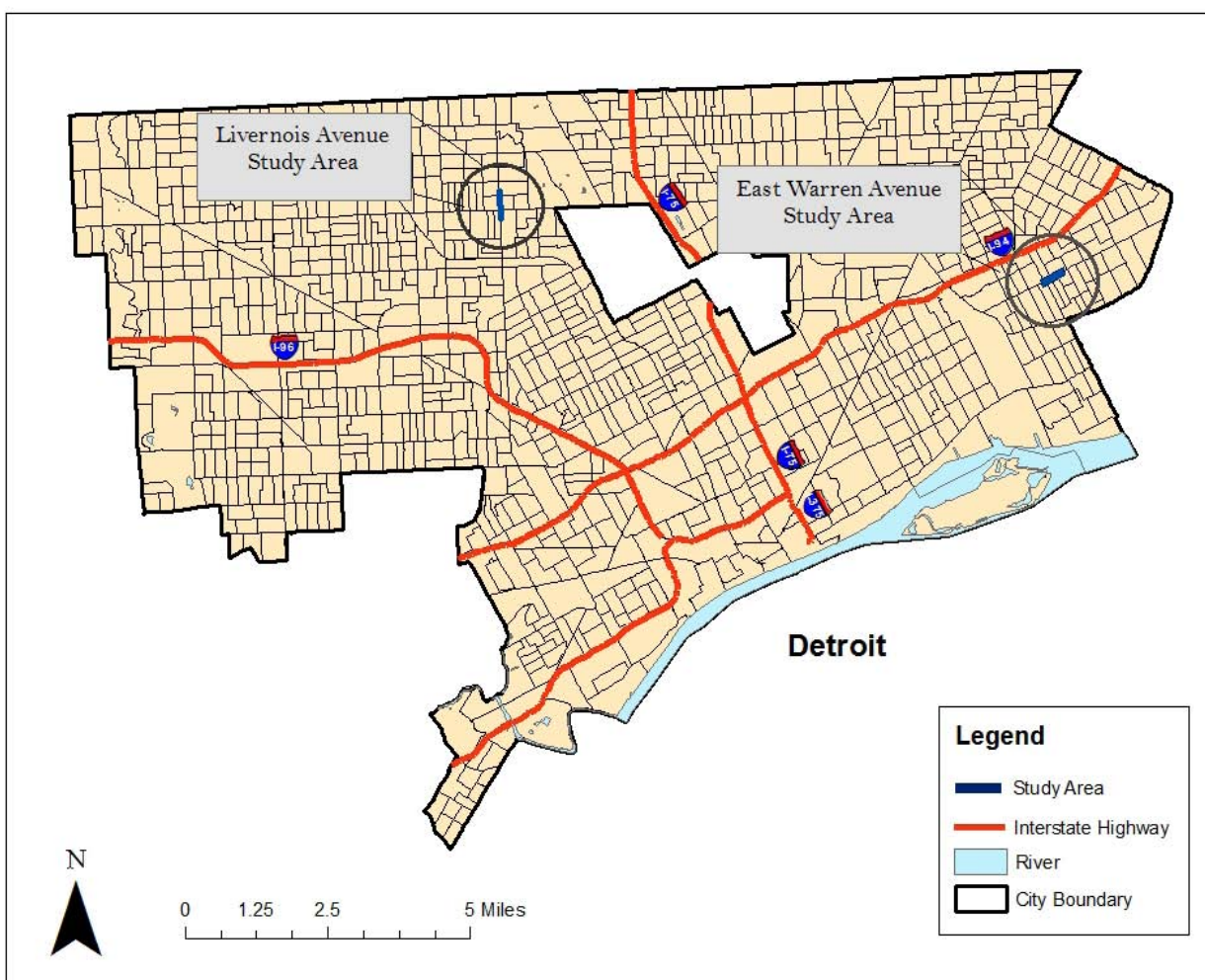
Although full measurement of Detroit's citywide commercial vacancy rate remains undefined, a commercial vacancy survey by Data Driven Detroit will likely commence soon. Based on assessments done for this plan, vacancy rates along Detroit's peripheral commercial corridors are high. For example, a particularly empty eight-block stretch of the once-busy East Warren corridor faces vacancy rates around 62 percent of both lots and buildings. The Avenue of Fashion area of Livernois, still a busy commercial area, has much lower vacancy rates at 24.6 percent.<sup>2</sup> Commercial vacancy plagues areas unevenly. A particular street may have an area of substantial commercial activity and an area with high vacancy. Vacancy is not evenly distributed throughout the city or even on a street.

Many business owners and nearby residents, nonprofits, and community development corporations (CDCs) ask what they can do to improve the current state of commercial corridors. From *Vacant to Viable: Strategies for Addressing Commercial Vacancy in Detroit* intends to support their efforts. The plan can help commercial property stakeholders in Detroit's commercial corridors improve safety and aesthetics, while holding commercial property owners accountable and transitioning land toward more viable uses. The strategies the plan proposes work toward these goals using primarily community-based tactics designed for immediate action. The plan also identifies higher-level systems or policies in need of improvement.

*From Vacant to Viable* applies recommended strategies to two Detroit commercial corridors – a portion of the East Warren Avenue district and Livernois' "Avenue of Fashion" – that stand as examples for implementation elsewhere in the city. These districts represent areas of high and low commercial vacancy, respectively. In addition, the two areas are the focus of committed community partners – **U-SNAP-BAC** and **CEM Business Association** (CEMBA) in the East Warren area and **University Commons** in the Livernois area – who exemplify the type of devoted actors this plan intends as its audience.



Figure 1.1 Study Area Locations



Source: ESRI, Inc [www.esri.com](http://www.esri.com)

## Why Does Commercial Vacancy Matter?

**Community Legal Resources** (CLR) developed a community-based toolbox principally for addressing vacant residential property as part of its Detroit Vacant Property Campaign. CLR now seeks to expand its toolbox to address commercial vacancy more completely.

CLR's desire for expanding the commercial component of its vacant property toolbox responds to citizens' concerns about the negative impacts of vacant commercial property. Inactivity, abandonment, and deterioration define many commercial corridors in Detroit. Commercial property owners sit on their properties waiting for "fairy-tale paydays."<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, vacant commercial properties project a variety of problems onto adjacent properties, businesses, and surrounding

neighborhoods. Commercial vacancy may signal disinvestment in an area. Disinvestment increases both the perception of crime and actual criminal activity.<sup>4</sup> Unmanaged properties are attractive locations for vandalism, squatting, drug use, and drug sales.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, deteriorated properties hinder potential future owners' abilities to reuse existing structures. Vacant commercial properties also disrupt the continuity of commercial districts. Whether a commercial district faces only a couple of vacant buildings or swaths of vacant land, unused and unmaintained property hurts the viability of active businesses.<sup>6</sup>

The plan outlines strategies that will help commercial property stakeholders in Detroit accomplish four main goals:

- Improve safety and the perception of safety
- Improve appearance
- Promote commercial property owner accountability
- Transition and focus commercial corridor activity

These goals were determined through discussions with staff of CLR, the Detroit Vacant Property Campaign, CEMBA, and University Commons Organization. The goals intend to alleviate the most prominent concerns of vacancy along commercial corridors.

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss elements needed for any commercial vacancy program: a vacancy assessment and community involvement. Chapters 4 through 7 proceed to describe short term strategies that accomplish each of the four goals. Chapters 8 and 9 lay out plans for the "study areas" of eight blocks on East Warren and four blocks on Livernois to show how the strategies can work together to address vacancy. Chapter 10 concludes the plan with recommendations for policy changes that can improve vacant commercial corridors in the long-term.

## Notes

1. Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1987).
2. Commercial Vacancy Assessment Survey, 2010. See Appendix A.
3. Kim Tandy (University Commons), in discussion with the authors, January 14, 2010.
4. Patrick Jonsson, "Vacant homes spread blight in suburb and city alike." *Christian Science Monitor*, 1 July 2008, sec. USA, p. 1.
5. *Ibid.*
6. City of Evanston "110-O-03. An Ordinance. Adding a New Chapter 20 to Title 4 of the City Code, 'Vacant Building'" [http://www.cityofevanston.org/departments/communitydevelopment/property/pdf/vacant\\_buildings\\_ordinance.pdf](http://www.cityofevanston.org/departments/communitydevelopment/property/pdf/vacant_buildings_ordinance.pdf). accessed April 4, 2010.



## Chapter 2

# Determining Commercial Vacancy and Ownership

Determining commercial vacancy and ownership provide a foundation for addressing commercial vacancy issues. Determining commercial vacancy establishes a baseline of reliable data to track property conditions and activity levels over time. Determining vacancy and property conditions also helps business associations and neighborhood residents establish criteria for prioritizing their efforts. Determining commercial ownership helps business associations and neighborhood residents implement strategies to hold owners accountable.

Determining commercial vacancy and ownership is difficult: businesses sometimes operate in poorly maintained buildings; and property owners may use incorporated business names to mask their personal information. Despite these obstacles, a well formed commercial vacancy assessment tool allows almost anyone to collect reliable data. Once data are collected, business association staff or neighborhood residents can use ownership determination methods to unmask property owner information.

### **Commercial Vacancy Assessment**

A commercial vacancy assessment is a method of consistently identifying and assessing the condition of vacant buildings and lots. Volunteer surveyors from business associations and nearby neighborhoods can use such a tool to assess commercial property. One example of a commercial vacancy assessment approach is outlined below; for more details see Appendix A.

## Identify vacant properties

Surveyors could use the list below to determine whether a commercial property is vacant.

No one characteristic indicates vacancy; some common signs include:

- water damage
- fire damage
- boarded or broken windows
- major structural damage
- long-term security measures (bolted doors, chain locks, barbed wire)
- no signage
- damaged signage
- for sale/for lease sign
- graffiti
- eviction notice
- empty interior
- trashed interior
- under construction

**Figure 2.1** A vacancy assessment survey in action



Source: Ben Newman

## Assess lot and building conditions

The condition of commercial buildings and lots may affect which strategies are appropriate for addressing vacancy along a corridor. Business association staff and neighborhood residents can perform this assessment when they determine vacancy. Condition assessments allow business and neighborhood associations to prioritize and direct their efforts towards particularly problematic properties.

Criteria for assessing vacant lot conditions include:

- whether a lot is paved or currently used for business
- pavement conditions
- landscape conditions

Criteria for assessing vacant building conditions include:

- structural condition of exterior
- number of necessary minor repairs (e.g. broken windows, damaged signage)
- number of necessary major repairs (e.g. structural damage)

## **Determine block activity**

The more often businesses are open, the more often business owners and customers can act as “eyes on the street” and the more often customers patronize the businesses.<sup>1</sup> Determining activity frequency can help leaders identify appropriate approaches for addressing vacancy on the block. A scale for determining activity on a block could use indicators such as the number of days per week the businesses on a block are open and the number of vacant buildings and lots.

## **Ownership determination**

Knowing who owns commercial property is essential for taking many actions to improve vacant corridors. For instance, property owners must keep their properties up to city code, whether the property is occupied or vacant. Once a commercial vacancy assessment determines a property does not meet city code standards, the first step for a business association or resident is to contact the property owner. Ideally, a property owner takes responsibility and resolves any issues.

Four sources provide information that helps determine commercial property ownership:

- Michigan Corporate Entity/Business search
- City of Detroit’s Online Property Tax Information System
- Wayne County Register of Deeds
- Title search

Listed in order of least expensive and most basic to the most expensive and comprehensive, these property ownership identification resources help determine who is responsible for the property.

### **Michigan Corporate Entity/Business search**

The Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth administers a website ([http://www.dleg.state.mi.us/bcs\\_corp/sr\\_corp.asp](http://www.dleg.state.mi.us/bcs_corp/sr_corp.asp)) that allows users to search for information about Michigan corporate entities and businesses. A user can search by business name or business owner name. Information available on this site provides the name of a local agent who represents a business. Unless the business owner is the same as the property owner, this information does not determine ownership. A corporate entity/business search is often a useful starting point when additional information is unavailable.<sup>2</sup>

### **City of Detroit Online Property Tax Information System**

The City of Detroit Finance Department administers a website (<http://www.detroitmi.gov/Departments/Finance/tabid/86/Default.aspx>) with Detroit property tax information. A user can search for properties by address, parcel number, or owner name. The City of Detroit receives information on ownership from the Wayne County Register of Deeds. The Wayne County Register of Deeds determines ownership based on the last person to file a registered claim to the property. The site provides the property owner's name and parcel identification number without charge and returns the property owner's name with owner's address and taxpayer information for a \$2.00 fee. Information from this process is sometimes not current due to incomplete and dated city records.<sup>3</sup>

### **Wayne County Register of Deeds**

For additional information about each of these ownership determination options, contact Community Legal Resources at (313) 962-3171 or at [info@clronline.org](mailto:info@clronline.org).

The Wayne County Register of Deeds administers a website (<http://www.waynecountylandrecords.com/RealEstate/SearchEntry.aspx>) with Wayne County property documents. A user can search for properties by address, owner name, tax identification number, document type, or legal description. For a \$5.00 fee, the site provides all documents recorded on a property including owner name, ownership history, and property transaction dates and documents. Information from this process is sometimes not current due to administrative backlogs in county records.<sup>4</sup>



## **Title search**

A title search determines ownership most accurately. A title company performs a comprehensive search of all information about a property. This process provides up-to-date information including owner name, ownership history, and property transaction dates and documents. Fees range from \$150 to \$250 per property. Non-profit organizations may be able to negotiate better prices with large volumes of searches.<sup>5</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Determining commercial vacancy allows business association staff, residents, and city or county employees to decide the most appropriate strategies for addressing commercial vacancy along a specific corridor. Determining commercial vacancy requires field work, which requires staff and volunteers. Involving nearby residents, neighborhood associations' members, business owners and business associations' staff expedites a commercial vacancy assessment; and can also involve and inform residents. The following chapter discusses ways community involvement can assist in addressing vacant commercial corridors.

## Notes

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3. City of Detroit. <http://www.detroitmi.gov/Departments/Finance/tabid/86/Default.aspx> accessed 15 May 2010; Detroit Vacant Property Campaign Toolbox. <http://officemanager.law.officelive.com/technical/toolbox.pdf>. accessed May 10, 2010.
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# Chapter 3

## Involving Community

Vacant commercial properties in Detroit threaten the safety and economic viability of Detroit's commercial corridors and the neighborhoods that surround them. However, nearby residents may think of vacant commercial property as a problem for the businesses; businesses may consider them a problem for the city, and city departments may not consider them at all. Business owners, residents, and neighborhood organizations can make valuable contributions to addressing vacant commercial property.

Organizers can involve local residents, businesses, and associations by conducting outreach and coordinating events (see the next two sections). With dedicated individuals, organizers can identify issues and determine skills and resources to decide on appropriate strategies to address a vacant commercial area. Such strategies could include developing an ongoing program such as a clean and safe campaign or confronting a target such as a neglectful property owner. This chapter focuses on ways community involvement can address vacant commercial areas and outlines steps for effective community involvement. The following sections describe how to conduct outreach, coordinate events, identify issues, and develop a program, essential steps in community involvement.

### The Iron Rule

Many of the tactics and strategies in this chapter draw from community organizing methods. The iron rule of community organizing is, "Never do for others what they can do for themselves." For example, an organizer will have more time to focus on other strategies if she lets a committed neighborhood resident run the meeting or a committed business owner set up the event.<sup>1</sup>

## Conduct Outreach

Community organizing entails a process of identifying the most important issues to residents, business owners, or community association members. Outreach to address vacant commercial corridors can:

- Seek out dedicated individuals who may take leadership in addressing vacant commercial properties.
- Determine the most pressing concerns regarding commercial vacancy. Individuals are more likely to get involved if organizers act on “hot-button” issues or properties.
- Find out how individuals can contribute through ascertaining their skills and interests.
- Commit individuals to attend a meeting or event.

### Outreach hint: index cards

An organizer can carry 3 x 5 cards in her pocket, and as she walks to the next house or business write down the address and the issue.

3515 -- trash

3517 -- hates the landlord across the street

3521 -- promised info on facade improvement program

When finished, the organizer can see what follow-up she should do. The cards provide a point of reference for the next time she goes out on the block to talk to people.<sup>2</sup>

### Door-to-door outreach

Door-to-door outreach could apply to businesses or nearby residents. When going door-to-door, in particular with residents, an organizer has about 30 seconds to identify himself and state his purpose. Recognizing this, an organizer should immediately identify himself and try to mention an organization that the person will know.

*Hello, I'm \_\_\_\_\_ and I work with the [block club, business organization, business, neighborhood group]. We are talking with people in the neighborhood to get their ideas on how to improve the vacant commercial area.*

After the introduction, the organizer can say something like:

*A lot of the [business owners/neighborhood residents] have complained about the state of vacancy along [commercial corridor]. For example, the building at 1234 E. Main. We are getting together next [time and place]. This is a good time to get something done about the [vacancy issue]. Will you be able to come?*

If they express interest, the organizer should repeat the date, time and place, provide a flier, and ask if the individual knows of anyone else with whom they can talk about the meeting.<sup>3</sup> If the individual shows little interest:

*Well, there will be time to discuss other issues. What would you like to see us do something about?*

If the individual seems interested or willing to talk in depth, the organizer can consider asking to meet with the individual again or transition to a one-on-one. See “*One-on-ones 101*.”

## One-on-one outreach

A “one-on-one” serves as a personal conversation with an individual resident or business owner or manager to learn about his/her concerns, level of interest and commitment, and the resources the person has to offer. Unlike a survey that takes a neutral role, a one-on-one helps to evaluate the interviewee’s potential involvement. One-on-ones serve as the foundation to building a base of supporters. At the same time, they provide the opportunity to introduce the issues of vacant commercial properties and increase awareness. One-on-ones ideally take place in a quiet setting and last 30 minutes to an hour.

### One-on-ones 101

To conduct a one-on-one, the organizer can:

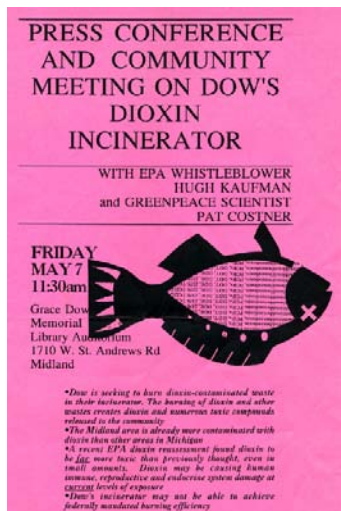
- Begin by learning about the person. For example:
  - How long have you lived in the neighborhood/ How long have you been in business here?
  - What do you like about this area?
  - Not jump to the topic right away but take time to listen and ask thoughtful questions to learn more about what they care about. This will help establish trust and make them more likely to care about the organizer’s cause.<sup>4</sup>
- When the organizer has learned about the person, ask questions relevant to the vacant commercial area. Examples include:
  - What is your biggest concern for this area?
  - What would you like to see happen in this area?
  - What do you think about the safety in this area?
  - What do you think about the appearance of this area?
  - What do you think about the landlords of these vacant commercial properties?
  - What do you think should happen to vacant commercial buildings? Vacant lots?
  - What ways would you consider being involved to address vacant commercial properties?
  - Do you have any special interests or skills to contribute?
- Ask open ended questions that will lead to greater discussion:
  - Closed-ended: *“Do you think we have a crime problem in this commercial area?”*
  - Open-ended: *“What do you think about the safety in this commercial area?”*
  - Closed-ended: *“Are you in favor of putting community gardens on vacant lots?”*
  - Open-ended: *“What would you like to see happen on vacant lots?”*
- Always ask, *“Are there any other people you suggest to contact?”*
- Document one-on-ones. Create mailing and phone lists to make contacting people easier in the future. Establish a simple filing system or computer database to record names, addresses, phone numbers, organizational affiliations, and other important information.<sup>5</sup>

For more information about conducting one-on-ones, visit [http://www.marininstitute.org/action\\_packs/community\\_org4.htm#what](http://www.marininstitute.org/action_packs/community_org4.htm#what)

One-on-ones can start with someone the organizer knows:

- Contact that person and ask to sit down and visit with her or him.
- Brainstorm about the people who might care about the vacant commercial area; these may include business owners, dedicated nearby residents, or leaders of community groups in the area.
- Every one-on-one should lead to future contacts. An organizer can ask for names of other people who may care about the issue.

**Figure 3.1 A shocking graphic to inspire attendance at a community meeting**



Source: University of Michigan Bentley Historic Library <http://bentley.umich.edu/research/guides/conservation/activism.php> accessed May 25, 2010.

**Figure 3.2 Flier with obvious question, featuring meeting details on the back**



Source: University of Michigan Bentley Historic Library <http://bentley.umich.edu/research/guides/conservation/activism.php> accessed May 25, 2010.

## Group outreach

One-on-ones and door-to-door outreach best develop support.

However, an organizer can reach out to a nearby neighborhood or business association to pique the interest of potential supporters and educate residents about addressing vacant commercial property. To conduct outreach at a meeting an organizer can:

- Learn as much as possible about the organization. Ideally, the organizer can attend a few meetings first to establish a presence.
- Contact the organization and ask if he can speak for a few minutes about the nearby vacant commercial properties.
- Ask the group what they think about the area, what they think should be done, and if they would like to help.
- Ascertain the assets of the group and what they're willing to contribute. See the "Identify Skills and Resources" section for more.

## Outreach with fliers

Fliers can serve as a reminder for upcoming events, particularly meetings. A flier should tell people:

- The issue
- When and where an event will happen
- If a meeting will have any guests
- The name of the organization or organizer and a phone number for more information

Simpler fliers have more impact. Graphics also help attract attention. Fliers can also ask an obvious question. For example, "Do you hate all of the trash on Main Street?" to cause people to react and respond to the flier.

Fliers do not serve as a primary means of outreach or substitute for personal contact. Organizers should not count on fliers to bring people to an event. After an organizer passes out fliers, she could call all potential contacts about an event. Or, on the day of the event, she can go door-to-door starting at the location of the meeting and hand people the same flier, saying she hopes they can make it.

## Coordinate events

Community events provide the opportunity for nearby residents to interact with commercial corridor businesses and institutions. These events bring attention to the area, giving individuals a greater sense of ownership. A sense of ownership builds success in community engagement efforts.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, events provide an opportunity for interaction, relationship building, and fun. Well-established relationships make actions to address commercial properties more viable as individuals have a personal investment in the area.

### Local events

**Figure 3.3 East English Village residents at “Taste of our Neighborhood”**



Source: Cornerstone Village / East English Village / Morningside Facebook fan page, <http://www.facebook.com/album.p?aid=209035&id=100445169255> accessed May 25, 2010.

East Warren’s CEM Business Association hosted a “Taste of Our Neighborhood” event that provided nearby residents the opportunity to taste food from local restaurants and markets. Owners and managers met with residents and talked about their specialties. The association hosted the event prior to the monthly East English Village neighborhood association meeting, providing a forum for residents to learn more about their commercial corridors.<sup>7</sup>

The Jefferson East Business Association annually hosts “Jazzin’ on Jefferson,” a festival that attracts thousands of people from across the Detroit area with jazz, blues, food, arts and crafts, and other activities. The association uses proceeds from the festival to support programming for the business district including business assistance, façade improvement programs, and clean and safe initiatives.<sup>8</sup> The event helps “brand” the area with a jazz theme, aiming to familiarize people with the area in hopes they return.

**Figure 3.4 Attendees at “Jazzin’ on Jefferson”**



Source: <http://www.jazziononjefferson.com/photos2006.html> accessed April 21, 2010.

Events can help create a regional identity while drawing attention to the issue of vacant commercial property. Local events can also bring regional attention to the area. The then-vacant Chalmers building in Figure 3.4 now has developers in the process of making the building a mixed-use retail and residential property.<sup>9</sup>

### **Outreach hints**

- The organizer should explain why he's writing something down.  
I'm making a note that you brought up the problem with trash so I don't forget it.
- If the organizer promises someone information, he should get it to the person right away.
- If the organizer encounters hostility, he should not get into an argument, but simply offer thanks for the time and move on.
- The organizer should dress in an acceptable way.
- Remember, the organizer intrudes on the person he reaches out to.<sup>10</sup>

## **Determine Issues, Skills, and Resources**

Organizers must identify a specific issue regarding vacant commercial properties in order to take action. The skills and resources that individuals can offer to address vacant commercial properties also help determine an appropriate course of action. Organizers can determine issues from business owners or nearby residents.

### **Issues vs. Concerns**

Business owners, nearby residents, or organizations may express concern about the vacant commercial area. Organizers cannot fix concerns, but they can address individual issues. For example, if a nearby resident says that she does not like how the commercial area is "run down," she has a concern. An organizer could make this into an issue by asking what she means by "run down." The resident could mean trash on the sidewalk or that a landlord doesn't maintain his property. Chapters 4 through 7 will outline several vacant property issues; however, nearby residents or business owners may highlight others. An issue more pressing to individuals will more likely gain their support to take action.



When an organizer finds what appears to be an issue, he should ask:

*Can people mobilize around this?*

*Is it specific?*

*Can we do something to change this situation?*

If an organizer cannot mobilize people around an issue, he can't address the issue. An organizer can "test" an issue by calling business owners or residents, talking about the situation and then asking:

*Would you be interested in getting a few folks together to talk about this?*

An organizer should make sure that interested residents, business owners, or community groups can realistically expect to win or change something about the issue.<sup>11</sup>

## **Start small to win**

Organizers should start by taking on something small and somewhat easy to accomplish. Small wins are shorter-term, controllable opportunities that can make a tangible difference.<sup>12</sup> For example, a trash clean-up day, cleaning graffiti, or planting flowers provide visible benefits of group action.<sup>13</sup> Such small wins encourage involved individuals to stay involved. "If people work for something concrete, if they have the opportunity for visible success from which they can draw confidence, and if they can translate their excitement into immediate action, a small win is likely, as is their heightened interest in attempting a second win"<sup>14</sup>

If organizers intend to work towards a bigger issue, they should have small victories along the way. These victories keep the issue alive and provide momentum toward the primary victory. For example, figuring out the ownership information of a vacant property is a first step victory towards taking action against the owner. Conveying intermediate victories shows dedicated individuals that their efforts have helped move the issue forward and that they are getting closer to the final goal.<sup>15</sup>

## **Identify skills and resources**

The assets of neighbors and business owners— their knowledge, skills, resources, values, and commitments— help determine appropriate strategies for addressing vacant commercial properties. The "Skills and Resources Inventory"<sup>16</sup> in Appendix B offers one way to determine

useful skills. Ideally, an organizer should conduct the survey in person. Of course, an organizer may not need a full survey to gain a snapshot of an individual's skills and resources. The following types of questions help to determine skills and resources for addressing vacant commercial property:

*What are you currently interested in?*

*What skills have you learned at home, in your neighborhood, or at your workplace?*

*Are you familiar with or involved with any organizations that might want to get involved?*

*What kind of activities have you been involved in in the past?*

*What kinds of activities might you consider in the future?*

*What would you like to do to address vacant commercial properties?*

If enough individuals express common concerns, organizers may bring them together to develop an ongoing program or confront a target as outlined below.

## **Develop an Ongoing Program**

Vacant commercial districts face common concerns such as crime and blight that require a sustained effort to address them. Chapters 4 through 7 discuss approaches to addressing vacancy in greater detail. Traditionally, community organizers build coalitions to advocate and implement changes to better their constituency. In commercial areas, a coalition can advocate for actions or policy changes, bring business owners together to discuss their common concerns, or tackle ongoing problems with crime and appearance. Detroit city government's budget issues may constrain its ability to support local efforts with services that commercial corridors have historically taken for granted. Local groups can take charge to develop a sustained effort to change their commercial area for the better. The following programs can address common concerns.

### **Organize a business association**

Business owners may not have the time or capacity to develop an alliance on their own. A commercial corridor business association provides a venue for business owners with a collective understanding

of their challenges to come together to voice concerns and develop strategies for their area.<sup>17</sup> It can also allow them to hire staff to work on issues with pooled membership dues.

In Detroit, the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Commercial Revitalization has offered funding for commercial corridors through the ReStore Detroit and Refresh Detroit programs. Participants in ReStore Detroit include the Jefferson East Business Association, Grand River District, Southeast Gratiot, Corktown, East Warren, and University Commons business districts. A community-based organization in each of the districts receives grants and technical assistance. Through this assistance, these organizations have the resources to facilitate outreach and business collaboration.<sup>18</sup> Refresh Detroit provides matching grant funds and architectural design-assistance for façade improvements (Figure 3.5), current districts include the NorTown, West Vernor/Springwells, W. Davison, and Woodward Avenue business districts.<sup>19</sup> However, in other areas business owners can still address vacancy and other common concerns through self-funding.

The following steps outline how a neighborhood association, nearby resident, or business owner can help form a business association:

- Reach out to business owners in the commercial corridor. See the outreach section for more information. Interested business owners can develop specific goals they want the business associations to address and outline them.
- Develop a start-up committee and hold meetings.
- Make sure everyone involved has some input; meaningful participation will keep them involved.<sup>20</sup>
- Business owners who have a genuine interest in guiding future endeavors can assume the helm of the association in the long term. Those in a leadership role can remain in regular contact with all business owners to expedite the process by which the group can address concerns.<sup>21</sup>
- Start with success. Tackling a fixable issue or holding a social gathering creates positive momentum and enables participants to establish trusting relationships.
- Expect the process to take time. The association may need to meet several times before it has the organizational capacity to act.<sup>22</sup>

## **Organize a Clean and Safe, Security, or Business Watch Campaign**

Many community development corporations across Detroit improve their commercial corridors through volunteer-based campaigns. Chapters 4 and 5 outline benefits of and strategies for such campaigns.

**Figure 3.5 An improved facade thanks to Refresh Detroit**



Source: Model D Media <http://www.modeldmedia.com/devnews/vernorfacades030910.aspx> accessed May 25, 2010.

Clean and safe programs often have a paid staff person for their programming, but a committed group can organize a campaign with a dedicated volunteer coordinator, or a few dedicated coordinators. The following steps demonstrate how this coordinator can establish a local campaign:

- Define the area that the group will clean, secure, or monitor.
- Sign up individuals to join the program. Maintain a master list of members and potential members and update it as needed. A block map with contact information listed next to corresponding businesses and neighbors can provide an easy visual reference based on location.
- Plan the first meeting. Participants can stand up and give their names and offer feedback on goals and strategies. Organizers can provide relevant information for the goals, such as crime statistics for a business watch, or beautification benefits for a clean and safe program. Make time for questions.
- Assign roles for key positions. Potential roles could include:
  - Member:** Offer time for volunteer events, attend informational meetings.
  - Business Supporter:** Provide access to drinking water and bathroom facilities for clean and safe work days.
  - Supplies Supporter:** Procure, through donations or purchase, necessary supplies, such as trash bags and landscaping for a clean and safe program.
  - Law Enforcement:** A law enforcement position, whether expert or novice, can provide crime prevention advice and information for a security or business watch program.
  - Block Captain:** Liaison between organizer and group members, handle day-to-day functions of the group.<sup>23</sup>
- Determine a plan of action, such as cleaning on the same day every month, securing a vacant property in two weeks' time, or monitoring an area with a history of criminal activity.
- A campaign can meet regularly to share information about potential criminal activity and invite guest speakers to discuss strategies. A volunteer-based clean and safe program may choose to meet less regularly or tie meetings into work days.
- Continue regular outreach to maintain member support.
- Have fun.

## Organize a Policy Advocacy Campaign

Many issues with vacant commercial property persist because current legislation and policy do not provide the means to address them. Chapter 10 describes a few potential policy changes in more detail. While individuals involved in a commercial area may not have the resources to influence policy, a widespread issue that many vacant commercial corridors face has the potential to gain equally widespread support in advocating for a policy change.

- Contact Community Legal Resources (CLR) to gain more information and advice about the issue, including what changing the current policy would require. CLR does not work with individuals; an organizer must have a group affiliation.
- Learn about the policy change. Organizers need not understand the legal details, but should determine the following:
  - What is the policy change?
  - Who can make this policy change happen?
  - Who else might support this policy change?
- When organizers know who else would support the change, they can reach out to them, focusing on the mutual self-interest in seeking this policy change. See Table 3.1 for potential partners and resources for addressing policy change for addressing vacant properties.

Once partnered with other organizations, organizers, dedicated residents, business owners, or community organizations can offer their resources for the cause. For example, organizers could develop a phone bank to call a local politician's office. Additionally, a business association could offer some of its funding from membership dues to a supportive partner organization spearheading a campaign.

**Table 3.1 Potential Partners and Resources for Addressing Policy Changes**

Contact Organization	Type of Policy Change	Description
<p>Community Legal Resources (CLR)</p> <p>615 Griswold Suite 1400 Detroit, MI 48226 (313) 962-3171 (313) 962-0797 fax info@clronline.org</p>	Any	<p>CLR provides pro-bono legal representation to Michigan nonprofit organizations working with disadvantaged communities unable to pay for traditional legal services. CLR leads the Detroit Vacant Property Campaign (DVPC), which empowers communities and organizations to turn vacant properties into assets through community engagement and technical assistance.<sup>24</sup></p>
<p>The Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Commercial Revitalization (ONCR)</p> <p>Phone: (313) 224-6380 Fax: (313) 224-1629 TTY: 311 or (313) 224-INFO (4636)</p> <p>65 Cadillac Square, Suite 2300 Detroit, Michigan 48226</p>	Changes in city department procedures	<p>The ONCR institutes programs to improve Detroit’s commercial strips. They offer technical assistance and training, grants, and loans to address local business development and the necessity of building local organizational capacity to sustain local businesses.<sup>25</sup></p>
<p>Community Development Advocates of Detroit (CDAD)</p>	<p>New law or city-level procedures</p> <p>Benefits CDCs in Detroit</p>	<p>CDAD aims to enhance the capacity and effectiveness of Detroit CDCs via training, technical assistance, sharing information among CDCs, helping CDCs to educate their constituents, advocating on behalf of CDCs and their constituents, facilitating common action on issues of concern to CDCs; and expanding financial resources available for CDC projects.<sup>26</sup> Communication with CDAD is most effective if an organizer is associated with one or more CDAD members.<sup>27</sup> A list of current members and a membership application are available at <a href="http://oitcommunitydevelopment.org/members.html">http://oitcommunitydevelopment.org/members.html</a></p>
<p>Community Economic Development Association of Michigan (CEDAM)</p>	State level	<p>CEDAM aims to advance community-based economic development for Michigan neighborhoods. They generate resources through advocacy and collaboration, and offer training, technical assistance, and opportunities to share best-practices.<sup>28</sup> While CEDAM is state-wide, their membership includes many Detroit organizations and they have successfully advocated for policies that primarily benefit Detroit.<sup>29</sup></p>

## Confront a Target

Business owners, residents, or organizations may need the cooperation of a city department, landlord, or other influential party to address a vacant commercial area. For example, a landlord may not fix his building based on a request alone. In such a situation, individuals can confront this individual as a “target,” someone with the power to address an issue.

Organizers can do the following to confront a target:

- Find out who he or she is.
- Make the demand, such as painting, securing, and maintaining a property, or picking up trash regularly.
- If he refuses, ask if he will meet with neighborhood leaders and hold a public meeting (outlined below).
- If he will not meet, organizers can find alternate targets with whom he has connections and contact them. These individuals can contact him to ask him to meet demands that will stop the organizers from persistently contacting them.
- If he agrees to meet, conduct a public meeting.
- If he won’t meet, a group could conduct a demonstration (outlined below).

## Conduct a public meeting

In a public meeting, organizers make a demand of a target. Public meetings must happen at a stage when the meeting can bring enough individuals to influence the target.

Public Meeting Procedure:

- **Have a sign-in sheet** and Keep new contact information.
- **Present the problem and need for action** on the part of the target. Audience members or organizers can provide personal testimony.
- **Introduce the target.** Make clear his role and the power that he has to resolve the issue. He should not talk at this point.
- **Present demands** and negotiate one at a time for multiple demands. A demand can have specific components. For example, demanding that a vacant property owner “fix up” his property could entail demanding boarding, securing, painting, or installing new signage. (Chapter 6 discusses the use of a community agreement for inattentive property owners.) Leaders can have a scorecard at the front of the meeting with the demands listed and Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ for each one.
- **Allow target to respond** only after individuals present demands. Comments like “I’ll do the best I can,” “We will look into the situation,” or “You have to understand our problems” dodge commitment, and leaders should not accept them.
- **Review agreements** made with the target and, if possible, he

should sign an agreement right there. If the group does not reach a satisfactory agreement, leaders can excuse the target.

- **Announce the next meeting and adjourn.** Leaders can meet to evaluate the meeting and determine appropriate follow-up.

Note: During a meeting, someone may try to change the subject. Leaders can note the seriousness of the issue and request that the individual bring it up again at the end of the meeting.<sup>30</sup>

## Conduct a demonstration

Through a demonstration, organizers seek to put pressure on a target by going to his or her home, place of business, church, golf course, or parents' home, for instance. Most of the ways of preparing for a public meeting can also apply to preparing for a demonstration. However, these considerations also apply:

- **Scout:** if the demonstration will take place at an unfamiliar location, someone should go there to find out what to expect.
- **Prepare people:** Before leaving for the demonstration, organizers should go over the history of the issue, why the groups will demonstrate, what to expect, responsibilities, and desired outcome.
- **Let others know what is happening:** Passers-by and neighbors should know the purpose of the demonstration, with simple signs, placards, and fliers.
- **Cooperate with police:** Someone should be assigned and prepared to talk with police, should they become involved. This individual can explain the purpose of the demonstration. The police may agree to go into the home or office and present the demonstrators' offer. If the police say: "If you don't leave, we will arrest you," the group should leave.<sup>31</sup>
- **Sing and chant:** Songs and chants keep spirits up and build a sense of solidarity. Noise also creates a disturbance that neighbors will most likely blame the target for.

### Demonstration tips

A target may offer to meet with a "few" people. While not ideal compared to a public meeting, organizers should agree to meet.

If a negotiation team can work with the target, they should do so, checking with the group occasionally and before making agreements. In such a case a leader should remain outside to keep morale high and be ready to talk with police or press.

Before breaking up any demonstration, leaders can review in front of the group what happened, what they accomplished, and necessary next steps and can thank individuals for participating.<sup>32</sup>



## Organizing for a better commercial corridor

Organizers partnered with nearby residents in the Warren/Conner neighborhood with the aim to address some of the vacant commercial properties. When they conducted outreach to nearby residents, they heard repeated complaints about trash in the area. While this was not their primary concern, they recognized it as an issue and chose to organize around it. They contacted the Detroit Department of Public Works, who initially refused to provide additional trash cans along the corridor. The department later agreed after residents and business owners promised to monitor the trash cans.

After this initial victory, the group mobilized increased support from residents and nearby businesses to try to get a few vacant commercial buildings taken down. Warren/Conner Development Coalition assisted organizers in contacting the City of Detroit's Buildings and Safety Engineering Department (BSE). The department initially did not agree to demolish the buildings, but the group eventually coordinated a public meeting with Karla Henderson of BSE. Organizers brought over 60 residents and business owners to the meeting, which helped pressure the department to agree to demolish a few vacant buildings in the area.<sup>33</sup> The success of individuals in the Jefferson East area demonstrates negotiation with the Public Works Department and a public meeting with Buildings and Safety Engineering.

## Conclusion

Community involvement can help address vacant commercial areas as businesses, nearby residents, and local organizations bring their expertise and resources to the table. Strong relationships serve as a key component to consistent participation.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, participants who have fun will more likely want to contribute their skills and resources again.

Community enthusiasm will dictate the most effective strategy for addressing commercial vacancy. Chapters 4 through 7 identify strategies for achieving each of the four goals listed in Chapter 1. Nearby residents, business owners, and associations can choose to undertake these approaches as they organize to improve vacant property on commercial corridors.

**Figure 3.6 Job with Justice demonstration helps prevent eviction of a Detroit resident**



Source: Jobs with Justice flickr account, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/jwjnational/3983659149/> accessed May 25, 2010.

## Notes

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# Chapter 4

## Improving Safety and the Perception of Safety

Success in a commercial area depends on safety and perception of safety. Crime against a commercial area's businesses discourages retail investment, and drives up costs: commercial areas and their business owners lose money to property damage and theft, lose customers to fear of crime, and lose time to dealing with crime.<sup>1</sup>

All retail areas attract crime.<sup>2</sup> Commercial districts can employ many strategies to combat crime and fear of crime. This chapter presents strategies for areas with commercial vacancy that help reach the goal: Improve Safety and the Perception of Safety. Strategies to achieve this goal fall into two categories: securing commercial areas and monitoring commercial areas.

### Securing Commercial Areas

#### **Strategy: Secure and repair vacant property to prevent unauthorized entry**

Securing and repairing vacant property prevents unauthorized entry to vacant buildings and lots. Preventing unauthorized entry reduces crime. Repairing vacant property can improve safety and appearance.<sup>3</sup> Crime rates on blocks with open vacant property are sometimes twice as high as rates on blocks with secured properties.<sup>4</sup> Criminals may use vacant spaces as hangouts for conducting illegal activities. Additionally, unoccupied properties present easy targets for arsonists (See Strategy: Eliminate fire damage).

## Who can take the lead:

Residents, business owners, business associations, local community organizations, and code and law enforcement officials

## How to accomplish this strategy:

Residents, business owners, business associations, and local community organizations can improve safety by securing vacant property in the following ways:

### No trespassing signs improve safety

Posting 'No Trespassing' signs improved safety in Cincinnati, Ohio. The chamber of commerce for the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood hung the signs on over 700 properties. This action "significantly reduced the number of individuals entering or loitering in the areas for illicit purposes. Controlling this behavior reduced the opportunity for criminal activity and helped restore security in problem areas."<sup>5</sup>

- **Install barriers to access on vacant property.** Access deterrents include "No Trespassing" signs, fences, locks, and boards on windows or doors. Whether code enforcement officials, field servicers or neighbors undertake action, efforts could begin with posting "No Trespass" signs on any vacant property. Neighbors or organizations with resources can fence empty lots, and lock or board all entries to unoccupied buildings. Neighbors of vacant commercial properties can begin by contacting the City of Detroit's Buildings and Safety Engineering Department (BSE) staff to attempt to get BSE to board vacant commercial property; however, BSE lacks the authorization to install any other types of access deterrents. If BSE does not board the vacant commercial properties, neighbors could attempt to gain permission to secure the vacant commercial property from the owner or property manager(s), (for more information on identifying property owners, see Chapter 2). If someone installs access deterrents himself, such action may involve trespass, which could lead to arrest or other penalties. See Figure 4.1 and No trespassing signs improve safety box for examples of barriers to access on vacant properties.
- **Guard vacant properties with high-visibility surveillance.** Monitoring vacant properties with highly-visible surveillance can help secure vacant properties. Neighbors can recruit volunteers to watch vacant properties. With additional resources, private security officers, alarm systems and video surveillance cameras can also protect unoccupied lots and buildings. Video surveillance

cameras or even non-operational imitation cameras can also deter access by presenting the appearance of constant monitoring. If community organizations receive grants, they can provide financial assistance to individual businesses to invest in highly visible surveillance. Surveillance camera monitoring in Detroit would entail engaging neighbors, business owners, or both to monitor cameras. University Commons in Detroit is considering such a measure with Guardian Alarm; Guardian Alarm would donate surveillance cameras, and nearby residents would volunteer to monitor the cameras over the Internet in their homes. See "*Neighbors disrupt criminal activity*" for an example of using highly visible surveillance.

Figure 4.1. Secured vacant building on Livernois Avenue



Source: Anne Choike

## Strategy: Eliminate fire-damage and reduce the risk of fire in the commercial area

Burnt-out buildings negatively affect an area's appearance. Arsonists may target unsecured buildings.<sup>6</sup> Vacant property fires pose public safety problems: fires may start and burn for prolonged periods without detection while hazardous materials and deteriorated structures intensify fires.<sup>7</sup> The existence of fire hazards warrants strategies for fire prevention.

### Who can take the lead:

Neighbors, business associations, and municipal agencies: the City of Detroit Buildings and Safety Engineering Department, Detroit Fire Department, and City of Detroit Finance Department (specifically, the Assessment and Property Tax divisions)

### How to accomplish this strategy:

Neighbors, business associations, and municipal agencies can prevent fires in vacant properties in a few ways:

- **Identify and evaluate at-risk properties.** A vacancy assessment (see Chapter 2) provides a good start to identifying vacant properties in commercial areas. To specifically identify fire hazards, the International Association of Arson Investigators and the United States Fire Association also developed a Fire Survey (see Appendix C). Neighbors of vacant commercial properties can contact vacant properties owners and property managers to ask them to complete a Fire Survey. Due to the technical nature of the Fire Survey and the need for access to a property, neighbors cannot perform this survey themselves.
- **Track vacant properties identified as fire hazards.** After a Fire Survey identifies vacant properties as high risks for fire or arson, the BSE could send owners of vacant properties a letter advising them of the situation. The letter could inform property owners and managers that if a fire occurs at an at-risk vacant property, City and private insurance investigators may scrutinize the property as a potential arson case. If investigators determine a fire is a case of arson, vacant property owners may not receive insurance claims covering the property.
- **Rehabilitate or demolish at-risk structures.** Ideally, property owners take the lead on this fire prevention step. If they do not, business association staff or other stakeholders can employ strategies described in Chapter 6 to encourage property owners to rehabilitate or demolish their vacant commercial properties. Business association staff or other stakeholders can also organize rallies to encourage the city to take a more active role in demolishing at-risk vacant commercial properties (see Chapter 3 for community organizing techniques).

### Neighbors disrupt criminal activity

Neighbors and community organization members in Lawrenceville, Pennsylvania, came together to monitor nighttime "hot spots" of criminal activity. "[V]olunteers gathered socially every Friday night at regularly changing, undisclosed locations . . . volunteers pitched a tent on the corner of a park known for its drug deals in the hopes of disrupting this activity. They were met with success. In fact, further scaring off the drug dealers that night were the local neighbors who kept visiting the corner to offer the volunteers food and beverages in a show of appreciation for their efforts."<sup>8</sup>

## Monitoring Commercial Areas

### Strategy: Establish a Business Watch program

Shoplifting, theft, burglary, purse snatching, and vandalism threaten the viability of commercial areas. Limited law enforcement resources may force business owners, operators, and employees to protect themselves from crime. A Business Watch program helps business owners and employees prevent crime in commercial areas. A Business Watch is a group of businesses in a commercial area who cooperate with local police to reduce crime in commercial areas through training of business owners and employees.<sup>9</sup>

#### Who can take the lead:

Local business owners and employees

#### How to accomplish this strategy:

Local business owners and employees can establish a Business Watch using community organizing techniques outlined in Chapter 3. The components of a Business Watch program include:

- **Education and Support.** Police officers and business leaders can assist business owners, operators and employees with crime prevention and mitigation. Topics covered in training sessions may include prevention of shoplifting, burglary, and check and credit card fraud; detection of counterfeit currency; and improvement of personal safety, building security and store operations. Business Watch members may also form a support group where they discuss problems, suspicious events, and new ideas for business safety.
- **Surveillance and Communication.** Surveillance asks business owners to watch for suspicious activity and communicate with each other and the police. Regardless of whether police respond, communication remains important for other reasons, such as collection of statistics. Merchants can place Business Watch stickers in their windows and signs in their parking lots. Signs warn criminals that business owners and their employees watch out for other businesses (see Figure 4.2). Members of nearby neighborhood associations may also lend support, especially after business hours. Business owners may also establish phone, radio, or text message trees to stay in touch with each other and the police. Delivery and service vehicles may become part of a Business Watch's communication methods. See "St. Louis uses business watches to reduce crime" for an example of a successful business watch.

Figure 4.2. Business Watch sign



Source: [www.cityofprescott.net](http://www.cityofprescott.net), accessed May 26, 2010.



## Strategy: Prioritize police resources to maximize results

Minor offenses, such as littering, loitering, and “broken windows,” create an environment of disorder that may lead to more crime. Yet, with limited resources, law enforcement may have to prioritize the order of officers’ response. Police, with the help of neighboring residents, business owners, business associations, and community organizations could focus their efforts on crimes with the greatest effects on actual and perceived safety.

### Who can take the lead:

Neighboring residents, business owners, business associations and community organizations

### How to accomplish this strategy:

Neighboring residents, business owners, business associations and community organizations can help prioritize police resources to maximize results:

- **Determine priorities among minor offenses.** In order to help police develop a focused strategy for a district’s more minor offenses, business associations and community organizations can determine which minor offenses concern them the most: for example, litter, noise, barking dogs, poor property maintenance, harassment, panhandling, or public intoxication. To determine priorities among minor offenses, business association or community organization staff can conduct a survey of area residents and businesses, or hold a discussion at a meeting.
- **Communicate and coordinate with police.** After determining the relative importance among various minor offenses, business associations and community organizations can help prioritize police resources by: (1) communicating the district’s prioritization to police, and (2) coordinating within the area to call police on only those minor offenses that the business association or community organization have established as a priority.

## Strategy: Employ community policing methods.

Community policing is a partnership between organizations, residents, and the police department designed to address pressing public safety issues. Community policing addresses limited law enforcement resources, while increasing safety and perception of safety in an area by expanding police resources to include volunteers. Community policing decentralizes police work, collaborates with community groups and

### St. Louis uses business watches to reduce crime

St. Louis, Missouri, saw substantial reductions in violent crimes after introducing its citywide Business Watch program. In St. Louis, after businesses form a Business Watch, participating businesses choose a program coordinator. St. Louis’ Business Watch program uses program coordinators to schedule group meetings, encourage attendance and participation, provide liaison activities among the business members and police, recruit new business members, maintain current Business Watch and member data, distribute regular and special information packets.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 4.3 A participant in community policing efforts**



Source: <http://www.detroitblog.org/images/Jack%20Rabbit%201.jpg>, accessed May 26, 2010.

citizens, and emphasizes problem solving and prevention. Figure 4.3 shows one man who participates in community policing on Detroit's Eastside.

**Who can take the lead:**

Nearby residents and property owners; leaders of local community and business organizations; Detroit Police Department

**How to accomplish this strategy:**

Nearby residents and property owners, leaders of local community organizations, and business associations can reach out to the Detroit Police Department to suggest forming a community policing action council. After establishing a community policing action council, police and leaders of local community organizations and business associations could meet regularly to identify problems, set priorities for dealing with them, and brainstorm ideas for combating crime in the commercial district. See "Community policing efforts across the U.S." for examples of community policing efforts across the United States.

**Community policing efforts across the U.S.**

Phoenix, Arizona, and Detroit, Michigan, are two of many localities across the United States that have put community policing in place with success.

- In Phoenix, Arizona, block watch groups facilitated crime enforcement in a number of ways. Community members identified high priority areas for enforcement. Increased policing in high priority areas scared away would-be criminals. Police enforcement trained block watch groups on how to identify criminal activity and equipped them with radios; when information came in from these block watch groups, police knew they could trust the information and responded to the issues accordingly.<sup>11</sup>
- In Detroit, Michigan, the Jefferson East Business Association's community policing efforts improved law enforcement in the area in a number of ways. The Jefferson East Business Association (JEBA) engages in volunteer recruitment by going door to door. JEBA's efforts educate residents about safety, give JEBA a chance to advertise volunteer community policing opportunities, and change negative perceptions of police. Volunteers help to improve prosecution outcomes by testifying when necessary. In addition, JEBA's members and nearby residents contribute resources to policing the area: residents pay \$20, and businesses a little more, to fund a security car that is staffed by volunteers and paid security to patrol the area. If residents cannot afford to pay, they can volunteer to patrol the area, or help with administrative work.<sup>12</sup>

For other case studies and information about community policing methods, see the Local Initiatives Support Corporation's Community Safety Paper Series (a part of the annual MetLife Foundation Community-Police Partnership Awards for Neighborhood Revitalization) at [www.lisc.org/resources](http://www.lisc.org/resources).

## **Strategy: Ensure vacant properties are visible and attractive**

Visibility and appearance of vacant properties influence both actual and perceived safety along commercial corridors. Visual obstructions prevent natural surveillance and escape routes for potential victims, contributing to fear of crime.<sup>13</sup> Neglected vacant properties can produce a domino effect of disorder in a commercial district. Attractive and visible properties give employees and onlookers a clear view of well-kept property.

### **Who can take the lead:**

Residents, business owners and associations, local community organizations, City of Detroit Buildings and Safety Engineering Department and Municipal Parking Department

### **How to accomplish this strategy:**

Residents, business owners and associations, local community organizations, code and law enforcement officers and staff can address visibility and appearance of commercial buildings to improve safety and the perception of safety in commercial areas in the following ways:

- **Facilitate unobstructed views of vacant properties.** Neighbors of vacant commercial properties can begin by contacting owners, or property managers to attempt to get them to remove obstructions that block views of buildings. Commercial property owners near the vacant property may want to install motion-detecting lights that provide visibility at night in the vicinity of the vacant property. The City of Detroit Municipal Parking Department can move parking signs and meters to ensure that cars cannot park where they might obstruct views of vacant properties.
- **Clean up vacant properties.** See Chapter 5 for more on improving appearance.
- **Beautify the commercial area with vegetation.** See Chapter 5.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented strategies for areas with commercial vacancy to reach the goal to improve safety and the perception of safety. Many strategies to improve safety and the perception of safety also help achieve other goals. The following chapter discusses ways to improve appearance. Improving appearance can help improve safety and the perception of safety by promoting the image of and activity along commercial corridors.

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# Chapter 5

## Improving Appearance of Commercial Corridors

Beautifying vacant commercial properties helps create a positive image for commercial corridors.<sup>1</sup> A positive image helps attract customers. Well-maintained vacant properties signal safety and promote both the image and activity of commercial corridors.<sup>2</sup> Vacant commercial corridors with buildings with signs of disinvestment such as fire damage, broken windows, trash, peeling paint, damaged exterior walls, and dilapidated signage can use well-documented strategies to improve their appearance. Property maintenance also enhances the quality of the pedestrian experience which supports a healthy commercial area. The following sections present strategies for improving the appearance of commercial corridors.

### **Strategy: Develop a clean-and-safe campaign**

Clean-and-safe programs can improve safety and appearance along commercial corridors. Chapter 4 discusses strategies to improve safety and the perception of safety. Cleanliness links directly to perceived safety. Clean-and-safe programs often include:

- sweeping sidewalks
- removing litter
- power-washing sidewalks
- removing graffiti
- cleaning windows
- maintaining trees and shrubs<sup>3</sup>

### **Who can take the lead:**

Business associations or other nonprofits

## How to accomplish this strategy:

Business associations' staff or other nonprofits' staff can improve appearance through a clean-and-safe program in the following ways:

- **Organize business owners and volunteers.** The staff of business associations or other nonprofits can organize volunteers to clean sidewalks, and remove trash and debris. A clean and safe team can meet as often as once a week or as seldom as a few times a year based on funding or volunteer interest. For information on developing a volunteer program see Chapter 3.
- **Clean streets.** Dirty streets signal disinvestment and encourage crime. Business association staff and volunteers can help improve appearance of streets and promote safety by emptying public trash cans, sweeping streets, and removing illegal dumping and debris from streets. Ideally, a few dedicated volunteers or a paid staff member can perform basic street maintenance at least once a week. For more information see "Volunteers help Jefferson East stay clean and safe."
- **Remove graffiti.** Graffiti removal helps eliminate the appearance of blight from commercial corridors. Volunteers can remove graffiti with water-blasting or sand-blasting equipment, through scrubbing, or by painting over it.<sup>4</sup> For more information see "Clean and Safe Task Force and Graffiti Busters maintain Grandmont Rosedale."
- **Plant flowers.** Well-maintained flowers and shrubs improve the appearance of commercial corridors<sup>5</sup> Business associations or nonprofits' staff can provide business owners and volunteers with

### Volunteers help Jefferson East stay clean and safe

Jefferson East Business Association partners with Wolverine Human Services, Operation Get Down, and Summer in the City to make its commercial district clean and safe. Each of these organizations provides volunteers who clean up garbage, sweep streets, and reset garbage cans twice a week. JEBA has 4-5 volunteers from Operation Get Down and around 10 volunteers from Wolverine Human Services come to the area every week to work on various projects.<sup>6</sup> Operation Get Down volunteers often have to do community service, and JEBA uses this opportunity effectively.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 5.1. JEBA's clean and safe program**



Source: <http://www.jeffersoneast.org/clean.html>, accessed April 25, 2010

For more information about Wolverine Human Services: <http://www.wolverinehs.org/>  
Phone: 313-521-6228  
15255 Mayfield, Detroit, MI 48205

For more information about Operation Get Down:  
<http://operationgetdown.org/>  
Email: [admin@operationgetdown.org](mailto:admin@operationgetdown.org)  
Phone: 313-921-9422  
10100 Harper Avenue, Detroit, MI 48213

supplies such as shovels and plants to plant flowers and shrubs along the street.

- **Celebrate accomplishments.** Business associations and nonprofit organizations' staff may celebrate their accomplishments by recognizing volunteers posting before and after pictures of commercial corridors.<sup>8</sup> These approaches help insure that commercial corridors are well-maintained, clean, and inviting.

### Clean and Safe Task Force and Graffiti Busters maintain Grandmont Rosedale

Grandmont Rosedale Development Corporation (GRDC) in Detroit initiated and now coordinates a "Clean and Safe Task Force." Representatives from surrounding neighborhood organizations and volunteers from outside organizations participate in full day programs. Volunteers perform cleanup and assist with landscaping on Grand River Ave.<sup>9</sup>

GRDC also organizes volunteers on a regular basis to paint over and remove graffiti from commercial areas (see Figure 5.2). This "Graffiti Busters" program organizes hundreds of volunteers who have helped remove graffiti from over 500 buildings. GRDC now owns its own power-washing equipment to remove graffiti from unpainted brick and masonry walls. Business owners and nearby residents can reclaim their vacant commercial areas through GRDC's clean-and-safe program.

**Figure 5.2. GRDC's Graffiti Busters volunteer**



Source : <http://www.grdc.org/id6.html>, accessed March 12, 2010.

### Strategy: Use art displays to beautify vacant commercial buildings

Art displays can improve the appearance of vacant storefronts.<sup>10</sup> Artworks that cover or partially cover empty building windows can hide trash and debris in the interior of buildings from pedestrian view. This promotes a positive image of commercial corridors by replacing ugly and vacant storefronts with a fresh exhibition of talent, see Figures 5.3 through 5.5. Art displays provide a new use for vacant commercial property that can benefit both artists and business owners; artists display their work for free, and business owners improve their property's image with little or no cost. Aside from beautifying vacant properties, art displays can also improve pedestrian friendliness<sup>11</sup> and increase activity in commercial corridors.

Figure 5.3 illustrates SmartSpaces' approach to prevent commercial vacancy in New York. While commercial vacancy in New York is only a temporary problem, in Detroit commercial vacancy is a long-term problem; but Detroit organizations can still apply the SmartSpaces approach. This strategy is appropriate for areas with quality buildings, existing businesses, and some pedestrian foot traffic. Pedestrian surveillance helps maintain safety to protect artwork and businesses from theft or vandalism.

### **New York nonprofit makes vacant commercial storefronts smarter with art**

SmartSpaces is a nonprofit organization that displays art in New York's vacant storefronts. SmartSpaces works with artists and owners to "transform vacant spaces into places people want be." The organization works with different teams, individuals, and organizations as curators for the art selection process. The group receives tax deductible donations through Fractured Atlas, which provides limited financial and legal oversight on artist projects.<sup>12</sup> For more information on Fractured Atlas visit <http://www.fracturedatlas.org/>.

**Figure 5.3. SmartSpaces' art display**



Source: <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Non-profit-galleries-pop-up-in-vacant-sites/19804>, accessed April 22, 2010.

### **Who can take the lead:**

Business associations, nonprofit organizations, and neighborhood associations

### **How to accomplish this strategy:**

Business associations' staff, neighborhood associations' members, and other nonprofit organizations' staff can install art displays by doing the following:

- Determine appropriate spaces for art display. An ideal space has:
  - windows in a secure building
  - active businesses nearby
  - high visibility to pedestrians
- Contact property owners to obtain permission to use their building.
- Locate artists. Nearby residents, business owners, or organizations may have connections to artists or arts based groups. The following organizations may also offer advice for locating artists or other groups that might have an interest in displaying work:



- **The College for Creative Studies** is an art and design school located in Detroit’s cultural center. The CCS already has a Community Arts Partnership program that includes neighborhood beautification including murals and art exhibits.<sup>13</sup>
- **The Russell Industrial Center** is an “Art Mecca/Small Business Haven with over 125 commercial tenants from all different creative backgrounds.”<sup>14</sup>
- Communicate between artist and property owner. Arrange a time frame for installing and removing art. Avoid art installations that appear valuable and that may entice theft.

For more information about CCS:

<http://www.collegeforcreativestudies.edu/about/services/communityarts>

Email: [cce@collegeforcreativestudies.edu](mailto:cce@collegeforcreativestudies.edu)

Phone: 313-664-1532

201 East Kirby, Detroit, MI 48202

For more information about Russell Industrial Center:

<http://www.ricdetroit.org/>

Email: [centeric@aol.com](mailto:centeric@aol.com)

Phone: 313-872-4000

1600 Clay Street, Detroit, MI 48211

### Richmond, Virginia, program to make vacant spaces into artful spaces

Richmond, Virginia, resident Tom Robison asked his city for approval to contact owners and landlords of vacant buildings in a downtown corridor. Mr. Robison asked owners to re-open their storefronts for art displays. He also conducted public meetings to educate city leaders, vendors, and local artists about putting artwork in sidewalk facing windows. The Vacant Spaces = Artful Spaces program in downtown Richmond works with residents, property owners, and city officials to display artwork and photographs in the storefronts of over 60 buildings.<sup>15</sup> Artist Brian Korte explains that the program offers benefits beyond promoting artists and real estate. “For the city - the real winners - we don’t have to look at concert flyers, lost dog posters, or bars on windows. Now we get art, and lots of it.”<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 5.4. The Vacant Spaces=Artful Spaces’ display**



Source : Flirck, Store for Lease, [http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3281/2849656636\\_c010d11ff8.jpg?v=0](http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3281/2849656636_c010d11ff8.jpg?v=0), accessed March 10, 2010.

**Figure 5.5. Brickworkz’s Lego mosaic display**



Source: Brickworkz, “Lego Mosaic Gallery & Info,” <http://www.brickworkz.com/lego-mosaic-gallery.shtml>, accessed March 10, 2010.

## Strategy: Paint murals on vacant commercial buildings

Painting murals on vacant commercial buildings improves appearance by covering blank or ugly walls and facades with art.<sup>17</sup> Commercial districts with low- or high-vacancy rates can benefit from this approach. Murals beautify commercial corridors and encourage other property owners to improve their property. Murals make vacant properties look more attractive and prevent graffiti. *Summer in the City* provides volunteer and logistical support for murals, as described later in this chapter.

### Who can take the lead:

Business associations, neighborhood associations, other nonprofits, and local artists

### How to accomplish this strategy:

Business associations' staff, neighborhood association members, other nonprofit organizations' staff, and artists from nearby districts can organize volunteers to paint murals in the city or commission artists from nearby districts.

*For more information on how to organize volunteers see Chapter 3.*

**Organize volunteers to paint murals in the city.** Business associations, nonprofit organizations' staff, and neighborhood association members will need to:

- find a location for the mural
- obtain property owner permission
- fundraise
- obtain paint and supplies
- get property owner's approval of mural design
- outline shapes and drawings for volunteers to color

### Commission artists from nearby districts to paint.

Business association and nonprofit organizations' staff, and neighborhood association members could hire artists to paint murals. These organizations could require muralists to complete an application form with pictures or samples of their work to ensure they have the skills to complete the mural.

In Michigan, the Cool Cities initiative revitalizes Michigan neighborhoods and provides grants for streetscape improvements such as mural paintings. Grandmont Rosedale Development Corporation received a grant from Cool Cities

Figure 5.6. GRDC mural



Source: <http://www.grdc.org/id6.html>, accessed March 12, 2010.

for a mural on a commercial property painted by a Center for Creative Studies student.<sup>18</sup> For more information on Cool Cities' grants see <http://www.coolcities.com/grant-program.html>.

The City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program found residents' involvement with a mural, availability of a suitable wall, capacity and commitment to maintaining the property, and neighborhood meetings with the artist and the organization can assist in the mural process.<sup>20</sup>

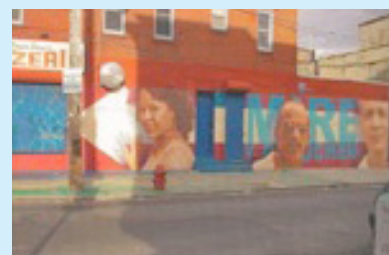
### Partnership makes murals flourish in Philadelphia

City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program (MAP) is a public/private partnership between the city government and nonprofits who work with block captains, neighborhood associations, public schools, and community development corporations to raise money and create murals that reflect the culture of Philadelphia neighborhoods. MAP also organizes free painting workshops, and provides free art programs to at-risk youth and young criminal offenders. According to MAP "mural projects often include stabilization of abandoned lots and revitalization of open spaces." The mural process takes three to six months and includes nearby residents in every step. Steps include:

- selecting mural location
- holding neighborhood meetings
- creating themes
- running painting workshops

Philadelphia Mural Arts Program has painted over 2,800 murals throughout the city. Murals include metalworking, photography, stained glass, and mosaics. MAP requires neighborhoods to fill out an application due to high demand for murals and limited resources. MAP also requires muralists to complete an application form. This application ensures that muralists have the necessary artistic skills, and the ability to work with residents to paint murals that reflect the residents' interests.<sup>19</sup> For more information on the muralist application see <http://www.muralarts.org/pdf/artist-app.pdf>.

**Figure 5.7. MAP's street mural**



Source: Jane Golden et al., *More Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell*.

**Figure 5.8. MAP's parking lot mural**



Source: Margaret Dewar

**Figure 5.9 MAP's mural**



Source: Margaret Dewar

## Strategy: Recognize outstanding property-maintenance practices

Recognizing property owners for exceptional visual appearance can create incentives for property owners to maintain their properties. For a very low cost, an award can both encourage business owners in the district to beautify their properties and acknowledge those who do.

### Who Takes the Lead:

Staff from a business association or a nonprofit organization

### How to accomplish this strategy:

**Determine Evaluation Period.** Individuals can evaluate properties every three to twelve months to determine a quarterly, semiannual or annual winner of a property appearance award.

**Develop Award Criteria.** Staff can develop a set of criteria to evaluate properties. Criteria for an award could reflect level of improvement over the evaluation period or overall aesthetic appeal based on maintenance and appearance such as facade, painting, and landscaping.<sup>21</sup>

**Promote Program.** Flyers and word-of-mouth advertising can educate business owners about the award. A business association could announce the program at a meeting, while a nonprofit organization could tie it into ongoing communication with businesses, such as newsletters or email.

**Determine Winners.** Staff from a business association or nonprofit can determine winners. They could also enlist the help of nearby residents or business owners familiar with the area to choose a top contender.

**Recognize Winners.** A group of staff, nearby residents, and business owners can present winners with a placard, certificate, or sign to reflect their award.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the business association or nonprofit organization can spotlight the business through media such as its website or newsletter.

### Looking good for business incentivizes owners to beautify property

The Grandmont Rosedale Development Corporation offers a "Looking Good for Business" award. GRDC annually recognizes "those businesses that do an exceptional job of property maintenance and make a special effort to improve their appearance." Members from its Clean and Safe Task Force, including business owners and nearby residents, hand out the award each year.<sup>23</sup>

## Strategy: Plant low-maintenance native vegetation

Low growing shrubs enhance the appearance and, as noted in Chapter 4, the safety of commercial corridors. Well-maintained vegetation improves appearance of commercial corridor by adding plants to the urban environment. Low-maintenance native vegetation reduces the cost of irrigation and pesticides.<sup>24</sup> Advantages of planting native plants include:

- **Low-maintenance:** native plants do not require irrigation, pesticides, trimming, and fertilizers.
- **Low-cost:** native plants require less money to maintain than traditional plants.
- **Low-environmental health impacts:** the use of native plants helps eliminate the use of pesticides and fertilizers which can cause cancer and other health diseases.<sup>25</sup>

### Who can take the lead:

Business associations, neighborhood association members, volunteers, and business owners

### How to accomplish this strategy:

Business associations' staff and neighborhood association members can plant low-maintenance vegetation:

- **Provide tools and plants** for volunteers and business owners to plant flowers, shrubs, and trees along commercial districts. See Figures 5.10 through 5.15 for flowers, shrubs, and trees suggestions.
- **Organize planting events** during weekends in the spring and summer for volunteers to plant and maintain vegetation.
- **Use proper soils.** Business associations' staff and neighborhood association members can use CU-structural soils to plant trees in the urban environment. According to Cornell's University Urban Horticulture Institute, CU-structural soil should be used under sidewalks and parking lots because it "provides adequate soil volumes for tree roots under pavement."<sup>26</sup> The pictures in Figures 5.16 and 5.17 show examples of urban trees planted with standard soil versus urban trees planted with CU-structural soils. In the second example, the sidewalk does not bow because CU-structural soil allows for root growth.

## Native flower examples:

**Figure 5.10. Ironweed**



Source: <http://www.michigan.gov>, accessed May 20, 2010.

**Figure 5.11. Lobelia**



Source : [http://www.northcreeknurseries.com/\\_ccLib/image/plants/DETA-193.jpg](http://www.northcreeknurseries.com/_ccLib/image/plants/DETA-193.jpg), accessed May 20, 2010

Ironweed (Figure 5.10) can reach up to 10 feet. They bloom from mid-summer to mid-fall.<sup>27</sup> Great blue lobelias (Figure 5.11) bloom during the summer. They attract hummingbirds and butterflies.

## Native shrub examples:

**Figure 5.12. Bearberry kinnikinnick**



Source : [http://pics.davesgarden.com/pics/Todd\\_Boland\\_1099950455\\_887.jpg](http://pics.davesgarden.com/pics/Todd_Boland_1099950455_887.jpg), accessed April 29, 2010.

**Figure 5.13. Creeping juniper**



Source: [http://www.westonnurseries.com/\\_ccLib/image/plants/DETA-910.jpg](http://www.westonnurseries.com/_ccLib/image/plants/DETA-910.jpg), accessed April 29, 2010.

Bearberry kinnikinnick (Figure 5.12) shrubs can reach 18 inches height. They start blooming during mid-spring and early summer.<sup>28</sup> They attract bees, butterflies and birds. Creeping juniper (Figure 5.13) is a low evergreen that reaches 12 to 18 inches height.<sup>29</sup> Both plants are suited for mid-western climates.

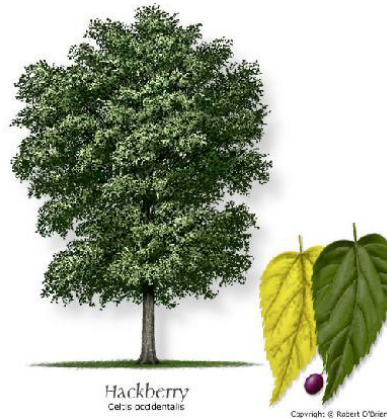
**Native tree examples:**

**Figure 5.14. Red maple**



Source: [http://texasreeplanting.tamu.edu/treepictures/maple\\_red.jpg](http://texasreeplanting.tamu.edu/treepictures/maple_red.jpg), accessed May 10, 2010.

**Figure 5.15. Hackberry**



Source: <http://www.troy.mi.gov/parksrec/trees/treestoplant/Hackberry3.jpg>, accessed May 10, 2010.

Red Maple (Figure 5.14) trees grow fast and can reach between 40 and 60 feet.<sup>30</sup> Hackberry trees (Figure 5.15) also grow fast and can reach 40 to 80 feet.<sup>31</sup>

**Soil examples:**

**Figure 5.16. Standard soil under pavement**



Source: <http://www.caddetails.com/spotlight/nov06/CU-Soil.pdf>, accessed May 10, 2010.

**Figure 5.17. CU-structural soil under pavement**



Source : <http://www.caddetails.com/spotlight/nov06/CU-Soil.pdf>, accessed May 10, 2010.

## Strategy: Partner with outside organizations for volunteer events

Partnering with outside organizations enlists the help of other nonprofit organizations to beautify an area through a volunteer event. Some nonprofits may require the help of nearby residents; others may already have established volunteer networks. In addition to offering volunteers and support, volunteer-based organizations can provide expertise. For example, the Greening of Detroit provides information about which plant species can thrive in city conditions and offers tips for landscaping strategies.

### Who can take the lead:

Nearby residents, business organizations and neighborhood associations

### How to accomplish this strategy:

Varies based on partner organization. Potential organizations for nearby residents, business organizations and neighborhood associations to partner with include:

**The Greening of Detroit** beautifies blighted sections of the city through gardening and landscaping. In 2009, volunteers planted new trees along East Jefferson. The Greening of Detroit is an organization with whom to partner for a planting event or educational session on ways to improve vacant land. The Greening of Detroit often partners with community associations, schools, and businesses throughout Detroit.

Programs include community gardens, outdoor classrooms, vacant lot plantings, park plantings, and streetscape development. The Greening of Detroit ensures that trees are maintained for three years, which helps beautify neighborhoods and corridors in Detroit.<sup>32</sup>

**Figure 5.18. The Greening of Detroit volunteers plant trees**



Source : <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?pid=4670089&id=55577530760>, accessed April 10, 2010.

For more information:  
<http://www.greeningofdetroit.com/>  
Email: [info@greeningofdetroit.com](mailto:info@greeningofdetroit.com)  
Phone: (313) 237-8733.  
1418 Michigan Avenue,  
Detroit, MI 48216.



**Figure 5.19. The Greening of Detroit outdoor classroom program**



Source: <http://www.greeningofdetroit.com>, accessed April 10, 2010.

volunteers to contribute \$25 to cover costs, but it waives this fee for people with financial hardship.<sup>33</sup> Additional funding comes through donations and fundraising. The organization works with business associations in East Warren, Woodbridge, Jefferson East, and several other districts on clean-up and mural projects. Additionally, Summer in the City landscapes, weeds, and plants community gardens.

Summer in the City Mural Process:

Neighborhood associations, residents, and nonprofits contact Summer in the City to request a mural in their neighborhood. Summer in the City staff then examines the site to determine feasibility. Summer in the City also

identifies potential mural locations while working in a neighborhood. After Summer in the City identifies potential locations, the staff contacts the building owner and asks for permission to paint the building (see Chapter

**Summer in the City** is a nonprofit that organizes high school volunteers to paint murals in various areas of Detroit. Summer in the City has painted over 100 murals throughout the city. The nonprofit welcomes volunteers from June through August. Summer in the City encourages

For more information:  
<http://www.summerinthecity.com>

Email: for up-to date contact information visit <http://www.summerinthecity.com/contact>

Phone: (248) 790-1000

**Figure 5.20. Summer in the City volunteers**



Source: <http://www.summerinthecity.com/>, accessed April 18, 2010.

2 for determining property ownership). Summer in the City often allows building owners to choose mural themes. Project site leaders sometimes sketch shapes and simple designs for volunteers to color. These simple designs accommodate untrained volunteers.

**Figure 5.21. East Warren Mural**



Source: <http://picasaweb.google.com/site.det.09/EastWarrenAvenue?feat=flashslideshow#5362425971909502562>, accessed April 20, 2010.

## Conclusion

Beautifying commercial properties addresses commercial vacancy in Detroit by improving the appearance of commercial buildings and creating a positive image for commercial corridors. This chapter described strategies that require limited financial resources to improve appearance. Business association and nonprofit organizations' staff, neighborhood association members, artists, and volunteers play a key role in improving the appearance of commercial corridors in Detroit. Beautification achievements encourage more people to volunteer and other property owners to beautify their property. In the long run, these improvements can reduce vacancy rates, increase the perception of safety, and increase pedestrian and commercial activity along Detroit's commercial corridors.

The presence of blight often results from irresponsible property owners in commercial corridors. Owner accountability strategies help ensure that owners maintain their properties. The following chapter discusses ways to promote owner accountability, which can help improve the appearance of commercial corridors.

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## Chapter 6

# Promoting Commercial Property Owner Accountability

Owners of vacant commercial property have few incentives to maintain their property. Vacant commercial properties do not generate income for their owners, and investing in vacant commercial properties in areas with high vacancy rates involves significant risk. With slim hopes of making a profit from commercial property, the owners often neglect their responsibility for maintaining their properties in safe and code compliant conditions.

Few options exist for business association staff, neighborhood association members, or nearby residents to hold neglectful property owners accountable. Those working to improve conditions of Detroit's commercial corridors would benefit from new laws and administrative procedures to increase owner accountability. Leaders can organize to lobby for these policy changes. Chapter 10 details several policy recommendations to improve owner accountability. This chapter presents three strategies for promoting owner accountability, including one strategy that reflects new legislation that Detroit City Council will likely pass in summer 2010.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 6.1 A neglected property on East Warren**



Source: Erin Evenhouse

## **Strategy: Create a community agreement**

Community agreements can help hold property owners accountable for the maintenance of vacant properties. A property owner and a representative of nearby businesses and residents sign an agreement committing the property owner to a plan for maintaining his property. A community agreement can include a schedule for meeting with concerned residents, securing vacant properties, cleaning and repairing sidewalks, managing landscapes, finding tenants, or selling a property. Community agreements signal good will between nearby business owners, nearby residents and property owners. However, community agreements lack enforceability through legal action.

### **Who can take the lead:**

Business association staff, neighborhood association members

### **How to accomplish this strategy:**

Business association staff or neighborhood association members can promote owner accountability through a community agreement:

- **Identify properties to target and identify property owners.** Depending on their goals, business association staff or neighborhood association members can choose to target prominent unmaintained vacant commercial properties or less infamous properties. Targeting less prominent properties may require less effort as smaller properties require fewer resources to maintain. Targeting prominent properties can likely gain greater support from nearby business owners and residents. See Chapter 2 for methods to determine property ownership.
- **Schedule a meeting** between nearby business owners, nearby residents and the owner of a targeted property. At a meeting, nearby business owners, nearby residents and targeted property owners can discuss issues with the targeted property and both sides can express their concerns. For more information about community meetings see Chapter 3.
- **Draft and sign a community agreement** with the targeted property owner. A designated meeting attendee can draft a community agreement consisting of obligations for the targeted property owner and a timetable for the completion of those obligations. The targeted property owner and a representative of nearby businesses and residents can sign the drafted community agreement. See "MVOOC organizes to keep landlords accountable" for details on how a Youngstown, Ohio, group negotiated a community agreement involving several properties.
- **Follow-up to ensure results.** Although a community agreement lacks legal remedy if the property owner fails to follow it, business association staff or neighborhood association members can use it to publicly pressure a property owner to maintain his property. For example, business association staff, neighborhood association members, or other area leaders can organize a protest at the property owner's home or office. See Chapter 3 for more information about organizing community action.

## **MVOC organizes to keep landlords accountable**

In Youngstown, Ohio, the Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative (MVOC) works to improve the quality of life for residents of Youngstown. As part of its landlord accountability campaign, MVOC identified MACK Property, LLC, as the owner of multiple blighted residential units. To address MACK Property's unmaintained properties, MVOC held a community meeting intended to develop a community agreement with MACK Property. MACK Property did not attend this initial meeting, but after media and public pressure, MACK Property agreed to work with MVOC and negotiate a community agreement.

The community agreement between MVOC and MACK Property included language for MACK Property to do the following:

- attend landlord training courses
- pay for demolition of blighted properties
- register its properties with the City of Youngstown
- address citations from the city within six months
- contact neighborhood association leaders before making further property transactions
- meet with MVOC on a monthly basis

Although MVOC targeted owners of residential properties, business association staff or neighborhood association members in Detroit could use the same approach to create community agreements with owners of vacant commercial properties.<sup>2</sup>

## **Strategy: Use existing code enforcement resources strategically**

Effective code enforcement programs encourage property owners to maintain their properties. On the other hand, lack of code enforcement allows property owners to disregard their responsibility to maintain their properties. According to a 2009 report from the Detroit Community Initiative, a Northeast Detroit-based non-profit interested in safety and health issues, code enforcement in Detroit lacks an adequate number of code inspectors, an efficient violation process, and an extensive citizen education system.<sup>3</sup> Detroit Ombudsman Durene Brown echoed this sentiment: "We spend millions on enforcement, and there is none."<sup>4</sup> Detroit attempted to improve code enforcement in 2005; and while this effort led to meaningful changes in code enforcement, code enforcement still lacks clout.

## A recent history of code enforcement in Detroit

Before 2005, Detroit processed city code violations as criminal infractions in the 36th District Court. In 2005, due to backlogs in hearings, prioritization of criminal hearings (with more violent offenses taking priority) and limited code enforcement resources, Detroit sought new ways to enforce city building codes. Detroit Law Department attorney Medina Abdun-Noor asked the Michigan State Legislature to grant the

**Figure 6.4 Detroit Department of Administrative Hearings**



source: <http://www.detroitmi.gov/Departments/DepartmentofAdministrativeHearings/tabid/78/Default.aspx>, accessed May 25, 2010.

city the ability to enforce code through a provisional court system. The Legislature complied, and Abdun-Noor founded the Department of Administrative Hearings (DAH) (Figure 6.4) to hear code enforcement violations. Detroit City Council then approved \$2.3 million to fund DAH.<sup>5</sup> DAH now processes code violations formerly heard by the 36th District Court. DAH processes code violations as civil infractions instead of criminal infractions. This change in procedure means that offenders no longer face potential jail time and instead face only fines.<sup>6</sup> DAH can penalize violators with fines from \$25 to \$10,000.<sup>7</sup> Unpaid fines can result in garnishment of a violator’s wages, derogatory credit reporting, or liens on property.<sup>8</sup> City building inspectors, health inspectors, environmental inspectors, police officers, and Neighborhood City Hall managers can issue “blight violation notices,” or code violation tickets.<sup>9</sup>

### Who can take the lead:

Business associations and neighborhood associations

### How to accomplish this strategy:

Business associations and neighborhood associations can use existing code enforcement programs strategically in the following ways:

**Figure 6.3 A violation ticket**



Source: Curbed NY <http://ny.curbed.com>, accessed May 27, 2000.

- **Educate citizens about city code.** Many citizens do not understand what constitutes a code violation. Business associations and neighborhood associations can make a list of common code violations for commercial corridors. Educating citizens helps reduce the time inspectors spend investigating code complaints. Business associations and neighborhood associations can also take advantage of DAH’s code enforcement educational program by encouraging citizens to attend the program (see DAH educational program). Individuals can also call the 311 call center when they see code violations.<sup>10</sup>
- **Prioritize code complaints.** Educating citizens about city code can also help citizens use their discretion when determining which code violations deserve citations. Citizens can direct code enforcement officials to the most flagrant



and dangerous code violations. Staff from a business association or neighborhood association can assist citizens in prioritizing code complaints and submitting them to code enforcement officials together. This “packaging” of priority complaints can help code enforcement officials address the most important violations in an organized manner. Assisting code enforcement officials in this way increases efficiency in a system with limited resources.

- **Encourage DAH to convert unpaid code violation fines into liens and enforce liens through foreclosures.** Currently, DAH passes the collection of unpaid fines onto the City Treasurer, who attempts to collect the unpaid fines through collection agencies. Currently, unpaid fines are not attached to the property through liens. The Michigan Legislature changed state law to allow DAH to place liens on properties within the city, but also on a violator’s other properties around the state.<sup>11</sup> DAH could place liens on code violators’ properties that fall outside of the city limits to improve owner accountability. Business associations and neighborhood associations can use community involvement methods from Chapter 3 to lobby DAH to change procedures.
- **Process worst code violations as criminal infractions.** See Chapter 10 for this policy change.

## DAH educational program

The Department of Administrative Hearings (DAH) conducts group tours of the DAH courtrooms, which include observations of actual hearings (Figure 6.5) and an educational overview of the hearings and enforcement process. Neighborhood associations, block clubs and other interested groups can contact the DAH at (313) 224-0098 for more information.

Figure 6.5 A DAH hearing



source: City of Detroit Department of Administrative Hearings <http://www.detroitmi.gov/DepartmentsandAgencies/DepartmentofAdministrativeHearings/TheHearingProcess/tabid/583/Default.aspx>, accessed May 25, 2010.

## **Strategy: Educate property owners, businesses and residents about the vacant property registration ordinance**

A vacant property registration system allows city officials to track vacant properties by requiring vacant property owners to register their properties with the city. Tracking vacant properties and property owners allows city officials to know which properties are vacant, assess fees for vacancy, and monitor property owners' efforts to address vacancy.

An amendment to the Detroit City Code to create a vacant property registration ordinance (VPRO) will likely pass in June 2010. The VPRO can encourage property owners, businesses and residents to address vacant properties because property owners can face fines, liens, and loss of property. Similar to other legislation, enforcement of this new amendment will determine whether it is successful in addressing vacant property in Detroit. Business association staff and neighborhood association members can help the City enforce the VPRO by helping educate property owners, businesses and residents about the VPRO.

### **Who can take the lead:**

Business association staff and neighborhood association members

### **How to accomplish this strategy:**

Business association staff and neighborhood association members can educate property owners, businesses and residents about the VPRO by creating a flyer that summarizes the most important parts of the VPRO.

Important parts of the VPRO a flyer can highlight include the following:

- Property owners or a representative of property owners must register buildings that are vacant for more than 30 days with the Department of Buildings, Safety and Engineering (BSE).
- Registration information must include building address, building description, owner information, mortgage holders, lien holders, and a timeline to return vacant property to active use or to demolish the vacant property.
- Property owners must renew vacant property registration annually
- Property owners who fail to register a property with BSE can face an initial civil fine of \$250, and increasing fines with each additional failure to register.
- Officers of corporate owned properties can face civil fines for unregistered or unmaintained properties.
- Property owners who do not maintain their buildings in habitable, sanitary, and safe condition as defined by City Code cannot occupy or lease their property.
- BSE may secure vacant buildings in immediate danger due to unsafe or unsanitary conditions, or unlawful occupation. BSE can recover the costs of securing buildings from property owners<sup>12</sup>.

## Conclusion

The limited number and scope of the strategies described in this chapter reflect the difficulty of holding commercial property owners in Detroit accountable. Business associations and neighborhood associations can use these strategies to promote commercial property owner accountability and signal support for policy changes. The following chapter outlines strategies for business associations and neighborhood associations to transition and focus commercial corridor activity. Transitioning and focusing commercial corridor activity can assist with achieving other goals in this plan: improving safety, improving appearance, and promoting owner accountability.

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## Chapter 7

# Transitioning Commercial Corridor Uses

Vacant commercial corridors reflect changes in the retail industry and in consumer shopping preferences. The physical characteristics of older commercial corridors, such as long strips of single-story buildings with limited parking, do not attract retailers or consumers. In combination with these changes, declining population in the areas surrounding Detroit's commercial corridors have reduced the market for businesses in those corridors. To address these realities, this chapter presents short- and long-term strategies for transitioning and focusing uses along commercial corridors. These strategies can encourage business uses in viable areas and discourage business in less dense areas of a corridor.

Many of the strategies in Chapters 4 and 5 also apply here. For example, in the short-term, property owners, business owners, neighbors and local community organizations can beautify vacant commercial lots with vegetation. Additionally, establishing a clean and safe program can help maintain appearance as corridors transition uses and focus their commercial activity into designated districts.

### **Occupying Vacant Property**

The strategies in this section give suggestions for ways to occupy vacant land and buildings without redevelopment and revitalization. Occupation of vacant land along commercial corridors is important to maintain the appearance of activity.

## Strategy: Green vacant lots

Community gardens or low maintenance plantings can give lots a well-maintained appearance.

Gardens can generate activity, promote healthy living, increase the amount of green space and involve nearby residents and business owners. Gardens also beautify commercial corridors.<sup>1</sup> Gardens can occupy land that is vacant with a small chance for future commercial use. Community gardens bring activity to infrequently used land, bring business owners and nearby residents together, create green space, promote recreation and physical fitness, and encourage volunteerism.<sup>2</sup> Travelers along the corridor see well-maintained lots on their way to more vibrant commercial areas along the corridor. Community gardens may also provide locally grown food and flowers. In Detroit, support and resources for gardens are plentiful.

**Figure 7.1 A community garden**



Source: [http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3196/3148229599\\_3e52a0499f.jpg?v=0](http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3196/3148229599_3e52a0499f.jpg?v=0) accessed May 27, 2010.

Gardens are not always the best use of vacant land because they can require substantial resources and time from nearby residents and business owners. Planting native grasses and low maintenance plants is less expensive and requires less time from nearby residents and business owners (see Chapter 5 for more information). Native grasses and plants can easily improve the appearance of a lot and demonstrate that the lot is well maintained. Local leaders can assess whether they have the resources needed for a community garden; if not, low maintenance planting could better serve the needs of the corridor. See

Chapter 9 for an example of how this strategy might work on a section of East Warren Ave.

### **Who can take the lead:**

Business associations, business owners and nearby residents

## How to accomplish this strategy:

Local schools, business associations, business owners and nearby residents can create a community garden:

- **Apply for assistance from the Garden Resource Program Collaborative.** A \$20/year membership fee provides community groups or schools with 24 packs of easy to sow variety seeds, subscription to the Detroit Farmer's Quarterly Newsletter and an invitation to participate in garden cluster groups. An application to Garden Resource Program can be downloaded on the Detroit Agriculture website: [http://www.detroitagriculture.org/GRP\\_Website/Garden\\_Resource\\_Program.html](http://www.detroitagriculture.org/GRP_Website/Garden_Resource_Program.html)
- **Use native plants.** Native plants help preserve Detroit's native ecosystem as they beautify vacant areas. Beyond providing a natural diversion to urban surroundings, restoring native ecosystems can also provide economic as well as environmental benefits.<sup>3</sup> For more information on native plantings, see Chapter 5.

## Strategy: Obtain temporary use permits

A temporary use is the commercial use of a building or a lot for a limited period of time. Temporary uses can take on many forms, such as an art exhibit, roadside flower vendor, or a stand that supplies seasonal goods. Property owners can employ temporary uses as a bridge during periods of vacancy or construction. Temporary uses help to maintain activity on an otherwise vacant property. This activity may discourage vandalism and decay by increasing activity on underutilized properties.

Temporary uses that bring people together can play an important role in keeping the momentum going for those dedicating their time to address vacant commercial properties. They enable business owners and residents of the surrounding neighborhoods to build relationships that help them unite to address vacant commercial properties.

Temporary use permits allow social events that the zoning ordinance currently prohibits. These uses can attract people to distressed commercial corridors, resulting in patrons' spending money in local businesses on the commercial corridor.

**Figure 7.2 A farmer sets up temporary shop on a street**



Source: [http://www.mlive.com/news/kalamazoo/index.ssf/2010/03/vendors\\_asked\\_to\\_vacate\\_bank\\_s.html](http://www.mlive.com/news/kalamazoo/index.ssf/2010/03/vendors_asked_to_vacate_bank_s.html) accessed May 25, 2010.

### Who can take the lead:

Business associations, business owners, commercial corridor property owners

### How to accomplish this strategy:

Business associations, business owners, and commercial corridor property owners can obtain temporary use permits:

- **Devise a temporary use.** Brainstorm ideas for temporary uses that may fulfill a market need.

Ideas for a temporary uses on vacant commercial lots can include:

- fairs and festivals
- summer movies
- live performances
- sporting events
- farmer's markets
- food vendors

Ideas for temporary uses in vacant commercial buildings can include:

- business association, residential and other meetings
- seasonal business
- holiday flowers
- holiday decorations
- gardening and yard supplies
- art displays

- **Apply for a temporary use permit.** The Detroit Zoning Ordinance allows property owners to apply for temporary use permits. Vacant commercial property owners submit applications for a Temporary Use Permit to the Director of Buildings and Safety Engineering Department (BSE) (Sec 61-4-12 Detroit Zoning Ordinance). The application requires the following information:

- Name, address, and telephone number of the applicant
- A written description of the temporary use activity
- Proof of property ownership
- A site plan, to scale
- Where applicable, the type of food and beverages to be served, for approval of Health and Wellness Promotion. (61-4-12 Detroit Zoning Ordinance). Contact the Public Health Department to determine the need for a food-handler permit at (313)-876-4000 or the toll free customer service line at (800) 879-7979.

To approve an application, the city may require a performance bond and will almost always require liability insurance. BSE reviews applications and attempts to respond within ten (10) days of completion of the application. For more information on temporary use permits visit: <http://www.detroitmi.gov/legislative/BoardsCommissions/CityPlanningCommission/docs%20for%20posting/Ch%2061%20November%201,%20>



2008%20update.pdf.

- **Conduct the temporary use** after receiving a temporary use permit. See “Temporary uses in action” for a few examples.

### Temporary uses in action

In spring 2008, Growing & Retailing Opportunities in Wayne County (G.R.O.W.) began the process of establishing a neighborhood farmers market on the east side of Detroit. The East Warren Avenue Farmers Market opened in East English Village early the following July.

G.R.O.W. helped establish a market that provides a viable retail space for independent urban gardens. G.R.O.W.’s efforts also resulted in an increase in activity along the East Warren business district on market Saturdays.

In Washington, D.C., a traveling art exhibit draws large crowds to vacant buildings. Artomatic is semi-permanent art display in vacant buildings. The exhibit is on display in the summer and fall months and changes location annually. Artomatic provides a use for vacant buildings. Artomatic brings publicity to the vacant building and finds tenants. The buildings used in this program are on major disinvested commercial corridors.<sup>4</sup>

In Brooklyn, New York, local artists and residents transformed a vacant lot into a miniature golf course, the Brooklyn Putting Lot. A team of artists, architects and urban planners designed the holes to promote sustainability with artistic flair.<sup>5</sup> The Brooklyn Putting Lot occupies vacant land, attracts many visitors and educates the public about sustainability

**Figure 7.3 The East Warren Avenue Farmers Market**



Source: Ecozoic Detroit <http://www.ecozoicdetroit.net/ewafm> accessed April 5, 2010.

a

## Transitioning Some Land out of Commercial Use and Increasing Business Density Elsewhere

This section describes strategies that aim to shift commercial development to areas with high business activity. Concentrating commercial activity can benefit existing businesses and relocated businesses by sharing customers and increasing activity around the businesses.

### Strategy: Advocate for rezoning of unused commercial land

Clustered business development creates an environment where all businesses attract more customers than they would in isolation. Some businesses are destinations, and others depend on destination businesses to bring in customers. Shoppers often choose to combine shopping trips, and clustered businesses offer shoppers this opportunity.<sup>6</sup> A variety of uses on a commercial corridor can provide support for the businesses on a commercial corridor. Vacant land, on the other hand, discourages business activity because people will less likely visit places surrounded by vacancy.<sup>7</sup>

Rezoning could limit uses of land in former commercial areas that are now highly vacant. Rezoning land to open space between occupied business areas along commercial corridors could encourage clustering of businesses in areas that are already busy. Moving businesses to

areas of busy activity may draw customers because customers may feel more secure in high traffic areas. As human behavior scholar William H. Whyte noted, "What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people."<sup>8</sup>

Clustering businesses in a small area can also increase rents because businesses would have fewer areas in which they could locate. High rents around the commercial clusters would cause some

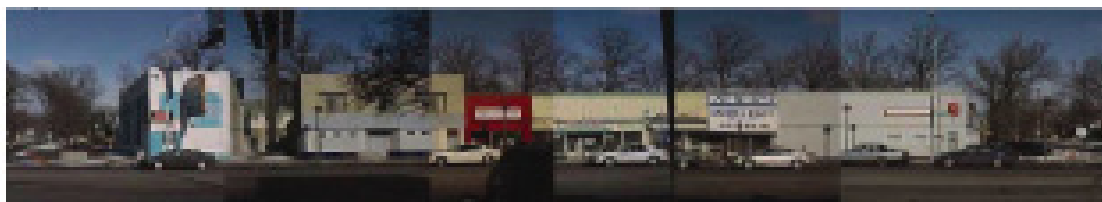
**Figure 7.4 A low density area of East Warren**



Source: Xiqing Lin

businesses to pursue lower rents outside of the clusters. Rezoning would reduce the likelihood that a business would locate away from the dense commercial nodes.

**Figure 7.5 A high density area of East Warren**



Source: Conaway et. al, "East Warren Commercial Revitalization: A Strategy to Realize District Vitality," p. 6, (2004).

While no examples of this strategy exist for urban areas, commercial corridors in Detroit could look similar to a major road that has small dense towns with pockets of commercial activity between stretches of open space. The dense commercial clusters could mimic the character of small older downtowns.

### **Who can take the lead:**

Business associations, business owners and nearby residents

### **How to accomplish this strategy:**

Business associations, business owners, and nearby residents can advocate for rezoning in the following ways:

- **Submit a rezoning application to the City Planning Commission.** Due to substantial processing fees (\$350.00 minimum), applicants may need support from a business association. Only property owners have the standing to apply for a rezoning of their property. Applicants must attend a public hearing where the City Planning Commission approves or denies the rezoning application. City code limits potential applicants for rezoning to business owners, business owner's agents, another person with a legal interest in the property or the planning commission.
- **Petition City Council to rezone sections of a commercial corridor to open space.** Business associations and residents can petition city council members to administratively rezone an area. Business associations, business owners and residents can lobby City Council members to encourage them to rezone their corridor to encourage clustering of businesses.

## Strategy: Reduce speed limit around areas of dense business

Figure 7.6 Reduced speed zones



Source: Edward Ringwald, <http://www.edwardringwald.com/images/PinellasBridges/ClwMemorialCswy/19.JPG>, accessed May 25, 2010

Areas with higher densities of businesses could benefit from reduced speed limits because slower speed allows passengers in cars to observe storefronts for a longer period of time. This strategy can complement strategies designed to cluster businesses.

Pedestrians often feel more comfortable around slower moving traffic. Areas with low business concentrations could have higher speed limits because those areas have fewer shops to observe and less pedestrian activity. Reducing speed limits, narrowing commercial streets, and building pedestrian crosswalks may promote business by encouraging pedestrian activity<sup>10</sup>.

### Who can take the lead:

Business associations or business owners

### How to accomplish this strategy:

Business associations' staff and/or business owners can reduce speed limits on commercial corridors:

**Construct new traffic calming measures such as curb bump outs, pavement material changes or bike lanes.** The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) offers funds for certain types of traffic calming measures.<sup>11</sup> Traffic Enhancement (TE) program funds support non-motorized traffic improvements such as bike lanes. Business associations can sponsor city and county applications for TE funds by assisting with planning, financing, and implementation efforts.<sup>12</sup>

- Submit a written request to Detroit City Council. Ordinances outline speed limits on city controlled streets. A business association or business owner may request that City Council amend the ordinance for their corridor. A business association or business owner may petition City Council by submitting a brief written notice of request with the city clerk the day before a meeting. For more information visit: <http://www.detroitmi.gov/CityCouncil/AppearingBeforeCouncil/tabid/2648/Default.aspx>.
- Request a traffic control order from the Traffic Services Section of the Michigan State Police. A traffic control order is a study by the Michigan State Police to find areas to increase safety on a street. MDOT relies on the State of Michigan Police Department to determine safety on the streets it controls. MDOT controls

several commercial corridor streets in Detroit and is reluctant to reduce speed limits on state trunk lines. <sup>14</sup> However, MDOT may agree to lower speed limits in areas of dense commercial activity if speeds increase in areas of sparse commercial activity. MDOT allows other traffic calming measures.

### **Strategy: Apply for a freeze on the taxable value of rehabilitated property**

Public Act 146 of 2000 – Obsolete Property Rehabilitation Act of Michigan (OPRA) can help to encourage businesses to locate or improve properties in commercial nodes. OPRA provides tax incentives to encourage reinvestment in obsolete commercial properties. In association with a convincing development plan, the state can freeze the taxable value on a property for up to twelve years. Tax incentives assist property owners in the redevelopment of contaminated, blighted or functionally obsolete buildings. The statute aims to help property owners rehabilitate older buildings into occupied commercial properties.<sup>15</sup>

#### **Who can take the lead:**

Business associations or property owners

#### **How to accomplish this strategy:**

Business associations or business owners can apply for a freeze in the taxable value of a selected property:

Contact Detroit’s Planning and Development Department at (313) 224-0953 for more information about how to apply. The OPRA tax application process involves multiple steps. After an applicant submits an application:

- The county holds public hearings to establish an Obsolete Property Rehabilitation District consisting of one or more commercial properties.
- The county passes a resolution declaring an area as an obsolete property district, which allows for property owners to apply for tax exemption.
- The county tax assessors notify each unit that levies property tax, e.g. school, library, and city.
- The county holds another public hearing.
- The county decides the number of years to exempt property owner’s investments, up to twelve years.
- The State Tax Commission approves or denies the tax exemption.<sup>16</sup>

OPRA's multiple step process deters some property owners from applying for tax exemptions. However, OPRA can greatly benefit business districts. See "OPRA helps SDBA revive Odd Fellows Hall" for

### OPRA helps SDBA revive Odd Fellows Hall

Wayne County and the City of Detroit have used OPRA on a significant number of properties. Since the Act passed in 2000, about 300 properties have qualified for OPRA tax exemption. Southwest Detroit Business Association invested over \$2.5 million in its property at 8701 West Vernor Highway, the historic Odd Fellows Hall, and received general property tax exemptions on the invested value for twelve years.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 7.7 Odd Fellows Hall before renovation**



Source: Cool Cities, <http://www.coolcities.com/project11.html>, accessed May 25, 2010.

**Figure 7.8 Odd Fellows Hall after renovation**



Source: Cool Cities, <http://www.coolcities.com/project11.html>, accessed May 25, 2010.

information on how OPRA helped the organization develop this anchor for activity along Vernor Highway. Business associations can inform current or potential property owners in targeted areas of their districts about OPRA and assist property owners through the process.

## Conclusion

This chapter covered strategies for transitioning commercial corridors to achieve long-term viability either as vacant land or as clustered businesses. Chapters 8 and 9 present examples of implementation of these strategies and strategies from Chapters 4 through 6 using the East Warren and Livernois study areas. Chapters 8 and 9 demonstrate how

neighborhood associations, business owners, and nearby residents can apply the recommended strategies to meet the specific needs of their commercial corridors.

## Notes

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16. Ibid.
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# Chapter 8

## Developing a Plan for Livernois Avenue

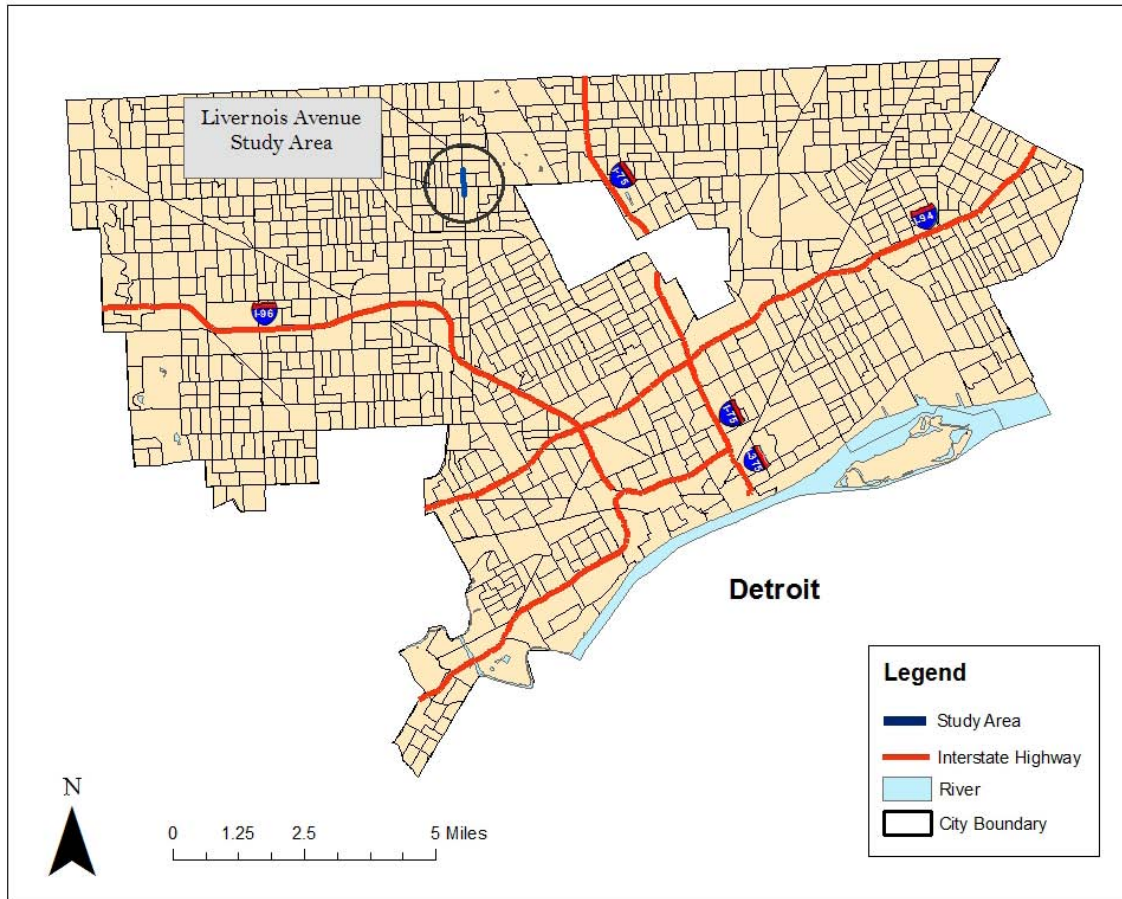
This chapter provides a plan to apply the strategies presented in Chapters 4 through 7 to a densely occupied, four-block section of Livernois Avenue between Clarita and St. Martins (see Figure 8.1). Recommendations in this chapter seek to achieve the four goals of:

- improve safety and the perception of safety
- improve appearance
- promote commercial property owner accountability
- transition commercial corridor activity

Livernois Avenue’s “Avenue of Fashion” between Clarita and St. Martins represents an area with a mostly occupied, dense building stock that is in good condition. The characteristics of this section of Livernois call for strategies that, first, address safety and appearance; and second, create a long term plan that focuses commercial activity and non-profit efforts on specific blocks.

An existing, active business association, the University Commons Organization, undertakes many efforts in the area. The Mayor’s Office of Neighborhood Commercial Revitalization (ONCR) designated University Commons a Re\$store Detroit! district, which gives University Commons access to grants and technical assistance. University Commons’ efforts offer ideas for other organizations that address commercial vacancy in similar corridors in Detroit.

**Figure 8.1 Livernois study area location**



Source: ESRI, Inc www.esri.com.

## Historic Context and Current Situation

The Livernois study area between Clarita and St. Martins was known historically as the “Avenue of Fashion.” Today, narrow storefronts along tree-lined streets with on-street parking still characterize the Avenue of Fashion’s streetscape, but the corridor offers fewer stores and less variety than during its post-World War II heyday. The commercial corridor houses many businesses but also has vacant storefronts and lots (see Figure 8.2). Although many buildings are in good condition, others need aesthetic and structural repairs (see Figure 8.3).



**Figure 8.2.**  
**Vacancy in the**  
**Livernois study**  
**area**

Source: ESRI, Inc; field assessment of vacant commercial property; the Detroit Planning and Development Department; Bing Maps.

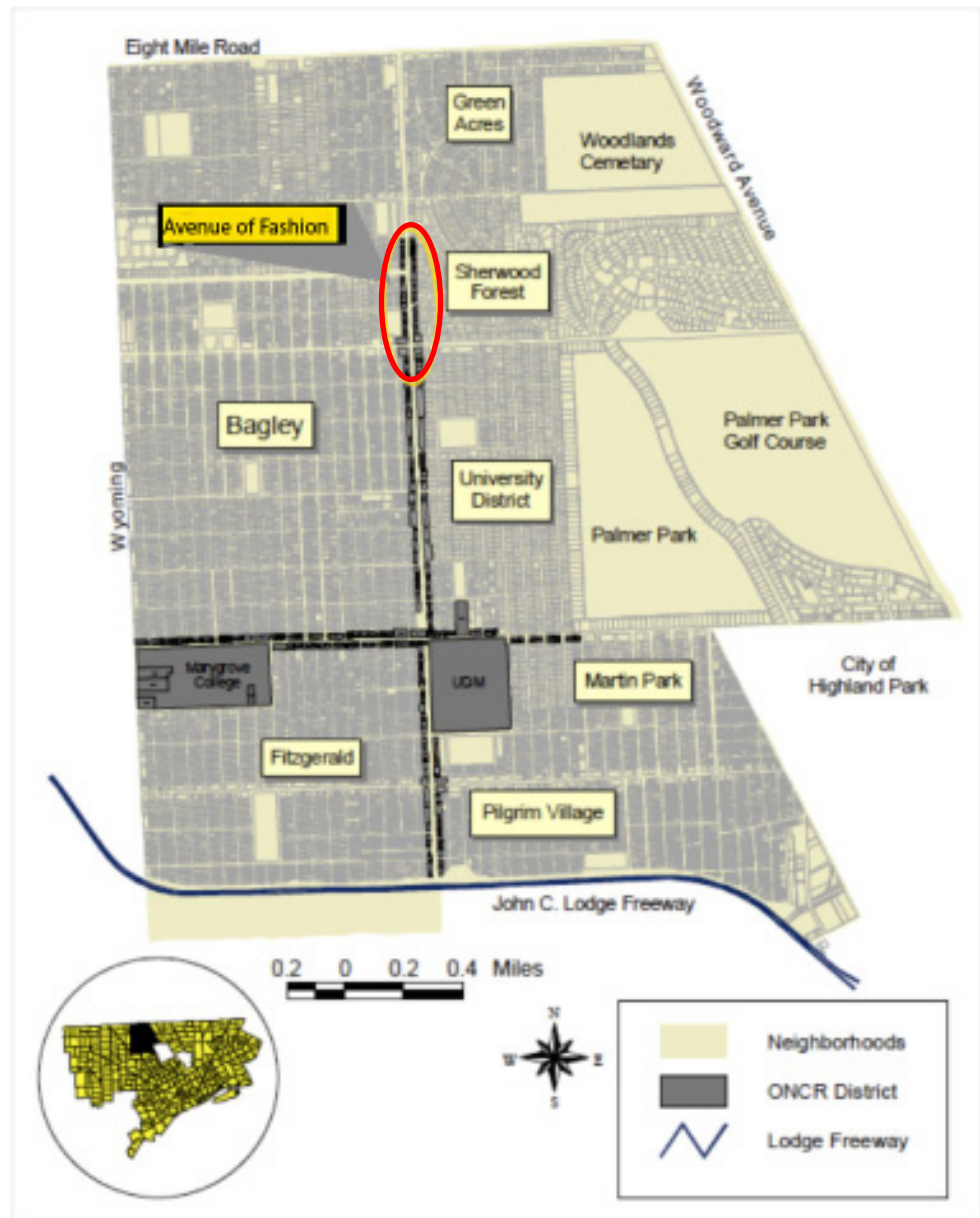


**Figure 8.3.**  
**Building**  
**conditions in**  
**the Livernois**  
**study area**

Source: ESRI, Inc; field assessment of vacant commercial property; the Detroit Planning and Development Department; Bing Maps.

Many assets remain near today’s Avenue of Fashion, such as residential neighborhoods, other retail areas, and higher education institutions. Nearby neighborhoods include: Bagley, Fitzgerald, Pilgrim Village, University District, Martin Park, Sherwood Forest, and Green Acres. The University of Detroit-Mercy (UDM) occupies large amounts of land south of the Avenue of Fashion along Livernois. Figure 8.4 shows the locations of the neighborhoods and educational institutions near the Avenue of Fashion.

**Figure 8.4. Neighborhoods surrounding the Avenue of Fashion**



Source: Kaplan and Roy, “Restoring Commercial Corridors: Revitalization Strategies for NorthStar CDC,” p. 18, (2003).

In addition to the forces changing retail districts detailed in the introduction to this plan, crime, low neighborhood patronage, poor lighting and inadequate parking hold back resurgence of the Avenue of Fashion.<sup>1</sup> The University Commons business association addresses these obstacles to development along Livernois. University Commons specifies five areas of action:

- **Design:** implement a façade program, as well as find funding and develop a plan for streetscape on Livernois and Seven Mile.
- **Economic Restructuring:** work with businesses and business associations to help find funding; present forums to help in the development and retention of existing businesses; and, recruit new business.
- **Clean and Safe:** organize clean-ups for the commercial strip; develop maintenance programs for Livernois; and work with the police department to develop a better plan for safety for customers and business owners.
- **Public Relations and Marketing:** develop a directory for the commercial corridor; develop marketing materials; and maintain and upgrade the [www.university-commons.net](http://www.university-commons.net) website.
- **Fundraising:** find funding to help University Commons become self-sustainable; develop and host golf outings, Jazz on the Ave, and University Commons' Holiday Event on Livernois; and find grants and other funding to help in the upkeep and beautification of the streetscape on Livernois.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to these activities, University Commons also surveys area residents regarding:

- What kind of businesses they would like on Livernois
- What businesses they currently support on Livernois
- What issues they would like University Commons to address on Livernois
- What issues they would like the City of Detroit and Wayne County to address on Livernois
- What activities they would like University Commons to organize

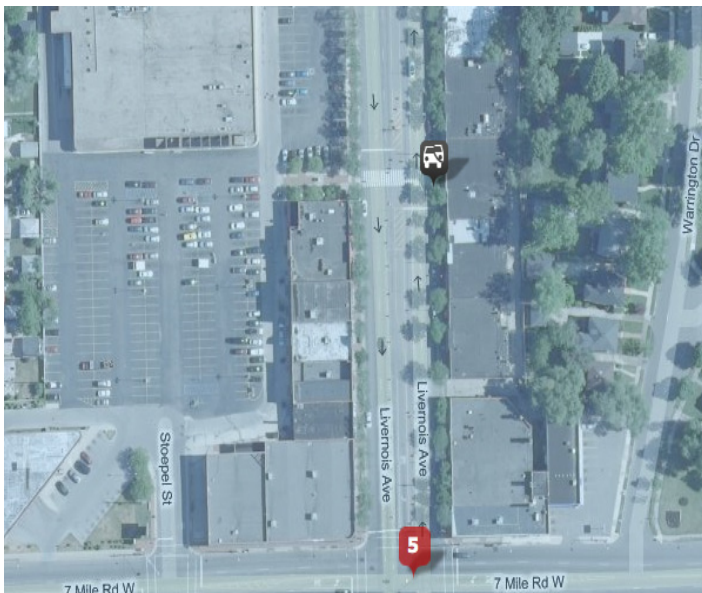
## Strategies Recommended for Livernois

With the Livernois study area’s historic context and current situation in mind, the following section recommends strategies to address commercial vacancy along the corridor. Local individuals and organizations can implement these approaches to address commercial vacancy in the Avenue of Fashion by improving safety, appearance, and owner accountability and transitioning commercial corridor activity to areas with well established and often patronized businesses. The recommendations are in order from near-term to long-term strategies.

### 1. Establish block-by-block Business Watches in commercially active areas of Livernois

A Business Watch is a group of businesses in a commercial area who, in cooperation with each other and the local police, take steps to reduce crime in commercial areas. These steps may include surveillance of the area by businesses and other nearby individuals or organizations or support sessions where businesses and police share information about crime and crime reduction tips (see Chapter 4). Livernois could benefit from three block-sized Business Watches:

**Figure 8.5. Incidence of crime at Livernois and Seven Mile**



**Note:** The red number 5 indicates that five crimes took place at this location between January and April 2010.

Source: Crimemapping.com

- on the block from Clarita to Seven Mile
- from Seven Mile to Cambridge
- from Cambridge to Outer Drive

The northernmost block of the Livernois study area, from Outer Drive to St. Martins, does not have sufficient commercial activity to support a business watch. Business Watches suit the recommended blocks because businesses with interests to protect and with the capabilities to support and monitor one another exist.

The proposed Livernois Business Watches may want to focus surveillance on the intersection of Seven Mile and Livernois. According to Detroit Police Department reports, five crimes occurred at this intersection in the four months between January and April 2010 (see Figure 8.5).

Surveillance by businesses during business hours, by local residents and community organizations' members after hours, and by video surveillance systems, may deter crime at this hot spot.

University Commons Organization is exploring the possibility of using video surveillance systems with equipment donated by Guardian Alarm and with time donated by nearby local volunteers to monitor the video from their homes. University Commons surveillance efforts are a step in the right direction and could be even more successful in cooperation with Business Watches.

## 2. Ensure visibility at key locations along Livernois

Ensuring visibility can help improve safety and the perception of safety by allowing more eyes to monitor key locations. According to Detroit Police Department reports, reported crimes took place in areas of limited visibility, with all but two of the crimes occurring in broad daylight. Enhancing visibility and surveillance of an area may reduce opportunities for crime (see Chapter 4).

To improve visibility along Livernois, business organizations could cooperate with city officials to prohibit parking in front of or near vacant buildings. Parked cars obstruct passersby's views from the street, and may create ideal locations for criminals to target their activity. The west side of Livernois just north of Clarita is a prime location for implementing this strategy because an armed robbery occurred in front of vacant buildings often blocked by parked cars (see Figure 8.6).

Business associations or business owners could also trim vegetation and cut down inappropriate vegetation to ensure visibility. Overgrown shrubs and trees block witnesses' ability to see people and activities on the street (see Figure 8.7). Ideal vegetation includes high canopy trees with branches no lower than eight feet from the ground or low-maintenance grasses that grow no higher than 18 inches. Other types of vegetation should be maintained regularly to ensure visibility and eliminate hiding places for potential predators.

**Figure 8.6. Proposed location of prohibited parallel parking**



Source: Ben Newman

**Figure 8.7. Visibility-blocking vegetation at the corner of Livernois and Outer Drive**



Source: Ben Newman

Finally, business associations or business owners can provide lighting in high-activity areas in the evening. Well-lit high activity areas increase surveillance, foster the perception of safety, and discourage would-be criminals. The parking lot north of 1917 American Bistro presents an ideal location for lighting because the restaurant remains open after dark (see Figure 8.8). Additionally, one of Livernois’s two after-dark crimes between January and April 2010 occurred here.

**Figure 8.8. 1917 American Bistro**



Source: Ben Newman

### **3. Improve the appearance of the Livernois commercial corridor**

Well-maintained vacant properties signal safety and promote both the image and activity of commercial corridors. The recommendation to improve appearance can apply to various locations along the Avenue of Fashion section of Livernois, but some buildings deserve particular

attention. In general, improving Livernois’s appearance involves addressing basic repairs, such as fixing broken windows (see Figure 8.9). University Commons works hard to improve appearance by operating clean-up and a façade improvement programs.

**Figure 8.9. Broken window on the 19400 block of Livernois**



Source: Lee Adams

Specifically, a mural on 1917 American Bistro’s blank wall could improve the appearance and safety of the restaurant, and help market the restaurant (see Chapter 5 for more detail). The blank wall on the side of 1917



American Bistro is appropriate for a mural because the wall is visible from Livernois and because a mural would draw passersby’s attention to the parking lot, which helps to improve safety.

In addition to murals, University Commons, property owners, or business owners could beautify the corridor using low-maintenance native vegetation. Low-maintenance vegetation beautifies commercial corridors by adding nature to an urban environment. University Commons or others could place street planters with native flowers along Livernois. Ideal planters do not block passersby’s view of buildings. The corner of Livernois and Cambridge illustrates a place where flower planters could help improve appearance (see Figure 8.10). For more information about native flower options, see Chapter 5.

**Figure 8.10: Potential location for native flower planters**



Source: Anne Choike

Lastly, University Commons can recognize property owners who practice outstanding upkeep (see Chapter 5). Two businesses at the southern end of the Avenue of Fashion’s west side comply with the Main Street Ordinance and keep their properties well maintained (see Figure 8.11).<sup>3</sup> University Commons can foster responsible property ownership by offering awards, rewards or incentives for good property maintenance.

**Figure 8.11. Well-maintained businesses in compliance with the Main Street Ordinance**



Source: Ben Newman

#### **4. Transition Livernois's commercial activity to a concentrated, well-established area of the corridor**

Transitioning commercial activity along Livernois from somewhat scattered businesses to clusters of businesses could help improve businesses' chances of success. Customers may be more likely to visit a retail center with multiple stores. Commercial redevelopment could focus on the area along Livernois between Outer Drive and Seven Mile Road to increase the concentration of businesses in this part of Livernois and allow emptier areas just north and south of the Avenue of Fashion to transition to other long-term uses (see Figure 8.12).

The section of Livernois from Outer Drive to Seven Mile Road is well-suited for commercial redevelopment for several reasons:

- Few incidences of crime
- Most buildings are in good condition and have lower vacancy than elsewhere (see Figure 8.12)
- Many successful new businesses, including Mike's Market, Simply Casual, and the 1917 American Bistro
- Abundance of parking: lots on both the southeast and southwest corners of Livernois and Outer Drive, a lot just north of 1917 American Bistro, Mike's Market's parking lot, and on-street parking
- Protected by a business watch; plan calls for one to be implemented here

In order to focus commercial redevelopment in this area, University Commons could focus efforts on retaining existing businesses in this area, while encouraging new businesses to locate there.

While a transition occurs, owners of vacant buildings and lots can invite temporary uses to occupy their property. For more information on temporary uses and temporary use permits, see Chapter 7. Temporary uses on Livernois can include holiday themed retail shops, seasonal shops that supply gardening and yard supplies in the spring or summer and snow removal supplies in the winter, storefront art displays, or food vendors on vacant lots. Ideal locations for a temporary uses are properties that without a use would break up continuity of businesses. The parking lot and vacant buildings on the east side of Livernois at Cambridge could accommodate temporary uses.

**Figure 8.12. Proposed retail cluster on Livernois's Avenue of Fashion**

## 5. Promote accountability of key vacant property owners

Business associations can promote owner accountability by targeting key vacant property owners. Certain vacant properties may degrade the quality of a commercial corridor due to their size, location or both. In the Livernois study area, key vacant property owners to target include the owners of two large unoccupied structures at the southwest and northwest corners of Seven Mile and Livernois in need of rehabilitation and a plan for occupation (see Figure 8.13). In the past, University Commons attempted to work with the owner of at least one of these buildings. With Detroit City Council expected to pass a vacant property registration ordinance (see Chapter 6), University Commons can renew discussions with vacant property owners to educate them that property owners who do not register vacant properties with the city can face fines, liens, and loss of property.

University Commons and nearby residents can create community agreements with property owners according to the steps in Chapter 6. The large unoccupied businesses at the corner of Livernois and Seven Mile are the best candidates for increased pressure and owner accountability techniques because of their size and importance to the vitality of that intersection.

**Figure 8.13. Large vacant properties at the corner of Seven Mile and Livernois**



Source: Ben Newman



Source: Anne Choike

Another important method for improving owner accountability is good code enforcement. Detroit's current system presents many opportunities for stronger, more effective code enforcement. Livernois-area business owners, University Commons staff and allies from across the city who hope to improve their commercial corridor can lobby for the policy changes proposed in Chapter 10.

## The Future of the Livernois Study Area

Taken together, the approaches suggested in this chapter form a plan for Livernois's Avenue of Fashion. The plan transforms the Avenue of Fashion from its current state with numerous businesses and some vacancy into a safer and more aesthetically appealing corridor where responsible property owners and businesses can conduct commerce in a concentrated, vibrant area. With the implementation of these approaches, Livernois's Avenue of Fashion has the potential to become a destination for many more Detroiters. Figure 8.14 presents an example of the approaches from this chapter implemented on the Avenue of Fashion.

While all of the recommended approaches are important, certain approaches are higher short-term priorities than others. With limited resources, University Commons could focus on winning little battles until additional financial or legislative resources become available. University Commons can help establish business watches with little monetary investment within one year. University Commons can improve visibility and appearance within one to three years with a slightly more significant investment and through the use of grants, such as the façade improvement grants the organization currently uses. Transitioning businesses towards more active areas and promoting owner accountability may take more time to implement than the other approaches because outside forces, such as property owner interests and the City of Detroit departments, are involved. University Commons will need to involve vacant commercial property owners, nearby residents, and potential retailers to implement these approaches. For more information on community participation, see Chapter 3.

The approaches recommended in this chapter could also work in similar, mostly-occupied business districts in Detroit. Chapter 9 outlines recommended strategies for an eight-block study area along East Warren Avenue, an area with high vacancy and disinvestment.

**Figure 8.14. Possible changes in the Avenue of Fashion**



- **Increase Lighting**
- ⋮ **Trim Vegetation**
- **Key Building for Owner Accountability**
- ★ **Mural Opportunity**
- Ⓡ **Disallow Parking until Building is Occupied**
- ↔ **Business Watch Block**
- **Proposed Retail Cluster**

Source: Google Map; field assessment of vacant commercial property

## Notes

1. Jason Kaplan and Paula Roy. "Restoring Commercial Corridors: Revitalization Strategies for NorthStar CDC," University of Michigan Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, 2003.
2. University Commons, "University Commons Organization Mission Statement." [www.universitycommonsdetroit.org](http://www.universitycommonsdetroit.org).
3. Kim Tandy, (University Commons), in discussion with the authors, January 14, 2010.





# Chapter 9

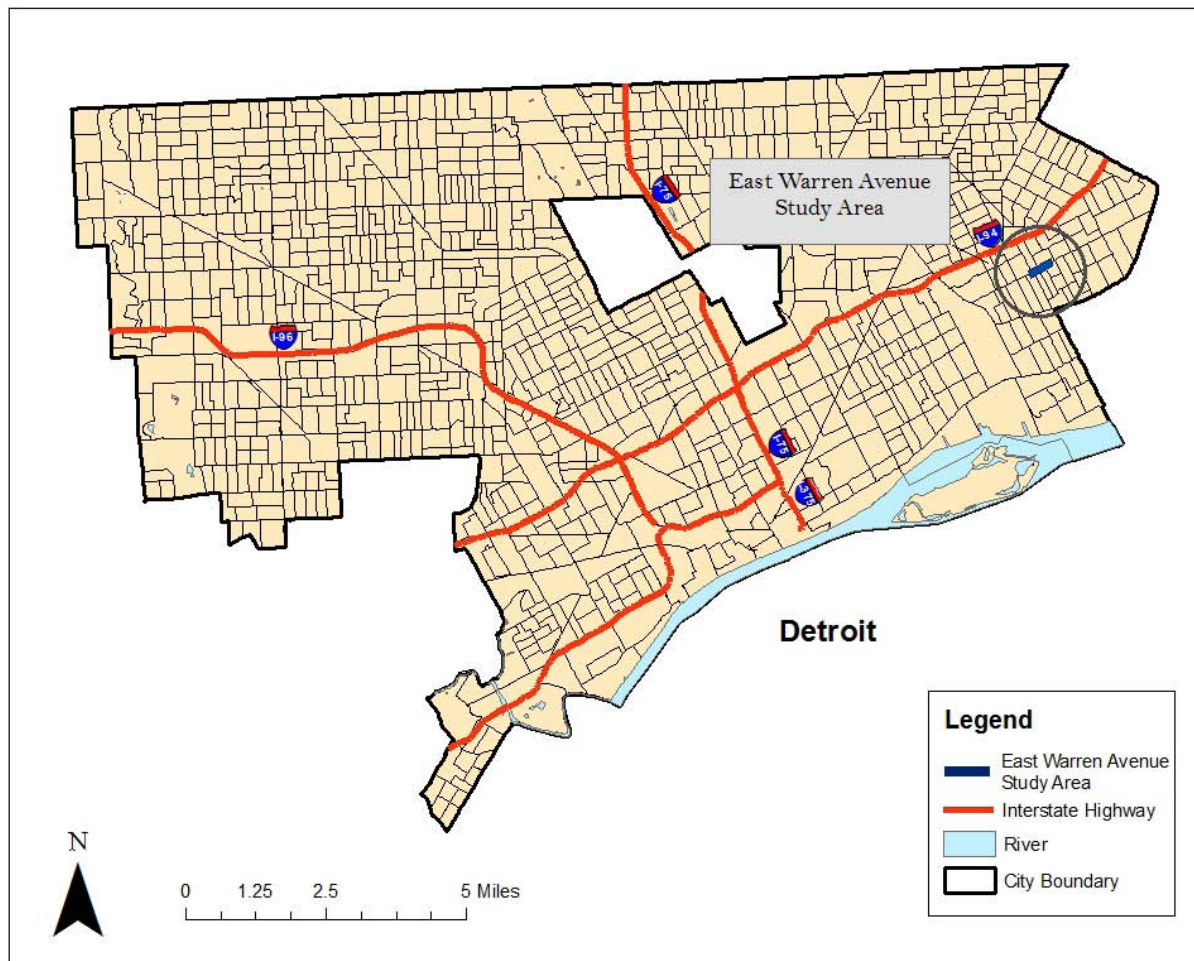
## Developing a Plan for East Warren

This chapter provides a plan to apply strategies from Chapters 4 through 7 to an eight-block section of East Warren Avenue between Alter Road and Balfour Drive (see Figure 9.1). In contrast to Livernois' "Avenue of Fashion," this portion of the East Warren corridor represents an area of high vacancy and disinvestment. Circumstances in this area of East Warren call for strategies that address immediate concerns, while encouraging future businesses to locate in denser parts of the commercial corridor. Business associations, community organizations, and others working in Detroit districts experiencing similar disinvestment can use parts of this plan to address commercial vacancy in those areas. The following provides a brief background of the East Warren commercial corridor, describes East Warren Avenue's vacancy issues, describes the actions of area organizations to address commercial vacancy, and presents additional strategies area organizations can implement to address commercial vacancy.

### **Historical context and current situation**

The East Warren Avenue study area conveys little sense of the times when Detroit experienced better economic conditions. As people left the city and shopping habits changed, neighborhood commercial districts experienced obsolescence. This change resulted in many derelict buildings and neglected properties in the area. High vacancy and dilapidated buildings now dominate a formerly vibrant area. The eight-block area was chosen for its particularly high amounts of vacancy

**Figure 9.1 East Warren study area location**



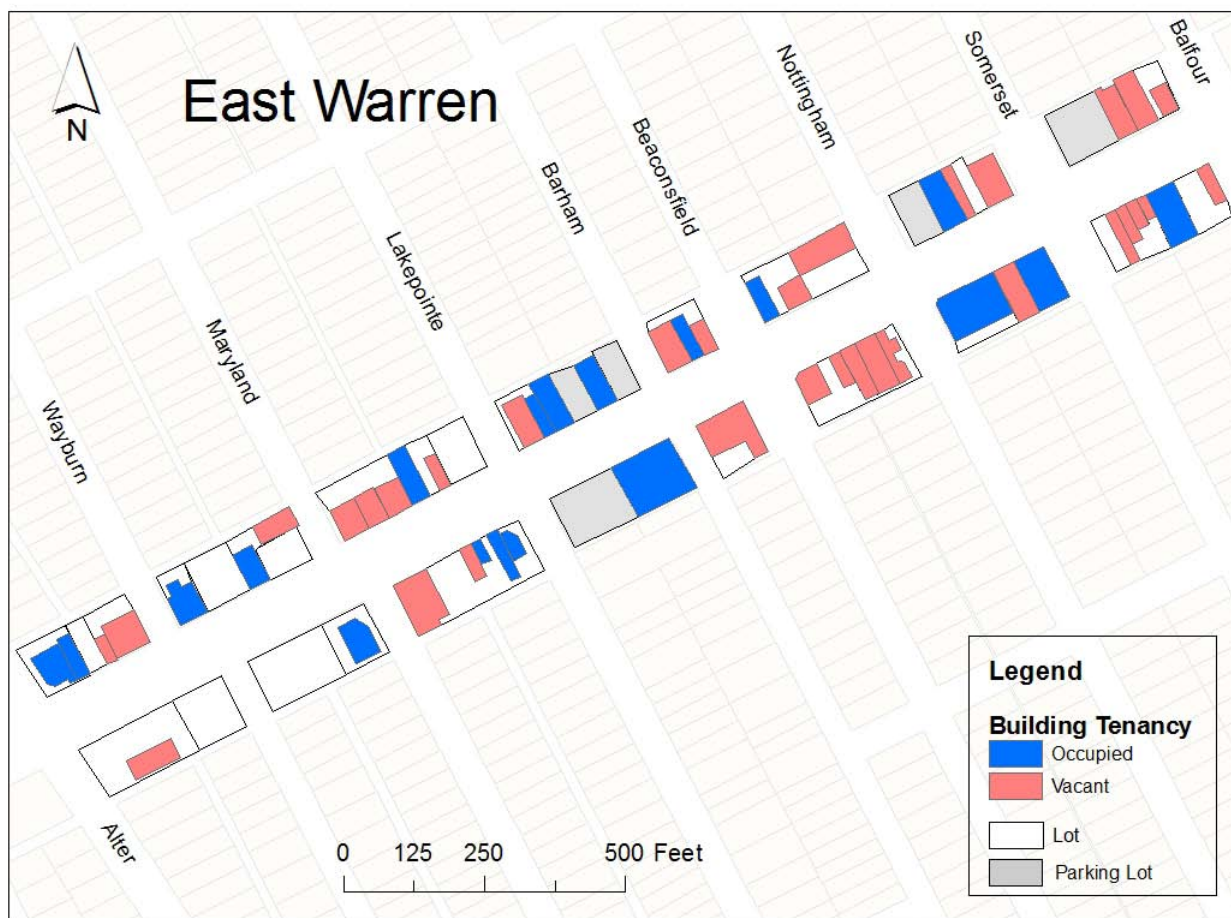
Source: ESRI, Inc [www.esri.com](http://www.esri.com)

unlike other sections of East Warren that are more densely populated with businesses. See Figure 9.2 for a map of vacancy within the study area.

While the area has many vacant lots and shuttered storefronts, several partner organizations work to help revive the area.<sup>1</sup> United Streets Networking and Planning: Building a Community (U-SNAP-BAC), a community development corporation, has worked to revitalize a large area of Detroit’s eastside for over 20 years. Its efforts now include the CEM Business Association (CEMBA). Both the MorningSide and East English Village neighborhood associations are active participants in CEMBA.

Through its commercial revitalization program, CEMBA addresses the business areas on East Warren from Alter Road to Mack in the following ways:

Figure 9.2 Vacancy in the study area of East Warren



Source: ESRI, Inc; field assessment of vacant commercial property; the Detroit Planning and Development Department; Bing Maps.

- assisting the business community in developing a common vision and strategy
- helping make the commercial district clean and safe
- promoting the district and its businesses among potential customers with festival or retail events
- improving the appearance of the district's buildings, businesses, and signs using the façade grant program administered by the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Commercial Revitalization (ONCR) of Detroit
- aiding businesses by providing information on capital assistance programs, such as small business microloans
- working to create and execute redevelopment opportunities<sup>2</sup>

CEMBA's efforts resulted in new businesses, cleaner building exteriors, improved landscaping, improved streetlighting, and new trash cans.<sup>3</sup> Thanks to CEMBA with help from ONCR, parts of East Warren have a bright future.

The East Warren study area represents a less active part of East Warren where CEMBA and U-SNAP-BAC have not focused revitalization efforts. Their concentration of efforts on more active areas of East Warren corresponds with strategies described in Chapter 7 to transition some blocks to more viable forms of land use.

**Figure 9.3 Logo and schedule of CEMBA farmer's market along East Warren**

## 2010 East Warren Ave Farmers Market



Saturdays

June 12th – October 2nd, minus July 3rd

10:00 am – 3:00 pm



Source: <http://cembusiness.wordpress.com/>, accessed June 5, 2010.

Business associations, community organizations, neighborhood residents, and other non-profits can use the following strategies in districts with a high percentage of vacant commercial buildings and lots in order to maintain these areas while transitioning to alternative uses over time.

## Strategies Recommended for East Warren

The following sections offer recommendations for the East Warren study area. The recommendations are ordered from highest priority to lower priority based on their potential to address commercial vacancy.

### 1. Prioritize code complaints

All buildings, vacant or occupied, shall comply with building codes. Code violations can worsen the physical condition of a commercial corridor. Many violations exist along this eight-block section of East Warren, but the Department of Buildings and Safety Engineering (BSE) can handle only a limited number of complaints. Business owners and CEMBA staff can coordinate to determine which code violations concern them the most. CEMBA, with the backing of its business members, may be more likely to receive a response from BSE because complaints would represent the concerns of a group and not just individuals and because CEMBA could organize efforts to make a large number of

complaints about specific buildings. This method could help build a better relationship with BSE and help address future violations. Figure 9.4 shows a structure with dangling razor wire that can cause injuries and degrades the appearance of the corridor.

The following properties, highlighted in Figure 9.5, represent code-violation priorities:

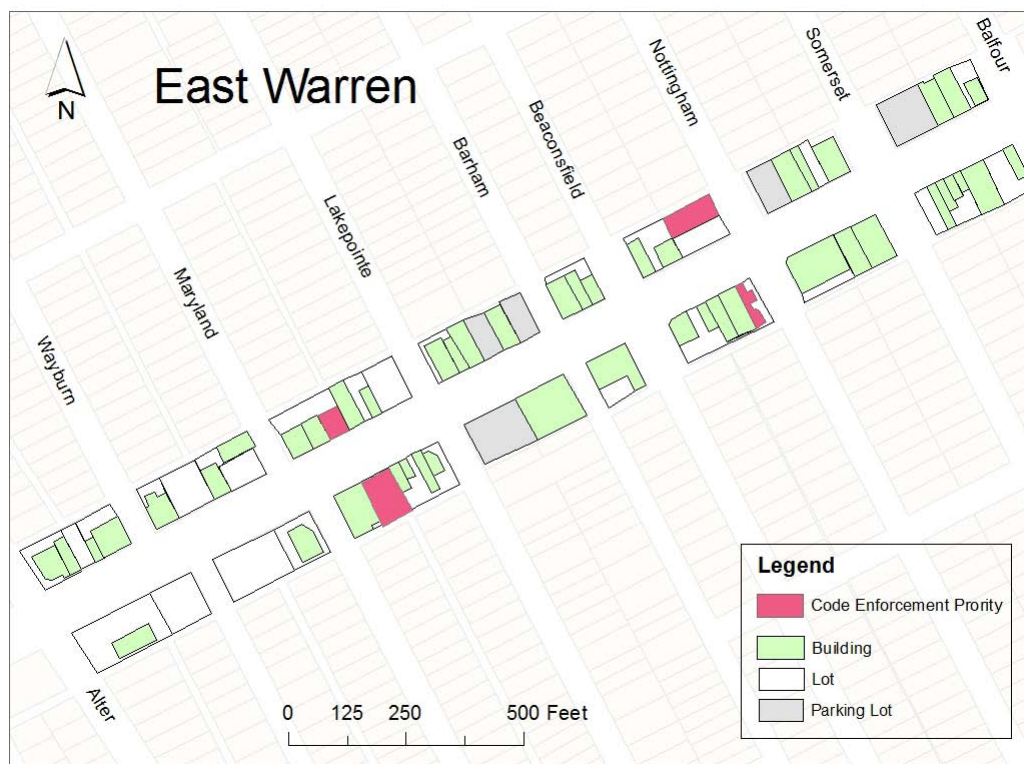
- The Accident and Injury Clinic building at 15123 East Warren between Maryland Street and Lakepointe Street is unsecured. An individual could enter the building and use it for squatting or other illegal activities, putting themselves and others in danger because the building is damaged and possibly unstable.
- The vacant lot next to Michigan Auto Wholesale at 15100 East Warren between Maryland Street and Lakepointe Street has abandoned cars and miscellaneous metal objects that present a hazard to neighbors and visitors.
- The building on the north side of East Warren Avenue between Beaconsfield Street and Nottingham Road with dangling razor wire (Figure 9.4) presents a public safety hazard.
- The lot on the southwest corner of East Warren Avenue and Nottingham Road because dumping of property can attract criminal activity and lead to more dumping.

**Figure 9.4 High priority code violation**



Source: Erin Evenhouse and Xiqing Lin

**Figure 9.5 Map of high-priority code violations**



Source: ESRI, Inc; field assessment of vacant commercial property; the Detroit Planning and Development Department; Bing Maps

If owners of vacant commercial property continue to ignore their responsibility to maintain their property, U-SNAP-BAC or CEMBA representatives can approach property owners themselves (see Chapter 2 for determining ownership). If a code violation citation already exists, U-SNAP-BAC or CEMBA representatives can contact officials at the Department of Administrative Hearings (DAH) about pursuing negligent property owners. These efforts can help focus limited code enforcement resources and help eliminate redundancies. Representatives can contact DAH by telephone at (313) 224-0098.

## 2. Improve safety by securing vacant buildings

Unsecured vacant buildings present a threat to public safety (see Chapter 4). Businesses near open vacant buildings may attract fewer customers due to perceptions of crime. CEMBA can reduce threats to public safety and improve perceptions of the business district by helping prevent access to unsecured vacant buildings. A secured vacant building has potential entry points closed to unauthorized access, has utilities properly shut-off, and contains no combustible material.

Figure 9.7 identifies unsecured vacant properties. Highlighted buildings include:

- the Accident and Injury Clinic building between Maryland Street and Lakepointe Street (see Figure 9.6).
- the top floor of the building on the southeast corner of East Warren and Barham Street.

**Figure 9.6 Open and unsecured building**

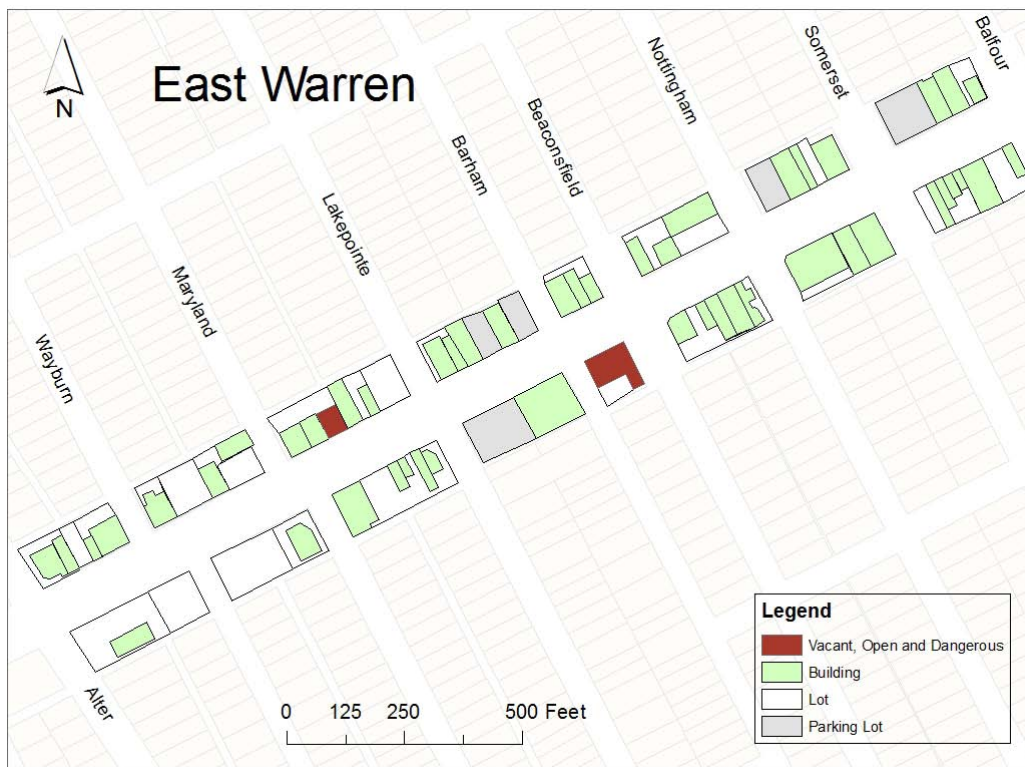


Source: Erin Evenhouse and Xiqing Lin

CEMBA can take a number of steps to secure vacant structures:

- Work closely with BSE and with private security contractors to board up and secure buildings.
- Contact DTE Energy customer service at (800) 477-4747 to schedule an appointment for a company representative to visit buildings to verify proper shut-off of utilities.
- Create a partnership with the Detroit Fire Department to identify potential fire hazards.
- Ask owners of occupied businesses adjacent to vacant structures to report hazards to BSE. For complete information on code violation prioritization see .

**Figure 9.7 Vacant, open and dangerous buildings**



Source: ESRI, Inc; field assessment of vacant commercial property; the Detroit Planning and Development Department; Bing Maps

### 3. Improve building appearance by painting murals

Blank walls along a commercial corridor offer an opportunity to improve appearance. Large bright murals draw attention to businesses and can provide an inexpensive advertising option for nearby businesses. Painting murals on select walls can make East Warren more pleasing while the area transitions to different uses over time. Placing a mural in a highly visible area, such as a wall adjacent to a stop sign, can help give passersby a positive perception of the area. CEMBA has worked with Summer in the City to paint several murals on East Warren. See Chapter 5 for more information about murals as a beautification technique. Figure 9.8 shows a mural on American Street in Philadelphia, PA.

**Figure 9.8 Mural replaces a blank wall**



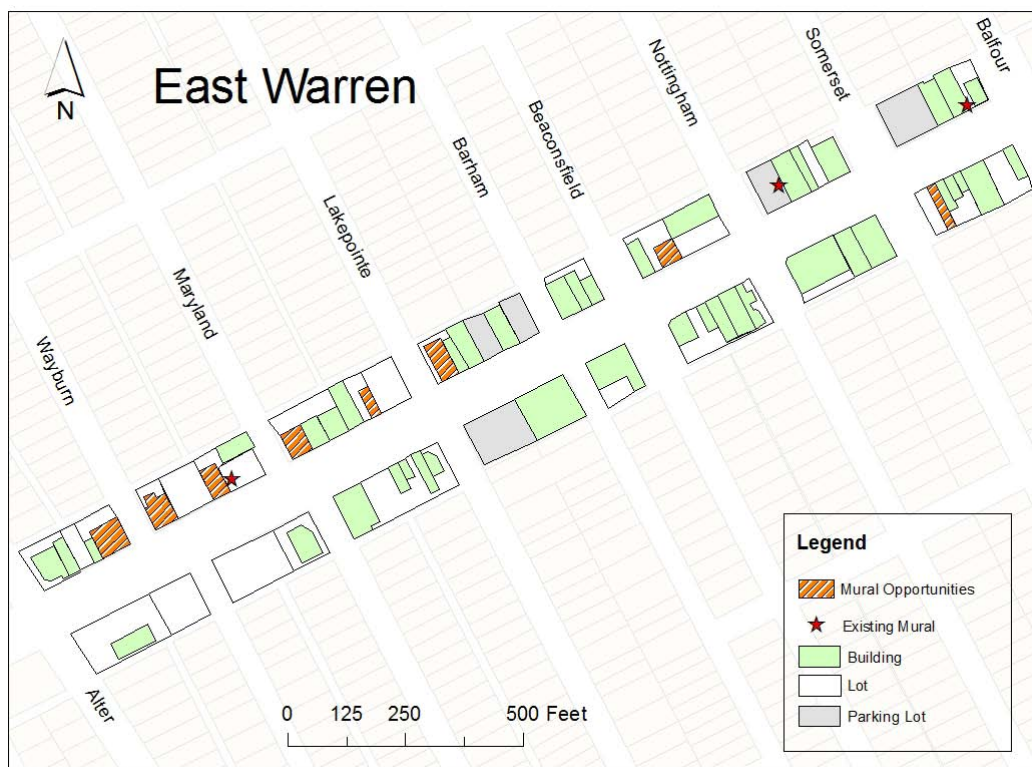
Source: Jane Golden et al., *More Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell*.

The following buildings along East Warren Avenue between Alter Road and Balfour Drive are good candidates for murals. They have large blank walls and high visibility from the street. These and others are shown on the map in Figure 9.9.

- the Ricardo’s building at the northeast corner of East Warren Avenue and Maryland Street
- the Mountain Tire Service building at 15141 East Warren Avenue between Maryland Street and Lakepointe Street
- the Black Bottom Lounge building at the northeast corner of East Warren Avenue and Lakepointe Street
- the building on the north side of East Warren Avenue between Beaconsfield Street and Nottingham Road
- the building just off the southeast corner of East Warren Avenue and Somerset Avenue

To start a mural project in the East Warren business district, CEMBA could again partner with Summer in the City or partner with a local artist who specializes in murals. Detroit muralist Martin LaPrise specializes in painting commercial buildings. Mr. LaPrise painted many buildings in Detroit. His contact information is: telephone : (586) 567-0181, e-mail : murals@martinlaprise.net, website: <http://www.martinlapriseviscous.net>.

**Figure 9.9 Potential mural locations**



Source: ESRI, Inc; field assessment of vacant commercial property; the Detroit Planning and Development Department; Bing Maps



#### 4. Improve appearance by landscaping vacant lots

As noted in Chapter 5, attractively planting unkempt lots with vegetation conveys surveillance in vacant areas. CEMBA can use landscaping on vacant lots to help fill in vacant areas and support existing businesses. Figure 9.10 depicts vacant lots suitable for low-maintenance landscaping. These lots have large unpaved areas near existing businesses.

CEMBA can contact The Greening of Detroit ([www.greeningofdetroit.com](http://www.greeningofdetroit.com)) to help landscape suitable lots. The lot currently used as a community garden at the southwest corner of Wayburn and East Warren can remain a community garden or transition to low-maintenance landscaping if the garden becomes more of a burden than an asset for the business district. Chapter 5 provides more information about appropriate types of landscaping for transition areas. The Greening of Detroit's contact information is:

telephone: (313) 237-8733, e-mail: [info@greeningofdetroit.com](mailto:info@greeningofdetroit.com).

**Figure 9.10 Vacant lots suitable for low-maintenance landscaping**

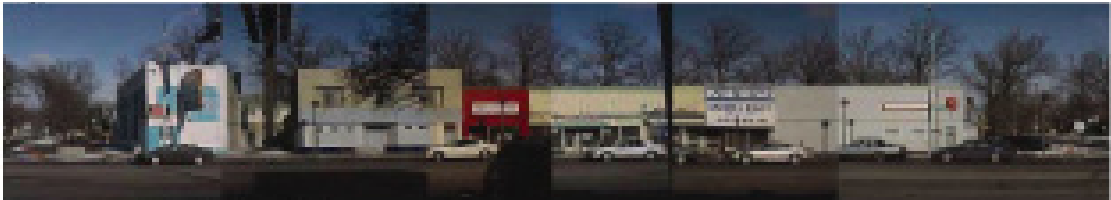


Source: Google Maps; Xiqing Lin

## 5. Transition commercial corridor uses by rezoning land

Given the significant vacancy present in the East Warren study area, a long-term strategy to transition uses could help focus businesses further east along East Warren.

**Figure 9.11 Area further east on East Warren where CEMBA can continue to encourage business growth**



Source: Conaway et. al, "East Warren Commercial Revitalization: A Strategy to Realize District Vitality," p. 6, (2004).

CEMBA can petition the Detroit City Planning Commission and the Detroit City Council to rezone this area to an open space designation. An open space zoning designation can encourage business owners to relocate operations in denser parts of the district, farther east, beyond Balfour Road. Current business owners could remain in the study area as nonconforming uses, while individuals seeking to start new ventures or business owners looking to expand could locate in commercially-zoned areas. Chapter 7 provides more detail for this strategy.

## 6. Expand clean team programming

CEMBA coordinates a Clean Team crew that cleans sidewalks and curbs twice a week. The Clean Team operates along a more densely occupied part of East Warren stretching from Devonshire east to Mack Avenue. Businesses fund the team by contributing \$312 per year per business.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 9.12 CEMBA Clean Team Member logo**



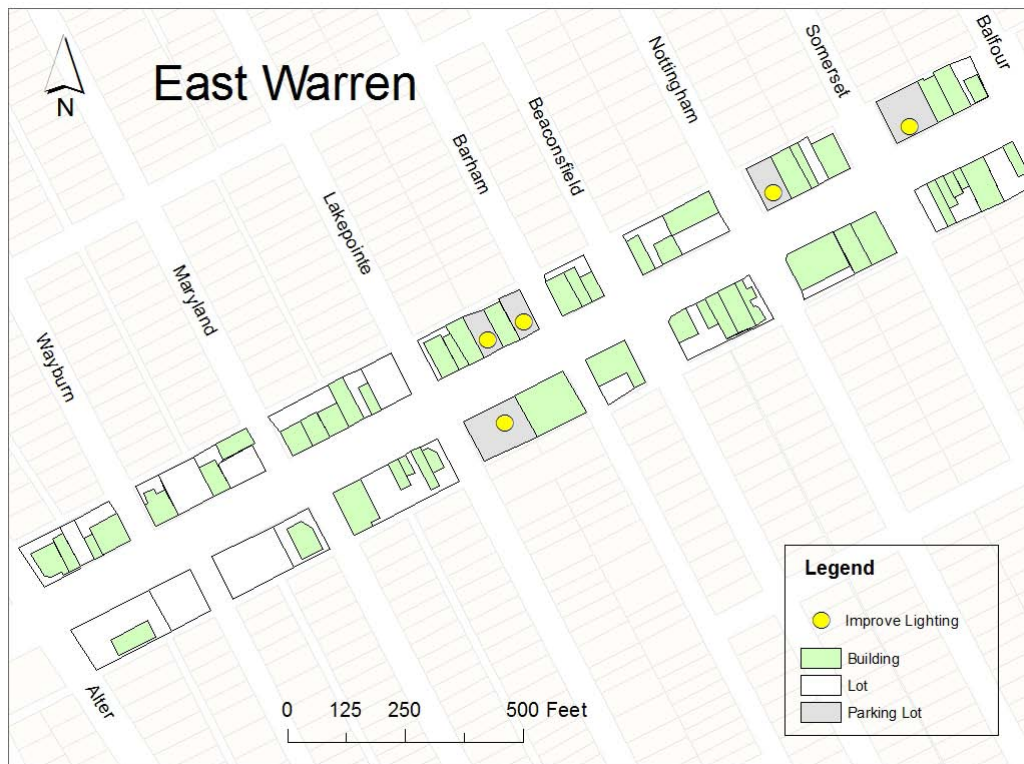
While the area from Alter to Balfour does not have the density of businesses to fund such a team, CEMBA or U-SNAP-BAC could pursue strategies to develop similar programming. Business owners in the area could volunteer to join the clean team and help clean areas near their business. Business owners in the area could also form their own version of a Clean Team or clean and safe task force. See Chapter 3 for more information about organizing volunteers and Chapter 5 for more information about improving corridor appearance.

Source: <http://cembusiness.wordpress.com/>, accessed June 5, 2010

## 7. Improve Lighting

Adequate lighting can improve safety and the perception of safety. Many places along the corridor need improved lighting because of the safety risks associated with poor lighting. CEMBA can lobby the City of Detroit Public Lighting Department for more lights along the commercial corridor. The Department of Public Lighting can be contacted at (313) 267-7202. See Figure 9.14 for locations of lighting opportunities. Potential locations for additional or new lighting are parking lots adjacent to active businesses. Lighting these areas can help improve safety and the perception of safety for customers.

**Figure 9.13 Areas for improved lighting**



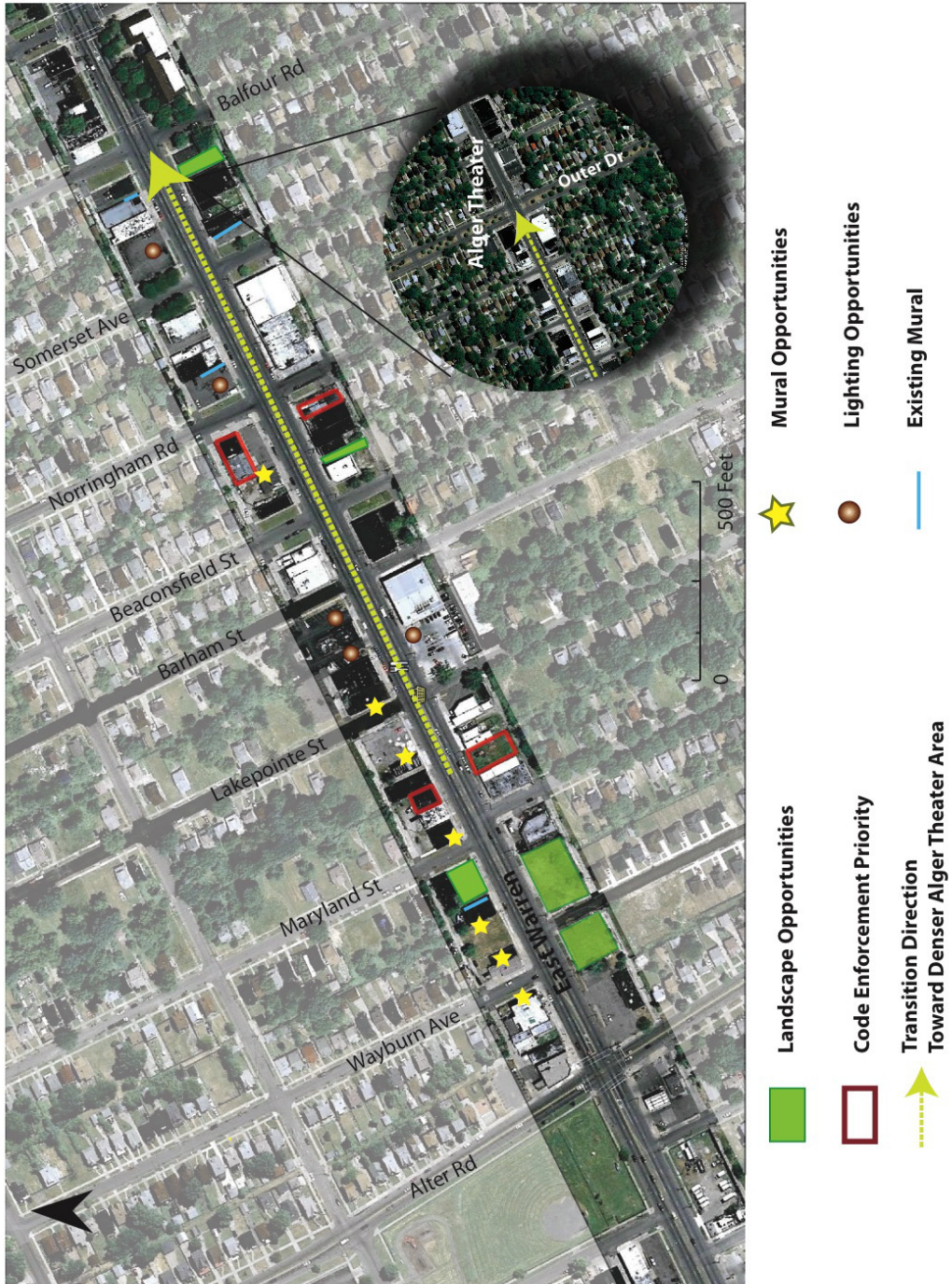
Source: ESRI, Inc; field assessment of vacant commercial property; the Detroit Planning and Development Department; Bing Maps

## **A New Direction for the East Warren Study Area**

The recommendations in this chapter can help CEMBA and neighborhood residents address commercial vacancy in the East Warren study area by creating a cleaner, safer, more attractive, and more viable East Warren. These strategies can serve as an example for commercial corridors with similar conditions. Strategies to prioritize code complaints, secure vacant buildings, paint murals, landscape lots and expand the Clean Team program can help improve safety and appearance over the next three years. Improving lighting will also help improve safety and appearance, but may take longer to implement, roughly three to five years, because it requires significant action from city departments. Transitioning businesses out of the area into denser commercial districts is a long term solution for the corridor that will take several years for full implementation. In the long run, the East Warren study area can function as a transitional area between active parts of the corridor. Figure 9.15 presents a complete vision for the East Warren study area.

Current policies and procedures impede the implementation of some additional strategies to addresses commercial vacancy. Chapter 10 suggests ways to change current policies and procedures to improve grassroots efforts to address commercial vacancy.

Figure 9.14 A vision for the East Warren study area



Source: Google Map; assessment of vacant commercial property

## Notes

- 1 Model D, "Restoring East Warren," <http://www.modeldmedia.com/features/ewarren11407.aspx>, accessed May 7, 2010.
- 2 City of Detroit, Office of Neighborhood Commercial Revitalization, <http://www.detroitmi.gov/DepartmentsandAgencies/OfficeofNeighborhoodCommercialRevitalization/AboutUs/tabid/360/Default.aspx>, accessed June 12, 2010.
- 3 Model D, "Restoring East Warren," <http://www.modeldmedia.com/features/ewarren11407.aspx>, accessed May 7, 2010.
- 4 CEM Business Association, "Clean Team," <http://cembusiness.wordpress.com/clean-team/> accessed June 11, 2010.

# Chapter 10

## Improving Policies and Procedures

Business associations, business owners, community organizations, nearby residents, and other non-profits can use strategies from Chapters 4 through 7 to address commercial vacancy and help achieve these goals:

- improve safety and the perception of safety
- improve appearance
- transition commercial corridor activity
- promote commercial property owner accountability

This chapter outlines four specific policy and procedural changes that could help grassroots groups and city officials address commercial vacancy. Of the goals listed, promoting property owner accountability offers perhaps the most potential for policy and procedural changes to improve vacant commercial areas. The first three changes in this chapter primarily address property owner accountability; the fourth addresses crime. Business associations, local organizations, and non-profits can advocate for these changes. Additionally, Community Legal Resources could assist grassroots efforts to change policies and procedures, as they have done already with the Detroit Vacant Property Registration Ordinance (VPRO).

### **Strategy: Require vacant property owners to file a “statement of intent”**

A city requirement that vacant property owners file a “statement of intent” could help achieve all four stated goals for addressing vacant commercial property. A “statement of intent” includes property and

ownership information and details a plan and time-line for occupying and rehabilitating vacant nuisance properties. This strategy requires enabling legislation before implementation.

Vacant property owners complete a “statement of intent” and file the “statement of intent” with the administering city department(s). Failure of the owner to make a good faith effort to implement his or her stated plan within a predetermined period of time results in administrative penalties or prosecution.

Policy requiring Detroit’s vacant commercial property owners to file an enforceable “statement of intent” can do the following:

- develop owner accountability by creating penalties for owners who fail to comply
- improve district safety and appearance if owners follow through on their plans for investing in their properties
- promote the active use of properties by pressing owners to reuse and maintain their properties or creating an incentive for them to lease or sell their properties to individuals who will invest in them

To make a “statement of intent” strategy possible in Detroit, Detroit City Council can pass an ordinance requiring all vacant property owners to file a “statement of intent” with the City of Detroit and granting the City’s

### **San Diego’s “statement of intent” system**

San Diego created the San Diego Municipal Code Section 54.0315 Article 4: Public Hazards and Public Nuisances, Division 3: Abatement of Vacant Structures to create an efficient way of dealing with nuisance vacant properties.<sup>1</sup> San Diego’s code defines characteristics of these vacant nuisance properties, and obligates nuisance property owners to file a “statement of intent” form.

The code grants the director of the San Diego Neighborhood Code Compliance Department, or any other director identified by the San Diego city manager, authority to administer and enforce the code against vacant nuisance property owners. Multiple authorities allow administrative resolution of problem properties. The Neighborhood Code Compliance Department or other authorized San Diego city personnel can learn of nuisance properties through neighborhood watch groups, community planning groups, police officers, and other residents.<sup>2</sup>

If a property owner fails to follow the code, San Diego can fine the property owner or charge the owner with a misdemeanor. If the property owner files out the “statement of intent” form but does not demonstrate a good faith and diligent effort to implement the plan, the city officials can assess the following penalties, up to \$5000.00 per structure in a calendar year:

- \$500.00 for the first 90 days
- \$1000.00 for the next 90 days
- \$1500.00 for the next 90 days
- \$2000.00 for the next 90 days<sup>3</sup>



Corporation Counsel or the Department of Administrative Hearings authority to prosecute or penalize non-compliant vacant property owners.<sup>4</sup>

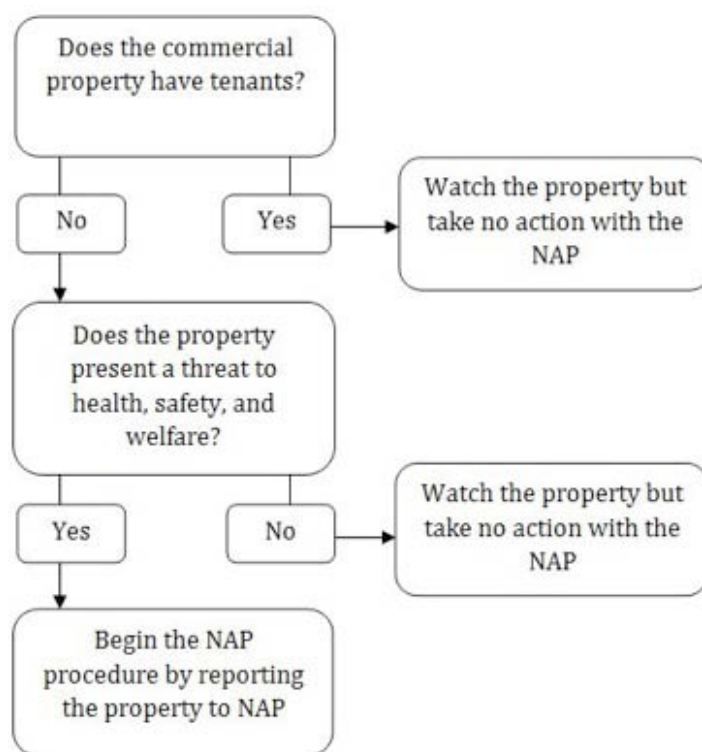
### **Strategy: Start a city nuisance abatement program and/or restart the county one**

A nuisance abatement program can help make commercial property owners accountable. The Wayne County Nuisance Abatement Program (NAP) recently disbanded due to lack of funding.<sup>5</sup> Before it ended, the NAP filed lawsuits against problematic commercial properties. If city officials want to create a nuisance abatement program, they should consider whether they can do so under existing city code or if it would require new legislation. Officials could also consider seeking to reinstate a new version of the Wayne County nuisance abatement program. For example, the county could pursue a nuisance abatement program using volunteer lawyers to help offset costs.

Figure 10.1 shows a decision tree that Wayne County's NAP used to determine whether a vacant property qualified as a nuisance. Future nuisance abatement programs could use this decision tree as a model. Further criteria that designated a property as a nuisance included a history of crime, "open trespass, broken windows, rodents, missing doors, overgrown lawns and garbage."<sup>6</sup>

Once the NAP decided a property constituted a nuisance, the Nuisance Abatement Team filed a lawsuit against the last known property owner(s). Property owners and the NAP often reached resolutions out of court to abate the nuisance. Property owners devised schedules to abate nuisances by selling, fixing, or demolishing a building. Property owners needed to implement the nuisance abatement plan within three to nine months.

**Figure 10.1 NAP decision tree**



Source: Michael D. Russel, Assistant Wayne County Corporation Counsel, April 15, 2010.

If the property owner refused to cooperate, then the NAP could obtain title to the property through court action. Additionally, the NAP could obtain title to a property when an owner did not comply with the signed schedule to abate the nuisance. After obtaining title to a property, the NAP auctioned the property online. Purchasers of auctioned properties paid back taxes and outstanding water bills and signed schedules to abate the nuisance. Failure of the new property owner to comply with the NAP's conditions resulted in the property's returning to the NAP.<sup>7</sup>

### **Strategy: Process worst code violations as criminal infractions**

**Figure 10.2: A successful reinvestment due to the NAP, 3574 Second Avenue in Detroit**



Source: Wayne County, Michigan <http://www.waynecounty.com/nap/index.aspx>, accessed May 25, 2010

Processing the worst code violators criminally could help promote commercial property owner accountability. In Detroit, the transition from processing code violations as criminal to civil violations helped reduce a backlog on the courts. But it also took some strength out of code violation tickets (see Chapter 6). Property owners who don't maintain their properties assist criminal activity, as vacant and unmaintained properties attract crime. For cases when a particular property owner has a history of code violations, Detroit's Corporation Counsel could prosecute these owners under a criminal recklessness standard. The majority of code violations could still remain in the Department of Administrative Hearings.

## **Strategy: Implement a conditional bond program for commercial areas**

Criminals sometimes repeatedly victimize the same business.

Businesses where crimes occur repeatedly can account for a majority of all crime in an area.<sup>8</sup> To reduce crime in vacant commercial areas, a conditional bond program can discourage repeat offenders from returning to designated districts.

Judges often issue conditional bonds in domestic crime cases – such as battery, assault, and criminal trespass – to protect domestic crime victims. Judges could also use conditional bonds for offenses that take place in a commercial district to protect businesses. After an offender commits a crime in the designated area, a court could offer bond on the condition that police can arrest an offender if he or she reenters the commercial district for any reason other than employment purposes.

A conditional bond program requires the cooperation of local law enforcement, judges and prosecutors, and nearby residents or organizations. For example, nearby community organization or business watch (see Chapter 4) members could help short-staffed law enforcement by watching for repeat offenders listed on a “conditional bond” watch list. Community organization or business watch members could take pictures to document violations and provide these pictures to the police department or prosecutor’s office to help enforce a conditional bond program.

### **Curtailing crime through a conditional bond program: Ypsilanti, Michigan**

A new conditional bond program experienced success in Ypsilanti, Michigan. The program in Ypsilanti’s Harriet Street commercial district resulted in a significant drop in area crime. Before the conditional bond program, the commercial district “was the site of numerous fights, public drunkenness, theft and loitering. These issues made the area unattractive to other businesses, and the blocks surrounding it suffered from increasing blight.” In response to these issues, the police department and city attorney implemented a conditional bond program, enabling police officers to issue tickets based on criteria such as public intoxication and open alcohol containers. “By 2006, reported assaults fell more than half from five years prior, and disorderly conduct charges declined by two-thirds.”<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter proposed two policy changes and two procedural changes that could help address commercial vacancy issues in Detroit. Many more policy and procedural changes that could improve grassroots and city-level efforts to address commercial vacancy exist. Community Legal Resources works on improving policy and procedures and is an excellent resource for someone looking for additional ways to improve policies and procedures.

Overall, this plan investigated and assessed the conditions of vacant commercial property. Following the assessment, the plan proposed strategies to achieve defined goals for addressing vacant commercial property. The plan then used portions of two commercial corridors in Detroit to illustrate ways to implement the proposed strategies as part of an overall plan for a district. Business associations, neighborhood groups and individuals can implement the strategies outlined in this plan. Despite the complexity and scale of issues related to vacant commercial property in Detroit, grassroots efforts can do much to accomplish the goals.

## Notes

1. City of San Diego, "Statement of Intent Form," <http://docs.sandiego.gov/municode/MuniCodeChapter05/Ch05Art04Division03.pdf>; <http://www.sandiego.gov/nccd/pdf/intent.pdf> accessed March 2, 2010.
2. Diane Silva-Martinez, "San Diego's Response to the Foreclosure Crisis," San Diego City Attorney's Office, <http://www.sandiego.gov/nccd/housing/vacant.shtml> accessed May 10, 2010.
3. City of San Diego, <http://docs.sandiego.gov/municode/MuniCodeChapter05/Ch05Art04Division03.pdf>; accessed March 2, 2010
4. Detroit Department of Administrative Hearings, <http://www.detroitmi.gov/DepartmentsandAgencies/LawDepartment/AboutUs/tabid/320/Default.aspx> accessed March 25, 2010.
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## Vacancy Assessment Survey

Date :

Parcel ID #	
Neighborhood:	
Address:	
Cannot Identify Address:	Between Address _____ and _____
Between Streets:	_____ and _____

**1. Tenancy:** (for parcel w/ buildings)

Vacant    Occupied   Justifications (see codes): \_\_\_\_\_

**(A)**   **(B)**   **(C)**   **(D)**

**2. Lot condition:**(If applicable, please see descriptions)

**3. Building Conditions:**(If applicable, see descriptions)

**4. Block Activity:** (Please see descriptions)

**Assessment Descriptions:**

(1) Tenancy: "Parcel w/ Building" is a parcel with a structure. Common characteristics of a vacant building: water damage (**WD**); fire damage (**FD**); boarded or broken windows (**BW**); major structural damage (**SD**); long-term security measures (bolted doors, chain locks, barbed wire) (**SC**); no signage (**NS**); damaged signage (**DS**); for sale/ for lease sign (**FS**); graffiti (**G**); eviction notice (**EV**); empty interior (**EI**); trashed interior (**TI**); or under construction (**UC**). Common characteristics of occupied buildings: lighting (**L**); open/closed sign (**OS**); new or well-kept signage (**S**); recent construction, recent repairs, recent remodeling (**RC**); visible activity (**VA**). Characteristics requiring investigation: roll-down doors, old mail.

(2) Lot Condition: **(A)** Well-maintained and actively used paved lots; **(B)** Actively used unpaved lots. Examples include community gardens or unpaved parking lots (i.e. gravel or grass); **(C)** Inactive unpaved lots in acceptable condition. Examples include landscaped or mowed inactive lots without any excess debris; **(D)** Unused lots requiring basic improvements to convert them to an active use or at least the conditions listed in "Lot Condition C." Lots may be paved or unpaved. Examples include lots with potholes, or lots with overgrown grass; **(E)** Unused lots requiring substantial effort to convert them to an active use or at least the conditions listed in "Lot Condition C." Lots show signs of long-term neglect, pose a hazard to nearby residents, disrupt the continuity of the commercial strip, and encourage criminal activity. Examples include lots used as garbage dumps or junk yards.

(3) Building & Property Conditions: **(A)** Clean, well-lit, secure and structurally stable new construction or are well-maintained older buildings; **(B)** Buildings requiring one or two visual improvements. May or may not currently contain commercial activity. Examples of visual improvements include replacing frosted windows, installing lighting, power washing the façade, and/or removing nonconforming security measures (e.g. barbed wire); **(C)** Buildings requiring more than two visual improvements and/or buildings with minor structural damage. Examples include buildings serving a day-to-day purpose, but requiring structural repairs; **(D)** Buildings cannot serve a day-to-day purpose, require major structural repairs that cannot, and pose safety issues. Examples include buildings with water or fire damage, foundational issues, missing structural supports, and/or missing roofs.

(4) Block Activity: **(A)** The block is very active: an attached building has an active business or use that is open 5+ days per week; **(B)** The block is somewhat active: an attached building has an active business or use that is open 4 or less days per week; or a building on the same block has an active business or use that is open 5+ days per week; **(C)** The block is somewhat inactive: other buildings exist on the same block, but contain no active businesses or uses; **(D)** The block is inactive: no other buildings exist on the block.

Surveyor Name: \_\_\_\_\_





# Appendix B: A Skills and Resources Inventory for Community Involvement

This inventory can help organizers determine appropriate actions that business owners, nearby residents, or neighborhood organizations' members can take to address vacant commercial properties.

## Security

- Watching Commercial Properties
- Installing Alarms or Security Systems
- Repairing Alarms or Security Systems

## Maintenance

- Cleaning Up
- Window Washing
- Repairing Windows
- Mowing Grass
- Gardening
- Pruning Trees & Shrubbery
- Operating Farm Equipment
- Painting
- Repairing/Installing Locks
- Working on Concrete (Sidewalks)
- Carpentry Skills

## Arts

- Singing
- Playing an Instrument such as the guitar, drums, or trumpet
- Painting a Picture
- Painting a Mural
- Creating Banners
- Sculpting
- Other\_\_\_\_\_

## Outreach

- Contacting Neighbors (by phone)
- Contacting Neighbors (in-person)
- Contacting Businesses (by phone)
- Contacting Businesses (in-person)
- Interviewing People
- Conducting Phone Surveys
- Organizing Events

## Community Action

- Contacting Local Government
- Contacting Local Organizations
- Contacting the Media
- Conducting Demonstrations

## Food

- Serving Food to Large Numbers of People (over 10)
- Preparing Meals for Large Numbers of People
- Washing Dishes for Large Numbers of People
- Operating Commercial Food Preparation Equipment
- Baking

## Transportation

- Driving a Car
- Driving a Van
- Driving a Bus
- Driving a Vehicle /Delivering Goods
- Hauling

## Child Care

- Caring for Babies (under 1 year)
- Caring for Children (1 to 6)
- Caring for Children (7 to 13)

## Supervision

- Running a Meeting
- Writing Reports
- Writing Grant Proposals
- Filling out Forms
- Planning Work for Other People
- Directing the Work of Other People

Skills

A. Are there any other skills to address vacant commercial property that you have which we haven't mentioned?

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B. When you think about your skills, what three things do you think you do best?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

C. Which of your skills are good enough that other people would hire you to do them?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

D. Do you belong to or have connections to any groups or organizations (churches, groups, clubs) that you think would be interested in addressing vacant commercial properties?

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E. Have you ever organized or helped organize a community activity such as a yard sale or a block club?

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PERSONAL INFORMATION

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Can we contact you on Facebook? \_\_\_\_\_

Place of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Adapted from the Rally Foundation, <http://rally-foundation.org/projects/prca-1/public/asset-mapping/mapcommcap.pdf> accessed April 7, 2010.

**Building Marking**

Date: / /



**Vacant/Abandoned Building Evaluation Form**

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Property Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Owner Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Owner Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Answer each of the following questions about the building. Select multiple options, if necessary; explain response. Draw a simple sketch of the location and explain your observations in a brief narrative.

<p><b>Building Security</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Secure   <input type="checkbox"/> Open/unsecured   <input type="checkbox"/> Signs of recent entry</p>	
<p><b>Utilities</b> (Note Entry Points for each active utility on sketch)</p> <p>Active Utilities   <input type="checkbox"/> No   <input type="checkbox"/> Yes   If Yes:   <input type="checkbox"/> Gas   <input type="checkbox"/> Electricity   <input type="checkbox"/> Oil   <input type="checkbox"/> Water</p>	
<p><b>Building Use</b> (The original use of the building and how it was last used)</p>	
<p><b>Building Construction</b></p> <p>Number of Floors _____   Basement:   <input type="checkbox"/> Yes   <input type="checkbox"/> Sub-Basement   <input type="checkbox"/> Multi Sub-Levels</p> <p>Structural Members   <input type="checkbox"/> Steel   <input type="checkbox"/> Concrete   <input type="checkbox"/> Wood   <input type="checkbox"/> Mixed (Describe) (Beams, Girders, Columns)</p> <p>Truss Construction   <input type="checkbox"/> Roof   <input type="checkbox"/> Floors</p> <p>Exposed Structural Members   <input type="checkbox"/> Yes   <input type="checkbox"/> No (Beams, Girders, Columns &amp; Trusses)</p> <p>Exterior Walls   <input type="checkbox"/> Block/Brick   <input type="checkbox"/> Curtain Wall   <input type="checkbox"/> Wood   <input type="checkbox"/> Metal Tie Rods (plans)</p> <p>Openings in Exterior Walls   <input type="checkbox"/> Many   <input type="checkbox"/> Few   <input type="checkbox"/> Windowless (Windows, Doors, etc.)</p> <p>Ceiling Type   <input type="checkbox"/> None   <input type="checkbox"/> Suspended   <input type="checkbox"/> Metal   <input type="checkbox"/> Sheetrock/Plaster   <input type="checkbox"/> Wood</p>	
<p><b>Condition of Interior Walls and Floors</b> (Integrity of compartmentation)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Good   <input type="checkbox"/> Deteriorating   <input type="checkbox"/> Multiple penetrations that would allow fire spread   <input type="checkbox"/> Walls</p> <p><b>Condition of Roof</b>   <input type="checkbox"/> Floors</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Good   <input type="checkbox"/> Some instability/deterioration   <input type="checkbox"/> Major deterioration</p> <p><b>General Condition of Structure</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Good   <input type="checkbox"/> Minor structural instability   <input type="checkbox"/> Major deterioration of structural elements</p>	
<p><b>Fire Protection Systems</b></p> <p>Operational Fire Alarm System   <input type="checkbox"/> Yes   <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Operational Sprinkler System   <input type="checkbox"/> Yes   <input type="checkbox"/> No   <input type="checkbox"/> System off, but usable if supplied through FD connection (Valves open, pressure showing on gauges)</p> <p>Operational Standpipe System   <input type="checkbox"/> Yes   <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Fire Department Connection   <input type="checkbox"/> Yes   <input type="checkbox"/> No (If Yes, note location on sketch)</p>	

**LESSON PLAN – Evaluating Abandoned Buildings**

<b>Fire Potential</b>			
<b>Fuel Packages (Fuel Load)</b>			
Quantity	<input type="checkbox"/> Numerous	<input type="checkbox"/> Moderate	<input type="checkbox"/> Limited
Distribution	<input type="checkbox"/> Concentrated	<input type="checkbox"/> Spread out	
Interior Finish	<input type="checkbox"/> Combustible	<input type="checkbox"/> Non-combustible	<input type="checkbox"/> Mixed (Describe)
Room Size	<input type="checkbox"/> Large	<input type="checkbox"/> Moderate	<input type="checkbox"/> Small
Housekeeping	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor	
Potential for a delay in FD notification	<input type="checkbox"/> High	<input type="checkbox"/> Medium	<input type="checkbox"/> Low
<b>Exposures</b> (Note locations on sketch)			
Location	<input type="checkbox"/> A side	<input type="checkbox"/> B side	<input type="checkbox"/> C side <input type="checkbox"/> D side
Separation (ft)	___	___	___
Occupied (Y/N)	___	___	___
<b>Suppression Operations</b>			
Hazards In Building	<input type="checkbox"/> Holes in Floors	<input type="checkbox"/> Missing Stairs	<input type="checkbox"/> Open Shafts/pits
Building Access:	<input type="checkbox"/> 4 sides	<input type="checkbox"/> 3 sides	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Sides <input type="checkbox"/> Limited
Interior Layout	<input type="checkbox"/> Complicated	<input type="checkbox"/> Normal - Walls/Partitions	<input type="checkbox"/> Open
Water Supply:	<input type="checkbox"/> Adequate	<input type="checkbox"/> Inadequate	(Note Locations on Sketch)

**Hazardous materials located on the site**  Yes  None Observed  
 (If Yes, describe in detail)

**Conditions that require immediate correction**  Yes  No  
 (If Yes, describe in detail)

<b>Analysis of the building</b> (provide your analysis of the building)	<b>High</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Low</b>
Potential for an exposure fire (extension to another building)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Potential for a Multi-Room fire on arrival of first due company	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Potential for structural collapse early in the fire development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Potential for fire fighters to become lost or trapped during operations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Narrative:**

Inspected by:

Posting Authorized by:

Data Entered by: