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# BLUEPRINT **BUFFALO**

**ACTION PLAN**

REGIONAL STRATEGIES AND LOCAL TOOLS FOR RECLAIMING  
VACANT PROPERTIES IN THE CITY AND SUBURBS OF BUFFALO

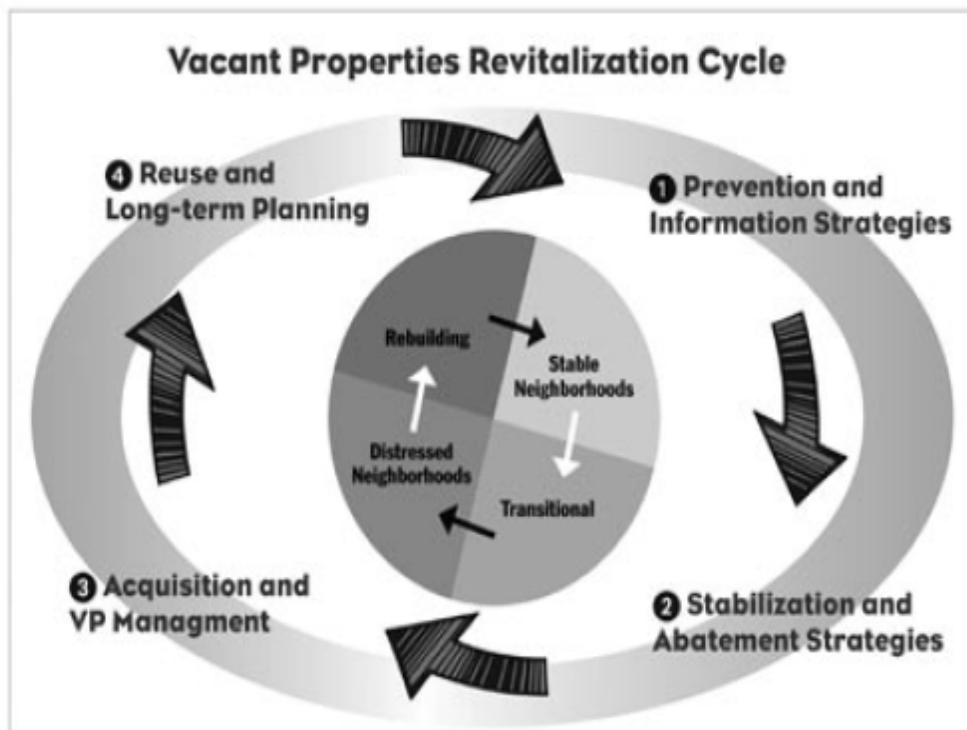
## Action Plan: Overview of Key Strategies

**E**ffective vacant property initiatives have a holistic action plan that contains an array of strategies and tools. These plans tailor certain strategies to the vacant property conditions of each community and neighborhood as illustrated in the Vacant Properties Revitalization Cycle below. Those relatively stable neighborhoods with modest levels of abandonment could benefit from preventive measures such as real property information systems, code enforcement inspections, and access to rehabilitation resources. As some transitional neighborhoods decline, local officials should aggressively exercise their nuisance abatement powers to stabilize substandard and abandoned buildings. Distressed neighborhoods with significant numbers of decaying and abandoned buildings will need stronger acquisition and vacant property management measures, such as land banking. Eventually a few communities will need long-term strategic planning and code reforms so they can rebuild entire neighborhoods. The action plan must also identify the respective roles and responsibilities of the community, business sectors, and government agencies at all levels, and nonprofit organizations.

Building on its technical assistance work with other cities, the NVPC team believes that four sets of strategic actions are essential to a comprehensive and effective approach to vacant properties in the Buffalo-Niagara region:

### Strategy One: Regional Real Property Information System

An effective regional Real Property Information System (RPIS) is critical to support all of the recommendations and actions set forth in this *Blueprint*. The RPIS is an important first



step toward implementing regional and citywide land-use plans, such as the Buffalo's recently adopted comprehensive plan, *Queen City in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, and those proposed by the *Framework for Regional Growth* to redirect investment into existing communities. These plans would focus existing resources on the neighborhoods with the greatest potential for successful revitalization, while relieving growth pressures on the region's fringe.

The city of Buffalo and Erie County both operate databases with important data and interfaces for use in this effort. However, the RPIS is envisioned as a multipurpose and truly regional resource capable of yielding both aggregate and fine-grained data for use in addressing and abating vacant properties throughout the Erie-Buffalo region. Broad citizen involvement and training are also needed; it would be wise to provide these through a nongovernmental entity uniquely suited to delivering such training. Possibly the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth, University at Buffalo could act as critical convener or host for RPIS. Given the recent foreclosure crisis gripping the region, the City's Anti-Flipping Task Force would also be a key participant.

### **Strategy Two: Comprehensive Code Enforcement**

Successful vacant property initiatives include a variety of strategies that prevent dilapidated buildings from becoming vacant and abate abandoned buildings that pose serious threats to public health and safety. Code enforcement strategies address blight and abandonment throughout multiple stages of the Vacant Properties Revitalization Cycle. A mix of code enforcement and nuisance abatement approaches (e.g., vacant property registration ordinances, civil judicial actions, and housing courts) can effectively address a wide range of communities and neighborhoods with different types of problem properties. What works best for Buffalo may or may not work for its suburban neighbors. The NVPC team recommends a comprehensive approach that coordinates code enforcement across multiple departments, creates special enforcement units and vacant property coordinators, and establishes a regional code enforcement network for sharing information and best practices. In particular, the citywide initiative recommended in Leadership Action One should make enforcement approaches a priority. The first-tier suburban agenda recommended in Leadership Action Two should also focus on a blend of compliance and code enforcement actions.

### **Strategy Three: Right-Sizing and Greening the City**

Buffalo-Niagara policy makers, business leaders, and nonprofit organizations must take aggressive actions to remove and reuse the significant blight in inner-city Buffalo so there is a healthy foundation for regional reinvestment. Once Buffalo removes the abandoned housing and decreases its surplus infrastructure, policies and programs for attracting more people back to Buffalo's core communities are more likely to succeed. Two critical strategies that other shrinking cities have used to right-size their built environment are land banking and green infrastructure.

Addressing the challenge of right-sizing Buffalo, however, involves delicate trade-offs with deep implications for the city's character and the daily lives of its residents. Crucial concerns for social equity, citizen involvement, and historic preservation must be reflected in any right-sizing effort in Buffalo. Fortunately, neighborhood residents and responsible property owners have been advocating the drive toward right-sizing, and there seems to be growing public support for a land-banking approach to redevelop the city. To avoid

the mistakes of the past, neighborhoods and citizens must drive the land-banking and green- infrastructure initiative in a meaningful way. The citywide vacant-property initiative recommended in Leadership Action One should make this strategy a priority, along with code enforcement approaches.

#### **Strategy Four: Greyfields and Brownfields Redevelopment**

The Buffalo-Niagara region contains many underperforming and vacant commercial plazas, as well as dozens of large abandoned industrial properties. Often known as greyfields or brownfields, these sites are the product of market forces that dictate whether companies maintain properties with significant vacancies or decide to reinvest elsewhere. Competing government and business programs and policies make the reuse of greyfields and brownfields especially challenging. The Buffalo-Niagara region could greatly benefit from joint strategies that streamline existing economic development programs and more closely link greyfields and brownfields redevelopment strategies across jurisdictional boundaries.

Regional and local leaders, along with developers and the retail/commercial industry, should design policies and projects integrate the economic redevelopment of these greyfields/brownfields with the neighborhood revitalization of residential properties. Although the city plays an important role in the redevelopment of these properties, the NVPC team anticipates that the suburbs will also want to create their own agenda and actions for promoting commercial revitalization of brownfields and greyfields. An instrumental convener for this activity would be the Vacant Properties Coordinating Council recommended in Leadership Action Three. This strategy would also likely be an important component in the sites and priorities designated for attention under the Living Laboratory as recommended in Leadership Action Four.