

## Land Bank Programs Will Continue To Serve The Community

By Deb Cherry

Recently, the Genesee County Board of Commissioners cut the Land Bank's entire \$1.3 million property maintenance budget. Unless other funds are found, the effect of this will be a drastic reduction in weed and trash abatement and boarding and securing of abandoned properties. Since most of the abandoned properties the Land Bank services are in Flint and Mt. Morris Township these communities will be affected most.

As the Chair of the Land Bank Board of Directors, I hope to use this article to let you know what the Land Bank is doing to improve our community and what we are doing to mitigate the action of the County Board of Commissioners.

First, the Land Bank consistently achieves sales of about \$2.5 million putting nearly 500 properties back on the tax rolls annually. Proceeds from the sale of property support all the Land Bank's programs including some funds that go to property maintenance. But sales proceeds alone are not enough to cover all the costs of property maintenance. Many people seem to think we have a huge inventory of very valuable property. The truth is that of about 9,000 properties we are managing, over 4,700 are vacant lots, mostly in highly abandoned areas of Flint that have no market value. We will continue to sell everything we can just as we have been.

Second, we will continue to work with community volunteers, churches and other groups to engage them in helping with property maintenance. The Land Bank has been doing this for eight years through our Clean and Green Program. Funded by the CS Mott Foundation, the Ruth Mott Foundation and the Community Foundation with additional funds from the Land Bank, this program engages over 40 churches, neighborhood associations and block clubs who this year maintained over 1,300 vacant lots for the Land Bank.

Third, we will continue to work with community partners who provide a great deal of "free" labor for property maintenance activities. One program uses non-violent offenders on work release in cooperation with New Paths, a jail alternate program for non-violent offenders, the Downtown Weed and Seed Program and the Michigan Prisoner Re-entry Initiative (MPRI). We

have also been fortunate in getting assistance through on-the-job training programs administered by Career Alliance and Mott Community College.

Fourth, we will continue to expand our adopt-a-lot program and a new land lease program designed to work with urban farmers and gardeners who are willing to take on a long term commitment to care for properties. We have had hundreds of properties cared for at no cost through these programs. However, there is a limit to how many residents are willing to come forward and care for vacant lots when many of those lots are in highly abandoned areas with few residents.

Fifth, we will continue to sell vacant side lots for a token cost of \$25 to neighboring property owners. This allows adjacent property owners to increase the amount of living space they have for their families while at the same time putting these lots back under private ownership. To date we have sold 555 side lots to adjacent property owners and over 700 more vacant lots to nearby residents.

As a final comment, there are some 20,000 abandoned properties in Flint alone making this a problem of significant magnitude to residents throughout Genesee County. At the Land Bank we will continue to do all we can to assist our community with the resources we have.



Deb Cherry

Deb Cherry is the Genesee County Treasurer and Chair of the Land Bank Board of Directors

## Reducing Urban Blight as a Crime Prevention Strategy

Can programs like the Genesee County Land Bank's Clean and Green Program prevent crime? Both violent crime and property crimes are greatly influenced by causal factors in the physical and social environment. A neighborhood's physical conditions and the social dynamics are among the primary reasons why crime occurs in very specific neighborhoods one generation after another. Urban blight and decay are now widely recognized as invitations to violent and property crimes. This is often referred to as the Broken Windows Theory, introduced by James Wilson and George Kelling in the early 1980s.



Broken Windows theory posits that untended property (symbolized by a single broken window) is a visual cue for diminished social control and attracts additional vandalism, loitering, and other criminal acts. Vacant buildings can become havens for trash, stray animals, squatters, and criminals. Vacant properties are also more likely to be vandalized or burned to the ground, and theft from vacant properties is less likely to be reported. Moreover, as residents perceive a rise in crime, they modify their behavior by avoiding social interactions near the untended property or by moving out of the neighborhood, further reducing informal social controls and fostering more crime.

My colleagues at the University of Michigan and I are currently working with the Land Bank and other community partners to prevent violent crime in one neighborhood of Flint where property vacancy rates are close to 50%. This neighborhood experiences high rates of violent crime despite the absence of natural gathering places for teens and young adults, such as high schools or night clubs, where violence is likely. The Land Bank's efforts to improve and maintain vacant properties are a critical element of our efforts to reduce urban blight and to prevent violent crime in this location.

We have recently completed a study of the effects of a Youth Empowerment Solutions (YES) project in another high crime area of Flint. Middle school youth worked with neighborhood adults to clean up and transform three adjacent vacant (and uncared for) lots into a park, the Rosa Parks Peace Park, located at the corner of Fleming Rd and De Freest St – near Flint Park Lake on the NW side. We tracked violent crimes for 22 months before and after the development of these vacant lots and noted a 37% drop in violent crimes within 200 meters of this project site. Within 100 meters of the site, there was a more pronounced 56% drop in violent crimes. The evidence from our study suggests that beautifying and maintaining vacant property can be an effective crime prevention strategy.

In many neighborhoods, the Land Banks' Clean and Green program (and other property maintenance programs) are the only way vacant properties are cared for. A loss in support for the Land Bank programs would be a lost opportunity to prevent crime in Flint and in Genesee County.

By Thomas M. Reischl, PhD



\*Dr. Reischl is a research faculty member at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. For the past ten years, he and his colleagues have been evaluating violence prevention programs in Flint and Genesee County with funding from the CDC – the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This article is based on remarks made to the Genesee County Board of Commissioners in support of funding for the Land Banks property maintenance programs.



## Creative Vacant Land Approach: Clean & Green Continues to Excel in 2011

The Clean & Green program has been a creative approach towards the maintenance of vacant land at the Land Bank for eight years. Churches, block clubs, schools, and other community groups receive stipends for regularly maintaining concentrated clusters of vacant lots. The community's interest in and demand for the program has grown every year. The program has grown from a handful of groups in 2003 to 42 groups in 2011.

2011 Clean & Green participants generated impressive results, both in terms of creativity and quantity. Between May and September the 42 Clean & Green groups regularly maintained a total of 1,326 properties, or roughly 48 city blocks. Regular maintenance includes mowing grass and removing debris at least every three weeks. Regular maintenance was not the whole story, however, for many of the groups. Twenty-eight of the Clean & Green groups organized and completed community greening projects as part of their participation in the program. One group created an urban orchard. Another group installed community horseshoe pits. Many groups planted and maintained urban vegetable and flower gardens. The 2011 Clean & Green program has set quite a high standard for 2012.

The 2011 program closed with a celebration. On September 29<sup>th</sup> Clean & Green participants, Land Bank staff and public officials gathered at Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle to celebrate the success of the 2011 season. Genesee County Treasurer Deborah Cherry welcomed participants to the festive dinner. The City of Flint's Mayor Dayne Walling thanked Clean & Green participants and the Land Bank for their collective community impact. Clean & Green participants lined-up to stand and share their reflections on the season. Land Bank staff thanked the program participants for all of their effort, devotion and success. The 2011 Clean & Green program truly demonstrates the dedication, innovation and trajectory of community partnerships in Genesee County.

By Natalie Pruett



## CREATING A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AT THE URBAN ALTERNATIVES HOUSE

The University of Michigan-Flint (UM-Flint) is partnering with the Genesee County Land Bank (Land Bank) to convert a tax foreclosed property in the Central Park Neighborhood into the Urban Alternatives House (UAH). The house, including two apartments and learning space for the new Energy and Sustainable Systems (ESS) housed in the Department of Earth and Resource Science (ERS) at UM-Flint, will serve as a demonstration for energy efficiency and sustainable living.

By Christina Kelly



## West Flint Church of the Nazarene Boards and Secures 60 Homes in Civic Park



For the third straight year, the West Flint Church of the Nazarene has taken a Sunday to board and secure Land Bank properties in a Flint neighborhood. The program called “Don’t Go To Church, Be The Church” is coordinated by Dr. David Bowser. Instead of going to church one Sunday, Dr. Bowser coordinates a large group of church members to instead go into the community and do good works.

“Dr. Bowser has worked with the Land Bank now for three straight years coordinating this program during which nearly 200 homes, collectively, have been boarded and secured and overgrowth cleared away,” said Land Bank Executive Director Doug Weiland. The first year of the program Church members worked on an area on Flint’s old eastside, last year they worked in the Garfield-Bunche neighborhood, and this year they worked in the Civic Park neighborhood.

“The work this year in Civic Park complimented an extensive boarding project that the Land Bank recently completed in conjunction with Joy Tabernacle Church and the New Paths jail alternative program,” said Weiland. “Having the additional assistance of the West Flint Church of the Nazarene doubled the number of homes that were boarded in the area.”

Clearing blighted properties and boarding and securing open houses helps reduce crime and improve property values. “We know that the residents in these neighborhoods appreciate the work that has been done,” commented Weiland.

These efforts can become contagious, further spreading the enthusiasm for maintaining blighted properties. After this year’s effort, Quincy Murphy, President of the Garfield-Bunche Community Service Corporation began organizing a similar program in conjunction with Bethlehem Temple Church, Salem Housing, the City of Flint and the Land Bank. The group hopes to board up and clean up an area bounded by McClellan, Stewart, Dupont and Saginaw Streets. Their goal is to board up 50 to 100 blighted properties before Devil’s Night.



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