



Another View: The Land Bank is already doing what The Journal suggested

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By

By Douglas K. Weiland

The Journal's recent **editorial**, "When mowing money goes away, Land Bank should get creative," leaves the impression that the Land Bank hasn't already established what they suggest as "creative" solutions. For us not to respond would leave an incorrect perception of our programs among the public and many of our funders.

I agree with The Journal on many of the suggestions they made, the problem is that the editorial does not acknowledge that we are already doing many of the things suggested.

First, the Journal said we could try to sell more properties and rent others to generate more revenues. Yet we consistently achieve sales of \$2.5 million and put nearly 500 properties back on the tax rolls annually. Many people seem to think we have a huge inventory of very valuable property. The truth is that of about 9,000 properties that we are currently managing, over 4,700 are vacant lots, mostly in highly abandoned areas of the city that have no market value. We will continue to sell everything we can, just as we have been.

Second, The Journal said we should shake every bush for charitable contributions to find more funds. We have. Even prior to the establishment of the Land Bank, the CS Mott Foundation has been extremely generous in providing support for the Land Bank. In addition, we have received significant grants from the Ruth Mott Foundation, the Community Foundation and the Fannie Mae Foundation. These grants have allowed us to purchase equipment and to work with community-based organizations for weed and trash abatement.

Third, The Journal said we should be working with community volunteers, churches and other groups to engage them in helping with property maintenance. The Land Bank has been doing this for more than five 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 1,400 vacant lots for the Land Bank.

Fourth, The Journal suggested that we consider soliciting bids from private firms to see if the work could be done for less and that we should consider using jail inmates on work release. In past years, both the city and the Land Bank have engaged private firms at a much higher cost than we can do it with our own staff of seasonal workers.

The reason we can perform the work more cost effectively is simple: We are a government agency and have some advantages. For example, we do not pay tax on fuel. During the mowing season, our fuel costs run as much as \$18,000 per month. It would be substantially more if we paid fuel taxes. We pay no personal property taxes on equipment and no sales taxes on supplies, and we do not have to make a profit. We also benefit from a great deal of “free” labor as explained below.

With regard to using inmates on work release, we have been doing that for several years 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 additional free labor through various on-the-job training programs administered by Career Alliance and Mott Community College. Using these programs, about 40 percent of our property maintenance workers come to us with no direct labor cost. We provide equipment, fuel, supplies and supervision. It is far less costly than using private vendors and we have more direct control of the work that is being done.

Fifth, The Journal suggested we work with neighbors to have them care for properties. We have been doing that for years through our adopt-a-lot program and now additionally through a 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.

Sixth, The Journal suggests we take our best properties in still populated areas and give them to people who agree to move from almost-empty blocks. This runs counter to the suggestion that we use sales proceeds to fund property maintenance as “giving” the best properties away would reduce the sales proceeds available to do our work. An equally important problem is that this suggestion would require many people to voluntarily move from their present homes to another area. Many people simply do not want to do this. Moreover, who would pay the cost of bringing these homes up to code? Nearly all the properties we receive need thousands of dollars in improvements just to be habitable. We do not have those funds and I doubt residents being asked to move want that burden.

The Journal seems to suggest that County Treasurer Deb Cherry should not fight for funds for the Land Bank's property maintenance program. Since Ms. Cherry is the chair of the Land Bank Board and since it is the treasurer's office that is responsible for dealing with tax foreclosed property, I would argue that it is her duty to fight for funding. Moreover, it is our contention that the County Board of Commissioners have over-reached their authority in taking funds that come from fees and penalties imposed on those who are tax delinquent. When the current tax foreclosure process became law, these fees were established to help pay the cost of handling foreclosed properties. The fees were not meant to fund other programs that are supposed to be supported with county general funds.

As a final comment, I agree with The Journal that these properties do need to be secured and vacant lots mowed. 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 with the resources we have to do this.

– *Douglas K. Weiland is executive director of the Genesee County Land Bank.*

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