



# New plan says there's a way to convert vacant Genesee County property into assets

Posted by Beata Mostafavi | The Flint Journal June 08, 2008 14:00PM

**FLINT, Michigan** -- Blighted patches of vacant land that were once eyesores and dumping grounds in city neighborhoods could someday bloom with wildflowers attracting birds and butterflies.

It's part of the vision of a new study by the University of Michigan that looks at low maintenance strategies to turn abandoned property owned by the Genesee County Land Bank into natural assets.

"It may seem that having thousands of vacant properties is a disadvantage but I think that in the longer run, having the land bank's involvement in looking forward with those properties is a huge plus for Genesee County," said Joan Nassauer, UM landscape architect professor who led the project in the graduate school.

"We can think about how they can contribute to long term quality of life. I'm not sure that it's obvious to everyone what an extraordinary opportunity it is."

Residents such as Jasmine Hairston, 21, of Flint, think even such small steps as planting wildflowers could help blighted neighborhoods.

"I think that's a pretty good idea. It would make it look more enjoyable," she said. "I think it could help stop people who are looking for trouble to come destroy it just because it's a vacant area.

"(Blight) makes the neighborhood look bad and drives people away."

Nassauer, who has done 30 years of research on the subject and has created similar designs for areas in Minneapolis and Chicago, said the nearly two-year study used an ecological design approach.

Some of the local properties had underground aquifers providing fresh clean water assets and others had the potential to be mini habitats with low maintenance and cost.

"We are not saying don't develop there," Nassauer said. "We're saying here are some ways to develop

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### About the study:

**The Genesee County Land Bank** is implementing recommendations from a study "Vacant Land as a Natural Resource: Enduring Land Values Created by Care and Ownership" by Joan Nassauer, a University of Michigan landscape architect professor.

- **Key goal:** To turn vacant abandoned property in Genesee County into natural assets and create a perception that it's being cared for to reduce blight and other problems.

- **To view study:** Go to the [organization's Web site](#).

and have a great residential area that protects water quality and habitats."

The report comes with a long and complex set of recommendations for each type of property among the more than 4,000 the land bank owns.

Examples include planting native plants that would attract wildlife and mowing just small strips on the edges of the land.

Putting up signage that tells people the land is maintained is also advised.

"What you're going to get is something real flowery, real colorful," Nassauer said. "I've done a lot of research over the years and have found that that makes a huge difference in the way people perceive an area."

"It creates a perception of care and safety, that people are regularly returning here, that this isn't a place to dump. It creates a strong statement about a human presence."

The report will be condensed into a booklet to distribute to residents in September.

Land bank lead planner Christina Kelly said the land bank approached Nassauer to do the project, hoping to find feasible and cost-efficient ways to maintain abandoned properties and improve their appearance.

"We're in this position where this property that has been abandoned and not cared for for many years ends up in our hands," she said. "It's pretty much an impossible job to go out and get every single property mowed. But people really want to see their neighborhoods cared for."

She said both through stipends and volunteerism, several residential groups help care for properties. Many of them will get involved in the training to implement recommendations from the report that was funded mostly by a C.S. Mott Foundation grant.

The land bank was turned down for another roughly \$40,000 grant they hoped would help put many of the recommendations into gear. But Kelly said she hopes to begin piloting some of the smaller ideas this summer.

Bigger scale projects, such as exploring the potential for urban gardening, could be down the road, she said.

"This property has value and it's kind of looking at where do we have opportunities to cultivate that and think differently about vacant land," Kelly said.

"Instead of being a nuisance, it can be converted into an asset that adds value to the neighborhood."

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