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Ohio City Tries Shrinking Back to Health

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YOUNGSTOWN, Ohio -- The panoramic view from the front steps of Loretta Bares' modest hillside home says a lot about this old, industrial city.

The houses, generally well kept, are a testament to a time when steel jobs were abundant. But two abandoned houses with broken out windows near some tall weeds reveal her Brier Hill neighborhood's sad reality _ advancing urban decay and population decline, tied to jobs that were never replaced. Nearby is Youngstown's last remaining steel plant.

For decades the northeast Ohio city tried to stem the number of people moving away. Then city planners decided to take a different approach _ accept being smaller and clear away clutter.

Millions of tax dollars are being spent to demolish vacant houses and buildings and open up green space _ redefining the tough, blue-collar environment of the gritty city so that parks may grow, crime may drop and property values may rise, city officials hope.

The idea is that if Youngstown becomes more livable, job and population numbers may stabilize or grow. The city estimates that it has lost more than 40,000 manufacturing jobs. The population is about 82,000, about half of what it was some 40 years ago.

Youngstown stands out among the nation's shrinking blue-collar cities in its newfound acceptance that it's going to be smaller than it once was, said Joe Schilling, an urban researcher and professor at Virginia Tech's Metropolitan Institute in Alexandria, Va.

"American culture is one of largess, so it's hard for any mayor to have to run for office and then say to the voters, 'I think we have to shrink our city.' It sounds like retreat," he said.

Cities usually try to quickly recover the loss of people and jobs, said Jennifer Vey, a senior research associate at the Brookings Institution, a Washington, D.C., think tank.

"I don't know that there are many other cities in the country taking such an aggressive approach to managing population shrinkage," she said.

A similar city, Flint, Mich., has gotten attention for aggressively managing vacancy and abandonment problems by trying to make tax delinquent properties available for redevelopment, Vey said.

More than 6,000 residential, commercial and industrial properties have been obtained in Flint and surrounding areas since the Genesee County Land Bank started the program in 2002. About 2,000 parcels are being or have been redeveloped, and some land is preserved for green space, said Dan Kildee, land bank chairman.

Youngstown spent $1.2 million for demolition last year and may spend about $1.5 million this year on razing mainly single-family houses. The city took down about 400 housing units last year and may

exceed that number this year. The plan took effect in 2005.

Hunter Morrison, director of the Center for Urban and Regional Studies at Youngstown State University, who helped craft the plan, calls the move a big psychological shift.

"When I got here five years ago everybody just talked about how their fathers made steel," he said. "Now they're talking about looking forward."

Some other cities and urban planners have taken note.

One is Saginaw, Mich., which, along with surrounding communities, has lost about 4,900 auto and other manufacturing jobs from 1994 to 2004, said Greg LaMarr, spokesman for the community group Saginaw Future. The area has seen a shift to service sector jobs.

A delegation from the city may soon visit Youngstown, said John Stemple, Saginaw's zoning and development coordinator.

"Being smaller isn't all that bad, if you create a quality environment," he said.

But getting smaller is a tough challenge.

"If Youngstown is not going to be the city that it was, some parts of the city have to be let go. It's a difficult exercise to go through," said Terry Schwarz, an administrator at the Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, a Kent State University planning institute that has closely studied Youngstown.

Planned downsizing requires a lot of patience, said Wendy Kellogg, professor urban planning at the Levin College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University.

Shrinking can make a city like Youngstown a better place, Kellogg said.

"In the meantime, until you reconfigure things, you're sort of in limbo," she said.

Frank Popper, a member of Princeton's faculty and a visiting professor at the Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University, is unsure of the likelihood of success, because the city's plan needs more time to show results.

"Shrinkage for a place like Youngstown seems reasonable at least in principle," he said.

Youngstown's plan makes sense to Loretta Bares, 34, who grew up in the house where she still lives and bemoans her joblessness.

"You get rats down here because of these empty houses," she said. "People are leaving."

A few miles away, Bill Mayes takes his 5-year-old daughter, Imani, for an outing. As she roller-skates gleefully at his side, Mayes, 39, who works at a plastics company, wonders what city planners are thinking.

"It doesn't make sense," he said. "Why tear down when you can try to rebuild what you've got?"

While the city has plenty of older neighborhoods and blight, there are still homes in various price ranges

that give the appearance of a thriving town. New townhouses are rising near the Youngstown State campus, and new buildings mix with old ones downtown.

Jay Williams, the city's personable, 35-year-old mayor who grew up in Youngstown, said it took a long time for city planners to understand that no longer having several big steel plants along the Mahoning River isn't all that bad.

"This community has been looking in the rearview mirror, still mourning the loss of the industry that sort of defined who we were," he said.

Steel mills were the city's lifeblood, part of a flourishing U.S. steel industry after World War II. Youngstown's population swelled to 170,000 in the 1950s. Then, in 1977, steel plants started to close, eliminating thousands of jobs.

The city kept chasing "the next big idea" that somehow might reverse the decline, Williams said. Such ideas _ one was a blimp factory _ haven't worked out.

The city's economy now is based more on government, public schools, Youngstown State and its two hospitals. Crime continues to be a nasty issue, Williams said, although the number of homicides dropped to 32 last year from more than 60 a few years ago.

Youngstown is wrestling with what to do with the new empty spaces. There has been talk of expanding parks, giving more space to an old cemetery and even agriculture.

But what it most has in mind is to bring the supply and demand of housing back into balance. Less people living in Youngstown has made that possible, Williams said.

"We're not kicking anyone out," he said.

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On the Net:

Youngstown 2010 Plan: http://www.youngstown2010.com