



# VACANT PROPERTY NOW & TOMORROW

## BUILDING ENDURING VALUES WITH NATURAL ASSETS

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## **Acknowledgements**

We gratefully recognize the essential leadership of the Genesee County Land Bank Authority and the Genesee Land Institute in this work: especially Bob Beckley, Jeff Burdick, Dan Kildee, Christina Kelly, and Linda Patrick. We also thank our partners in the Landscape Ecology Perception and Design Laboratory at the University of Michigan: Zhifang Wang and Danielle Kahn, each of whom importantly contributed to this project.

# An Extraordinary Opportunity to Invest in a Natural Asset

Vacant land can be a natural asset that creates enduring values for the community. A time when land is vacant can be an extraordinary opportunity to pause, look around, and invest in the environmental characteristics that initially attracted people to a place. Desirable environmental characteristics will be even more important in the future, as clean and abundant natural resources become rare and as more and more businesses locate where future employees are attracted to a pleasant place to live. This project shows how the Genesee County Land Bank Authority can use a time when many properties have become vacant to make the county an even more healthy and attractive place to live.

Attractive places to live must be healthy places. People depend on clean and abundant water, clean air, and other ecosystem services: all the natural processes and products that help people live healthy lives. Water resources are leading natural assets of Genesee County.



Streams, lakes, and wetlands are visible, often beautiful, assets that can be habitats for a rich array of fish and other wildlife. But unseen water in underground aquifers is equally precious – a storage pool of clean water that has been accumulating for generations and

could ensure that Genesee County is a highly desirable home for future generations. Other ecosystem services include processes that can heal commercial and industrial sites with a history of contamination, and processes that produce beautiful woodlands alive with birds. All these ecosystem services strengthen communities by

helping to ensure that property has value for the long-term.

When people support ecosystem services by caring for their neighborhoods, healthy places are even more likely to look attractive. Citizens' engagement and sense of ownership in their own neighborhoods is an essential community asset. This project shows how honoring local peoples' expectations and







values for their own neighborhoods can help to address immediate maintenance challenges, as well as establish stewardship habits that protect and heal the county's water resources and habitats.

### **Applications for Other Communities**

These ideas can work in other communities too, especially where property is vacant because the economy or weather events have forced people to leave their homes. For example, in the Great Lakes region that was so well-suited for manufacturing and transportation during the industrial era, economic changes have

greatly reduced job opportunities and people have moved away from many cities. Homes, businesses, and factories are vacant – for now, until future innovations stoke the economy. Communities like Genesee County can use the time when property is vacant to pause, appreciate the citizens, history, and resources that make their community valueable, and invest in the natural assets of the place. In the state of Michigan, many communities could use this time to engage local people not just to take care of their neighborhoods, but also to become stewards of the water resources, wildlife habitats, and other amenities that build lasting value.

The way that vacant land is managed in Genesee County could suggest successful approaches for other industrial cities in the Saginaw Bay watershed, like Saginaw, Bay City, and Midland. To varying degrees, these urban areas have lost jobs and people as a consequence of recent industrial changes. At the same time, each of these places has natural assets that could be protected and enhanced by insightful management of vacant land for its long-term value. Water resources are the foundation for natural assets all over the Saginaw Bay watershed. The Flint River that runs through the center of Genesee County and its primary city, Flint, leads to the Shiawassee and Saginaw Rivers and ultimately, Saginaw





Bay. Overall, the watershed that drains into this bay is Michigan's largest, (8,709 square miles), and the US EPA describes it as having "America's largest contiguous freshwater coastal wetland system." The surface and groundwater resources, and the habitat and amenity potential of this enormous watershed will become only more valuable with time, especially if other areas become drier, have saltier groundwater, or seem less hospitable with climate change. Pausing to think about how these natural assets can be enhanced through the proper management of currently vacant land is a precious opportunity to build enduring value.

### **The Genesee County Land Bank Authority**

This summary demonstrates how the Genesee County Land Bank Authority can use a time when many properties have become vacant to invest in the future by building the community's natural assets. The project was inspired by what the Land Bank is doing now. The Genesee County Land Bank Authority is the first local government to establish a land bank under Michigan's new law (2004 revisions to the Brownfield Redevelopment Financing Act, Public Act 381 of 1996), which allows a land bank to manage tax reverted vacant proper-

ties in ways that increase their market value. To do this, the Land Bank reorganizes vacant land before transferring it to new owners and future uses like open space or housing. This project analyzed all of the more than 4000 vacant properties managed by the Land Bank in 2006, and established a spatial framework for classifying any future vacant properties. This framework suggests how vacant land can be managed to achieve inviting neighborhoods and protect long-term ecosystem services, which help to ensure the enduring value of existing communities.

# The spatial framework for three time frames

Genesee County was mapped to locate current and future Land Bank properties for appropriate maintenance now, as a ripening amenity for future transformation, and ecological design in the future, as shown on the following pages.

For details about the maps, you can read **Vacant Land As A Natural Asset** (Nassauer, VanWieren, Wang, Kahn) April 2008, by downloading the report from the website on the back cover of this report.

These maps were made by analyzing:

- 1) environmental flows of water, habitats, and city water infrastructure
- 2) opportunities to enhance the quality of life for Genesee County residents by using environmental amenities like wooded hills, streams, lakes, and parks
- 3) community expectations for different types of landscapes to look well-kept.

While the maps show the entire county, they are intended only to help determine the best way to manage Land Bank properties that occur in each area of a map. The inventory of Land Bank properties is constantly changing, and as new properties enter the inventory, their locations on the maps can suggest how they might be managed.

## Managing vacant land across three time frames

*The three time frames shown in this project demonstrate that Land Bank responsibilities for maintenance of its properties naturally lead to a process of land assembly, open space designation, and enhancement of existing and new development – all of which contribute to enduring ecosystem services, including environmental health and appealing neighborhoods for local communities.*

### NOW Maintenance Concepts

How can maintenance costs be reduced while neighborhood pride is built?

#### CARE



### 10-20 YEARS Ripening Amenity Options

How can Land Bank properties be managed over a 10-20 year time frame to enhance their value, long-term property values and quality of life?

#### CARE + OWNERSHIP



### LONG-TERM FUTURE Ecological Land Use Design

How might Land Bank properties be moved to their highest and best use while they contribute to quality of life?










#### OWNERSHIP

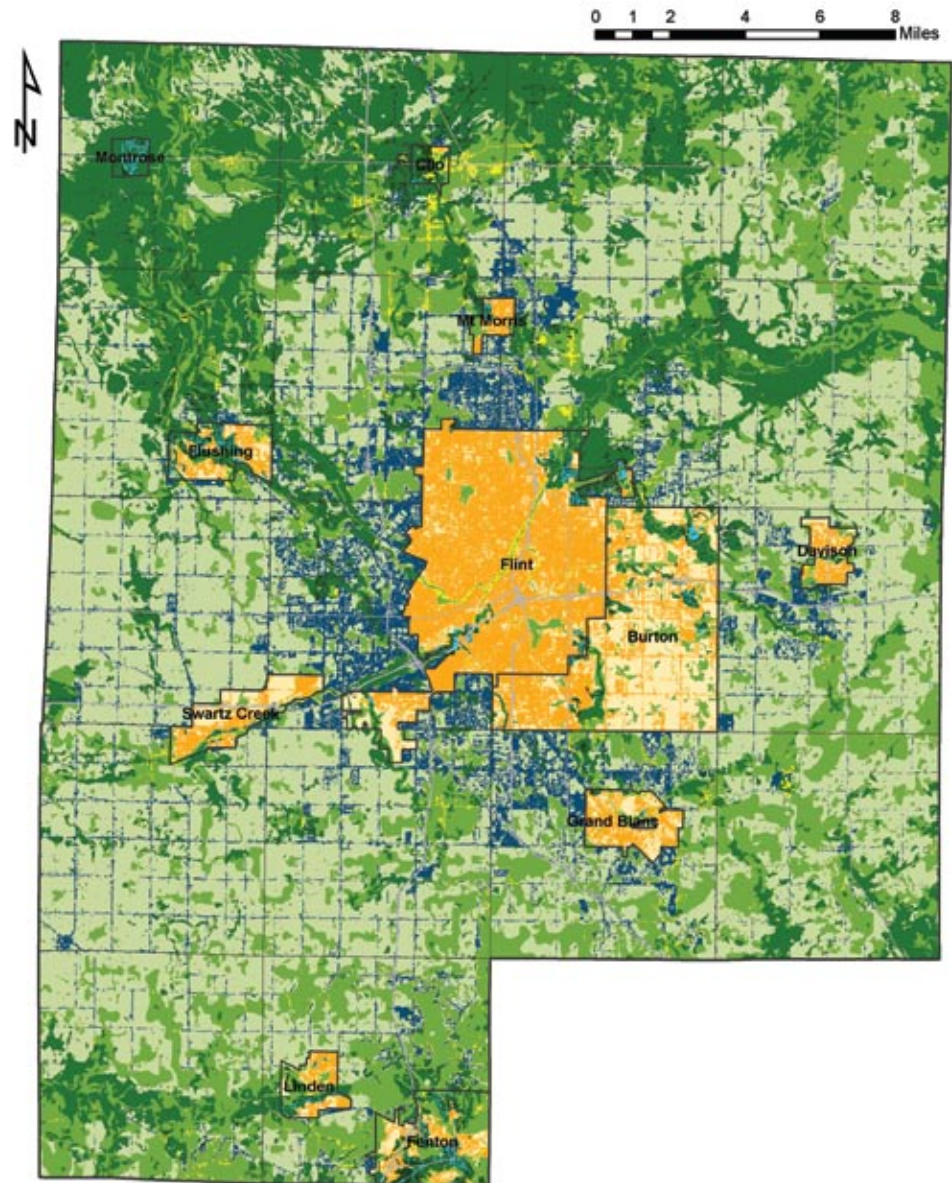




## Maintenance Concepts

Management begins by engaging citizens in cost-saving strategies to maintain vacant properties and to make them attractive right now. In this map, each type indicates an opportunity to manage Land Bank property in a way that demonstrates good care, extends stewardship of natural assets, and reduces costs. To learn about what to do to maintain each type of property, go to page 11 to see examples of real places. These examples show that, in deciding how to maintain a property, the minimum width of the mown area depends on specific characteristics of the property and neighboring properties. How often a property needs to be mown depends on these same characteristics. But any area where grasses and flowers are allowed to grow should not be mown until early fall; this prevents harm to baby birds in ground nests. Finally, the examples beginning on page 11 show signage that will help to enhance the value of different types of sites.








Type	Opportunity	What to do	# of GCLBA Properties	% Cover of County	
	1	Nature Protection	High priority signage	10	20
	2	Orderly Nature Protection	Mow strip + native plants + high priority signage	56	1
	3	Orderly Water Protection	Mow strip + high priority signage	8	<1
	4	Orderly Habitat	Mow strip + annual lot mowing +native plants + signage	30	1
	5	Casual Habitat	Native plants + signage	114	22
	6	Casual Yard	Mow strip	384	8
	7	Minimal Yard	Annual mow strip + signage	237	38
	8	Orderly Urban Yard	Mow strip + annual lot mowing	3053	6
	9	Casual Urban Yard	Annual lot mowing + signage	506	3

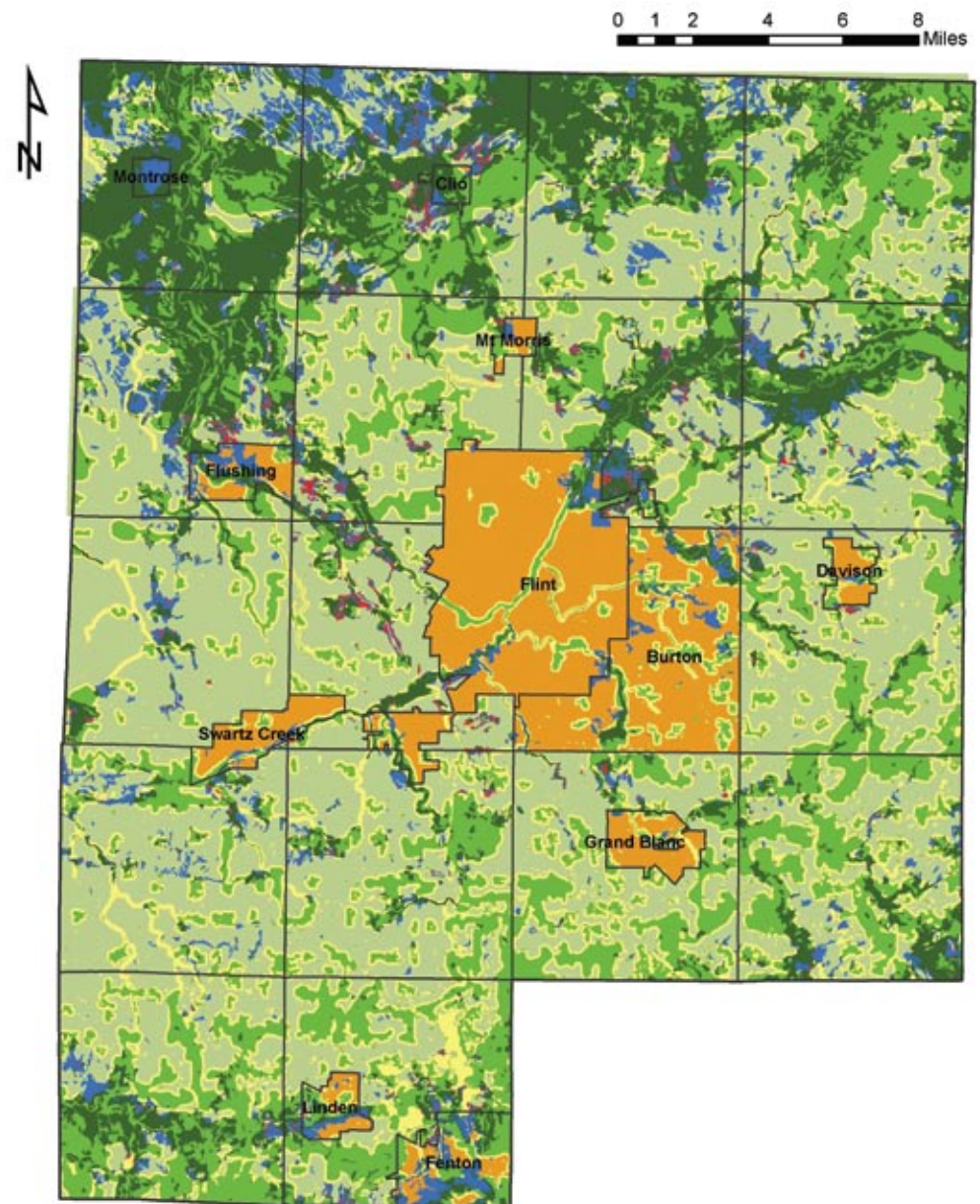


## 10-20 YEARS

### Ripening Amenity Options

Each vacant property can be seen as an amenity ripening for development, like fruit in an orchard. Not every tree in the orchard will have the same kind of fruit, and not every location has the same amenity potential. This project analyzed the entire county to determine what type of amenity is best suited to each location. Different types of amenities suggest how land can be most advantageously assembled for open space or to enhance existing or new development.














Type	Opportunity	# of GCLBA Properties	% Cover of County
	1 Priority 1: <b>Open space</b> Water protection and habitat	49	16
	2 Priority 2: <b>Open space</b> Habitat	132	22
	3 Priority 1: <b>Open space</b> Water protection	23	6
	4 <b>Site testing</b> Water protection infrastructure	2	1
	5 <b>Habitat matrix infrastructure</b>	277	13
	6 Priority 2: <b>Development and parcel aggregation</b> to large lots	533	35
	7 Priority 1: <b>Development and infrastructure targeting</b> for block densification	3381	8

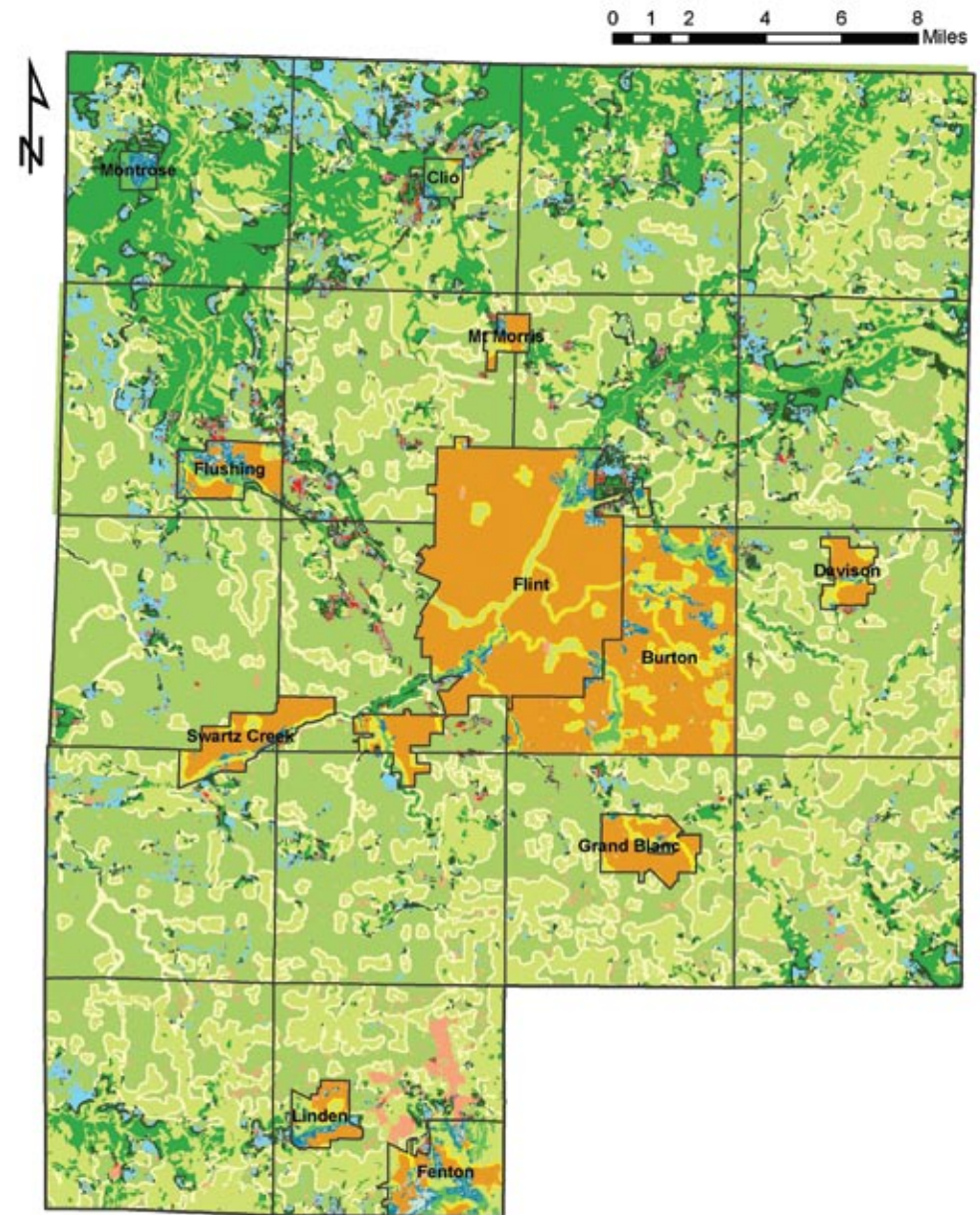




## LONG-TERM FUTURE Ecological Land Use Design

Finally, ecological design approaches are suggested for each future land use type. After a period of transformation, land uses in the county will complement and protect its natural assets. After Land Bank properties are transformed to an environmentally beneficial use, they will enhance the value of surrounding properties and ensure ecosystem services for the entire community. Ecological design of future land uses will greatly increase their environmental benefits as well as their attractiveness and sustainability.

Type	Opportunity	# of GCLBA Properties	% Cover of County
	1 Vulnerable Habitat	31	11
	2 Vulnerable Habitat Connector	15	4
	3 Vulnerable Urban Habitat	3	1
	4 Vulnerable Habitat Stepping Stone	3	4
	5 Vulnerable Urban Habitat Stepping Stone	5	<1
	6 Vulnerable Urban Matrix Habitat	15	1
	7 Habitat Patch	132	22
	8 Vulnerable Development	2	1
	9 Matrix Design	17	1
	10 Habitat Matrix	87	11
	11 Exurban Ecological Design	533	35
	12 Urban Habitat Connector	173	1
	13 Urban Ecological Design	3381	8





# Key principles behind this approach



Creating enduring value for vacant land must start by honoring what people value and want for their neighborhoods. Previous studies, (Nassauer 1997, 1995; Nassauer, Halverson, and Roos 1997), along with visits in Genesee County neighborhoods, have helped us understand that ensuring that a neighborhood looks well cared for is the necessary first step to stewardship of ecosystem services, which is the foundation for enduring value. Two key principles help to explain how this works: the market substitution principle and the community care principle, described below.

## **The market substitution principle:**

*Time and community care can substitute for robust market conditions to create value.*

When real estate markets are weak and many properties are vacant, people may have more time than money to spend. They may be willing to spend more time on maintenance of their homes and neighborhoods in order to live in a more attractive place. Without intense development pressure, there may be an opportunity to take the time to manage change toward

a larger goal: achieving long-term ecosystem services. Some ecosystem services, for example, restoration of some habitats or remediation of some types of industrial contaminants, may be less expensive to achieve if a slower process can be used. With appropriate management, time is on our side when we want to build enduring environmental values.





Care is necessary to use time well. Management approaches must engage the community in care that shows and care that knows about the ecosystem services that are part of neighborhood landscapes. This leads to the second key principle:

**The community care principle:**

*Ecosystem services achieved by local communities' engagement in caring for the landscape create enduring value.*

Landscape care can take the form of maintenance or stewardship. Gardeners, people who mow their lawns, people who prune their shrubs and trees, people who keep their house and fences painted and in good repair all are showing care by maintenance. People who retain a wide swath of native plants near the shores of wetlands, lakes, and streams, who protect large areas of woodland or native flowers and grasses, who are careful not to dump waste or wash cars near storm sewer inlets or near wetlands, lakes, or streams are all showing care by stewardship. The best care combines both maintenance and stewardship, and this project shows how to do that with vacant land right now.

Care is a form of ownership. Neighborhood care can protect both social values and

ecosystem services. Even when a property title is not owned by an individual, care for that property is in itself an act of control, personal pride, and ownership that helps to build strong neighborhoods. This is particularly important in neighborhoods where mortgage foreclosures and tax forfeitures have created many vacant properties.

In the first stage of Land Bank property management, an effective approach to maintenance is essential. Keeping the neighborhood up will mean ensuring that it looks cared for, even when many properties are no longer occupied. A well-cared-for place elicits continued care. The opposite of good care is neglect. Sociologists Wilson and Kelling (1982) observed that when a neighborhood looks like no one cares – with signs of disrepair like broken windows – more crime may occur. Vacant land should not look neglected.

To achieve the second stage of Land Bank property management over the next 10-20 Years, Ripening Amenity Options, ownership is essential. This can be a sense of ownership, like having pride in the neighborhood where you live, or it can be legal ownership of property.



*“People who own property feel a sense of ownership in their future and their society. They study, save, work, strive and vote. And people trapped in a culture of tenancy do not.”*

— Henry Louis Gates, Jr.  
Professor and Director of the W.E.B.  
Du Bois Institute for African and  
African American Research,  
Harvard University

Some ways to enhance a sense of ownership and extend opportunities for legal ownership of property include mow-to-own and the transfer of occupancy rights programs, described below.

**MOW-TO-OWN** programs could establish care contracts that allow neighbors to earn legal ownership of nearby Land Bank properties by providing good maintenance of those properties over a set time.

**TRANSFER OF OCCUPANCY RIGHTS** programs could invite willing residents to transfer their occupancy from homes in “transfer neighborhoods” that have higher vacancy rates to homes in “residential restoration neighborhoods” that are more well-occupied and offer greater amenities, including adjacency to

extended open spaces created by the transfer of occupancy rights. Infrastructure updates and maintenance could be concentrated in restoration neighborhoods as a new land use pattern evolves. In transfer neighborhoods, ecosystem services could be enhanced and maintenance and service costs reduced by conversion away from residential land uses.

Looking out 10-20 Years, the Ripening Amenity Options Map on page 6 shows areas where different pathways to ownership might be appropriate for different types of Land Bank properties. The Ripening Amenity Options Map shows where mow-to-own, transfer-of-occupancy and other property transformation ideas could be applied. Approximately 80 Land Bank properties are the highest priority for ensuring stewardship of water and habitat. These properties (Type 1 and Type 3 on the map) would most appropriately become open space for water and habitat protection, but their locations would cause their transformation to create value for their whole neighborhood and benefit the region. “Transfer of occupancy rights” is one approach that could help to protect water quality, enhance habitats, and reduce maintenance expectations in these areas.

Two other types of properties on the same

Ripening Amenity Options Map are also identified as high priority to create enduring ecosystem services. The 132 Open Space/Habitat (Type 2) properties have high potential habitat values, which might be enhanced by “Transfer of occupancy rights” programs to augment open space. The 533 Development (Type 6) properties are opportunities for neighbors to achieve ownership by care on larger lots in exurban locations, perhaps by using the “Mow to Own” idea.

The vast majority of Land Bank properties (3000) are (Type 7), where further development and infrastructure upgrades are targeted. These are candidate sites for further consideration as residential restoration areas. Using urban ecological design approaches for some of these properties, density might be increased where infrastructure enhancements are made and at the edges of new open space amenities. More specific work with neighborhood citizens and more detailed examination of the natural assets of these city properties will suggest which Type 7 properties on the Ripening Amenity Options Map are most appropriate to become restoration neighborhoods, which are more well-suited to be transfer neighborhoods, and how ecosystem services can be enhanced in both types of neighborhoods.



## Examples: Stories of real places



**NOW**  
**Maintenance Concepts**



**10-20 YEARS**  
**Ripening Amenity Options**



**LONG-TERM FUTURE**  
**Ecological Land Use Design**



We chose seven vacant properties as examples to tell stories of how the thousands of properties managed by the Land Bank might be maintained. Some of these stories also suggest how properties might be transformed in the future to create enduring land values. These selected stories are examples of how our approach to managing vacant land across three time frames can be applied.



## Two stories about properties that become open space to protect vulnerable habitats



Both of the first two properties are vulnerable habitats on the Future Land Use Map. A vulnerable habitat has native soils that are relatively porous, so that surface pollution or dumping could hurt the quality of groundwater. At the same time, vulnerable habitats have potential to support native plant or animal species as habitat patches or habitat connectors. A habitat patch is a contiguous area of land cover that could provide some of the essential needs for native plants or animals. It might provide food and rest for a bird migrating from Central America to the Arctic in the spring, or it might be home for the entire life cycle of a frog. Larger habitat patches are usually more effective than smaller patches. Connecting these patches allows plants to spread and animals to move to get different resources that they need. So, habitat connectors are also important.

Different types of vulnerable habitats make up less than 22% of Genesee County, and only 72 of the more than 4000 Land Bank properties fall within those types. All of the 72 vulnerable habitat properties are designated as open space/water protection and habitat (Types 1 or 3) on the Ripening Amenity Options Map, see page 6.



## VULNERABLE HABITAT PROPERTY

W. Dodge Road  
Vienna Township

### PROTECTING WATER QUALITY AND HABITAT: A RURAL LAND-LOCKED PROPERTY

This is a relatively large property (8.4 acres) with no structures in a rural location. Nearby, are large lot residential properties, farmland, and woodland. It is land-locked, having no direct access to public roads, and it is located adjacent to more than 100 acres of woodland, where it occupies the edge between a wetland and woodland. This is the type of location that is often very rich habitat. In addition, the soils in this area tend to be porous, making it vulnerable to contamination of groundwater below.

Only 31 Land Bank properties were classified similar to this one, and land like this with potential as vulnerable habitat makes up only 11% of Genesee County. This is a good place for immediate maintenance, in the form of clear signage or boundary markings to discourage dumping and promote stewardship. Eventually, the property could be transformed to open space to create enduring value for current and future development nearby.



### What's Nearby





## VULNERABLE HABITAT CONNECTOR PROPERTY

25045 & 25102 Walton Rd.  
Flint Township

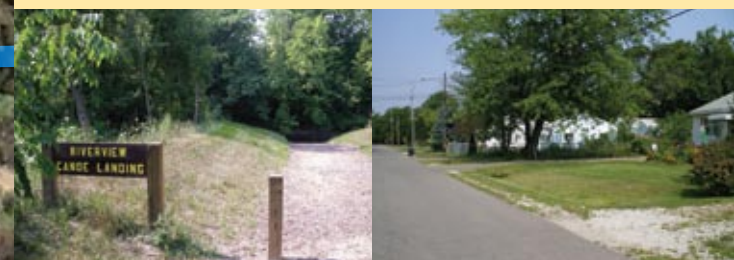
### PROTECTING WATER QUALITY AND MAKING HABITAT CONNECTIONS: A SUBURBAN LAND-LOCKED PROPERTY

This one-acre property is land-locked, having no direct access to public roads. It presents a special opportunity to create enduring amenity values because the property could contribute to the ecosystem services of the Flint River corridor. Transforming this property into open space would further connect woodland, wetland, and river habitat patches to help plants and wildlife survive. Soils are relatively porous here, so an open space land use could also help to keep groundwater clean.

Only 15 Land Bank properties were classified similar to this one, and land with potential to connect vulnerable habitats makes up only 4% of Genesee County. Making this property a high priority to be transformed for open space uses would enhance the amenity and habitat values of the Flint River Corridor, as well as nearby homes.



#### What's Nearby





## A story about habitat that enhances a city park



One of the example properties could create habitat inside the city, making it a more delightful place to live and also reducing long-term maintenance demands for the property. Habitat patches within Genesee County cities include vacant properties that are near parks, wooded areas, or stream corridors. Groundwater vulnerability is a less important issue in this location because the city water supply does not use this groundwater as a water source. In Genesee County there are more than 130 sites like this – opportunities

to reduce maintenance demands and enhance parks and open space within city limits. All of these properties are identified as Open Space/Habitat (Type 2) on the Ripening Amenity Options Map, see page 6. Properties like this are great open space opportunities, but transforming them to open space management is somewhat less urgent than for Vulnerable Habitats because near these properties, people rely on the city drinking water supply rather than private wells that could be affected by nearby groundwater contamination.

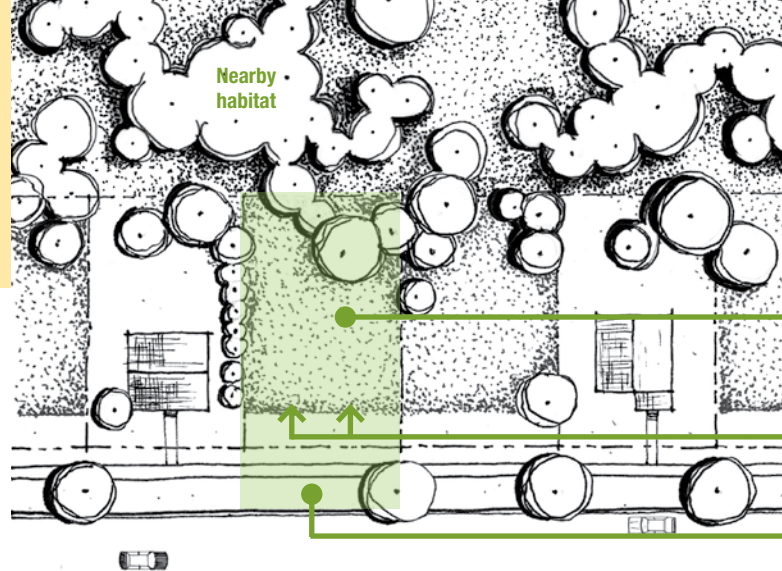


## HABITAT PATCH PROPERTY

55963 Fairfax Street  
Flint

### ENHANCING HABITAT IN THE CITY: A PROPERTY ADJACENT TO A LARGE CITY PARK

This .1-acre site faces several homes across the street, but there are no homes immediately adjacent to it, and it backs on to a large city park. It is important that maintenance now honors the tidy homes and gardens on this block. As a ripening amenity, it could become habitat that complements the park in the future. For now, it can be maintained by regularly mowing an area that extends to the front yard of adjacent houses, as shown at the top of the drawing on this page. As resources are available, native plants (especially flowery plants) can be established on this property, with the lot mown only annually in the fall – to keep tall shrubs out but encourage habitat for some birds. This approach will reduce maintenance costs at the same time as it builds enduring value for this property and property nearby. In the city where habitat patches are adjacent to homes, it's important that habitat looks beautiful and well cared for. As native plants become established, signs should be posted on the lot to help neighbors understand the good stewardship the property displays.

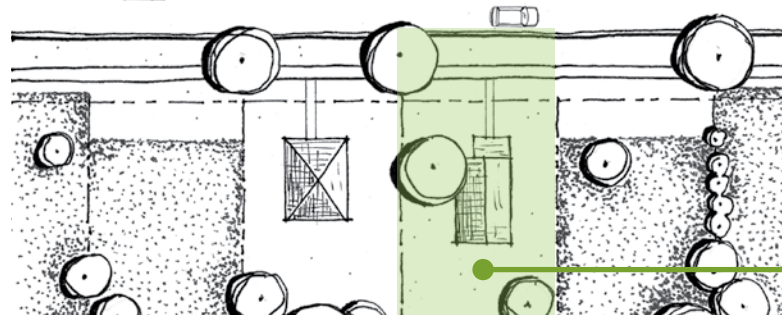


**IF** lot is vacant and adjacent to lot with occupied house...

**THEN...**  
use native plants, mow lot annually in the fall,

regularly mow strip to front of houses

and install signage



**IF** lot has occupied house...

**THEN...**  
regularly mow entire property



*Habitat and park nearby*



## Four stories about ecological design of residential properties in the city



Residential properties and other forms of development in the city also can contribute to important ecosystem services in the future. Development that contributes to ecosystem services is called ecological design. For example, residential development can be designed at varying densities to include small patches of habitat that can hold rainwater. Rainwater gardens capture rainwater from the adjacent streets, rooftops, and lawns and run it into soil beneath the gardens. That performs the ecosystem services of reducing overflow of local sewers to the Flint River, and reducing flooding and improving water quality further down the river.

At the same time, rainwater gardens are designed to enhance neighborhood amenity values and introduce selected, beautiful native plants. With native plants, rainwater gardens can be parts of small habitat steppingstones. Habitat steppingstones are small narrow

patches of native plant species that provide many ecosystem services, including providing food for a host of birds and butterflies that pass through the neighborhood, and possibly providing a resting and feeding opportunity for species migration. Steppingstone habitats in cities may be especially important to help the natural world adapt to climate change. Even habitat patches the size of a small perennial garden, repeated over a large area, could help to support the survival of native plant and animal species as they seek climate characteristics that they need.

Properties that could be developed using ecological design are, by far, the largest number in the Land Bank inventory (3814 of more than 4000 properties in 2006), and areas for ecological design occupy 43% of Genesee County. Because these properties are nearly always part of existing residential areas, they must be maintained in a way that honors neighborhood expectations and values. For each of the stories below, detailed drawings show what to look for in the neighborhood and where each property is located in order to determine both economical and environmentally beneficial methods of maintaining the property.



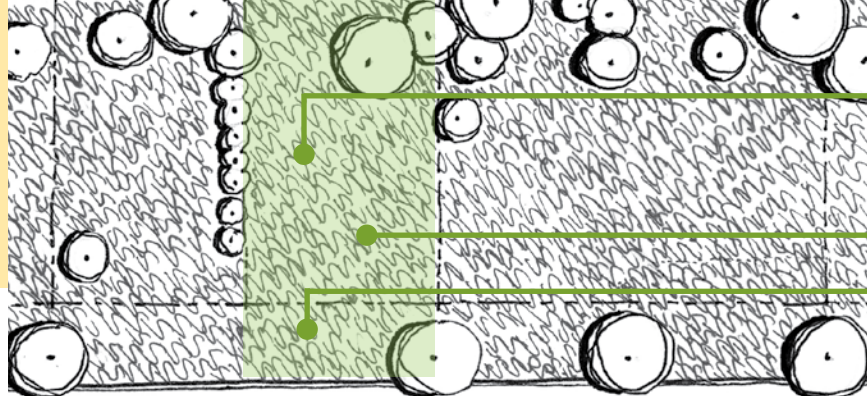
## URBAN HABITAT CONNECTOR PROPERTY

E. Russel Street  
Flint

### VACANT LAND ON A BLOCK WITH HIGH VACANCY NEAR AN EXISTING OPEN SPACE

This .1-acre property is on a block that has much vacant land, and it is near an existing open space. In this case, the nearby open space is a cemetery; in other cases, it might be a river corridor. While the property itself doesn't necessarily have high habitat or amenity values now, ecological design could establish these values over time. Eventually the property could be a habitat connector, enhancing the habitat value of the larger open space nearby.

For now this property should be maintained as a casual yard by regularly mowing only the boulevard and a three-foot strip beyond the sidewalk. The recommended maintenance plan would involve introduction of native species as resources allowed and adding signage to help neighbors understand that this maintenance plan is good stewardship. Almost 900 Land Bank properties could be maintained as casual yards. The areas identified as casual yards cover 11% of Genesee County. Many casual yard properties are in residential areas just beyond city boundaries, and many are in areas of lower density development within city limits.

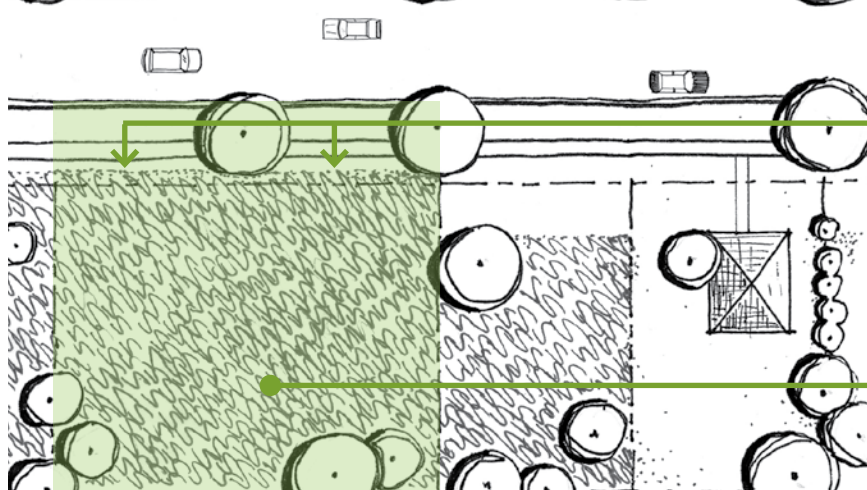


**IF** lot is vacant and adjacent lots are also vacant and street DOES NOT HAVE sidewalk...

**THEN...**

**do not mow lot annually and**

**do not use mow strip.**

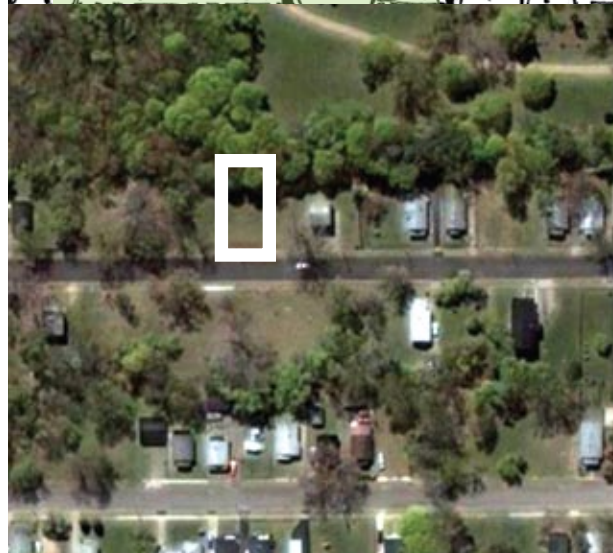


**IF** lot is vacant and adjacent lots are also vacant and street has sidewalk...

**THEN...**

**regularly mow strip to 3' beyond sidewalk,**

**but do not mow lot annually.**





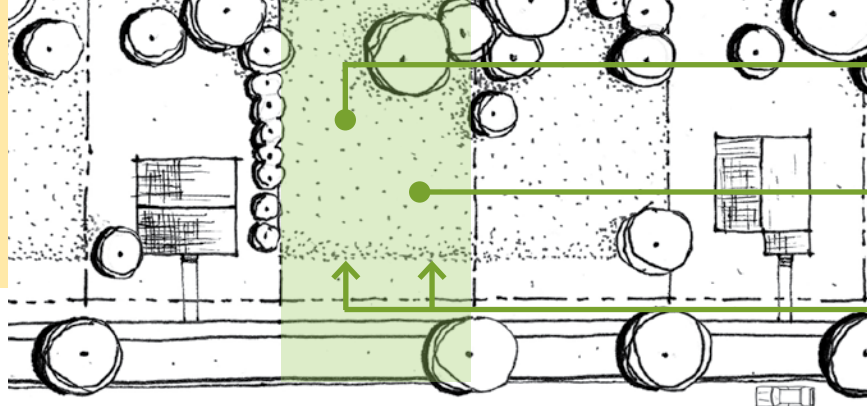
## URBAN ECOLOGICAL DESIGN PROPERTY

906 E. Alma Avenue  
Flint

### VACANT LAND ON A WELL-OCCUPIED BLOCK

This property is in a neighborhood and in a block where most residences are occupied and where infrastructure quality appears to be good. This is a neighborhood where investments in maintenance and infrastructure could attract even more people to live. While there is no longer a house on this property, there are occupied houses nearby. At a minimum, an area that extends from the street to the front of adjacent houses should be kept mown as shown at the top of this drawing, and the entire lot can be mown once each year in the early fall. Where Land Bank property is occupied, the entire property should be mown regularly. It is important that maintenance of this property fits in with the good care given to other properties on the block.

While this property is one of more than 3000 Land Bank properties that should be maintained as an Orderly Urban Yard, not all properties of this type need as much maintenance as this example property. The last story in this book describes an orderly urban yard that would require less maintenance.

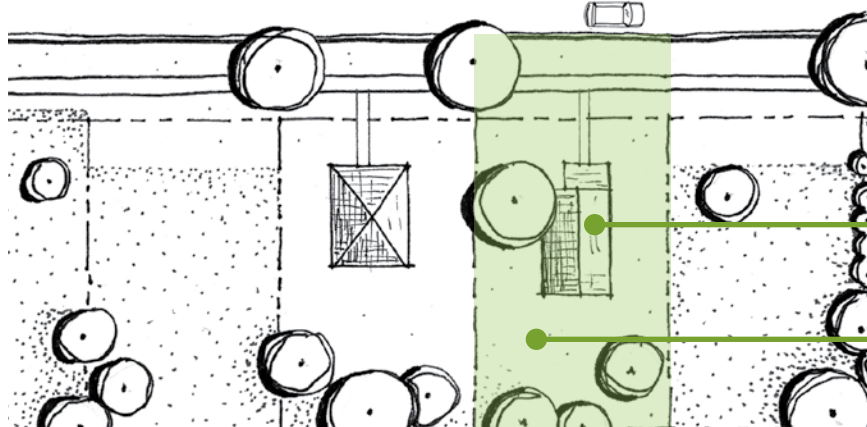


**IF** lot is vacant and adjacent to lot with occupied house...

**THEN...**

mow lot annually in fall and

regularly mow strip to front of houses.



**IF** lot has house...

**THEN...**

regularly mow entire property.

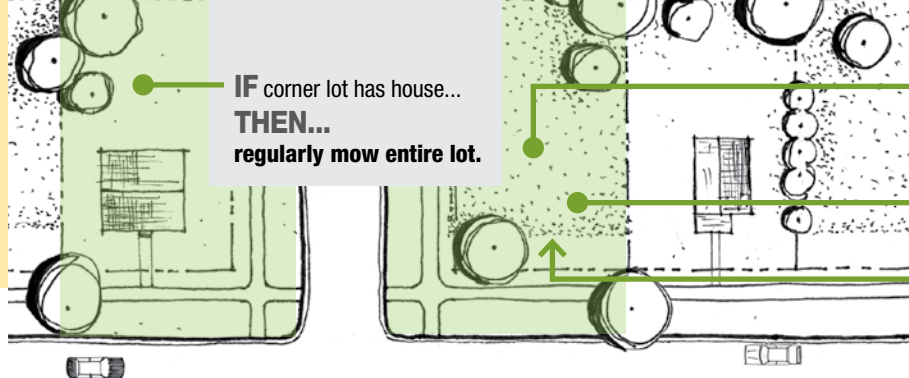




805 E. Foss Avenue  
Flint

### VACANT LAND ON THE CORNER OF A WELL-OCCUPIED BLOCK

This .1-acre property occupies a special location that invites community engagement. Corners are great places for neighbors to get to know each other better and show that they care about their neighborhoods. The corner of a block can be designed to be a neighborhood marker or gateway to the neighborhood as a whole. While vacant land on a corner may be maintained similarly to other vacant land, as shown in the drawing on the upper right, it also invites the community to celebrate its identity and show ownership by putting up a sign and mowing or planting a garden at the base of the sign as shown on pages 15 and 21. Neighbors also can show their investment in the neighborhood by planting and maintaining a vegetable garden, orchard, or nursery on corner lots.

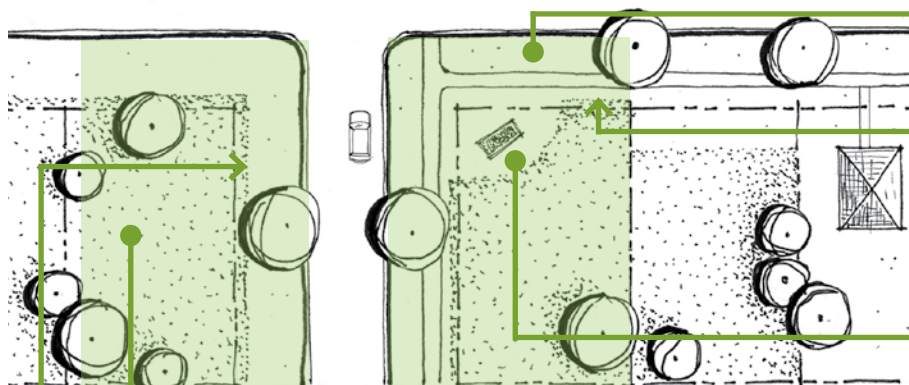


**IF** corner lot is vacant and adjacent to lot with occupied house...

**THEN...**

**mow lot annually in fall and**

**regularly mow strip to front of house on front of lot and to 3' beyond sidewalk on side of lot.**



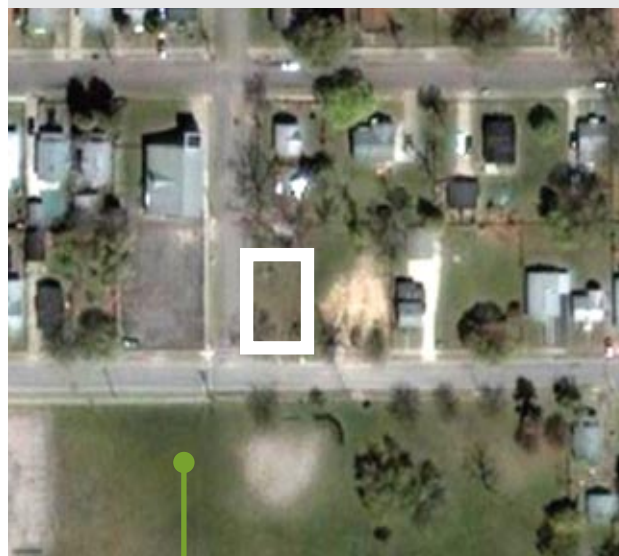
**IF** corner lot is vacant and adjacent to vacant lot...

**THEN...**

**mow lot annually in fall and regularly mow strip to 3' beyond sidewalk on both sides of lot.**

Where appropriate, corner lots can be used for neighborhood identity markers, and the can be mowed to highlight signage or other elements such as a planter.

**IF** corner lot is vacant and adjacent to vacant lot and does not have a sidewalk...  
**THEN...**  
**mow lot annually in Fall and regularly mow strip to ~10' beyond curb on both sides of lot for sight lines.**



Martin Park





### Signage to support maintenance

Sometimes the value of a particular landscape may not be obvious. Signs that help people understand neighborhood identity and ownership (for example, who takes care of a particular garden) or that help people be aware of fragile ecosystem services (like clean water or special wildlife habitats) can help people see vacant property differently. In the early years of maintaining vacant property, signage can help to communicate the value of natural assets on property that is not being regularly mown.



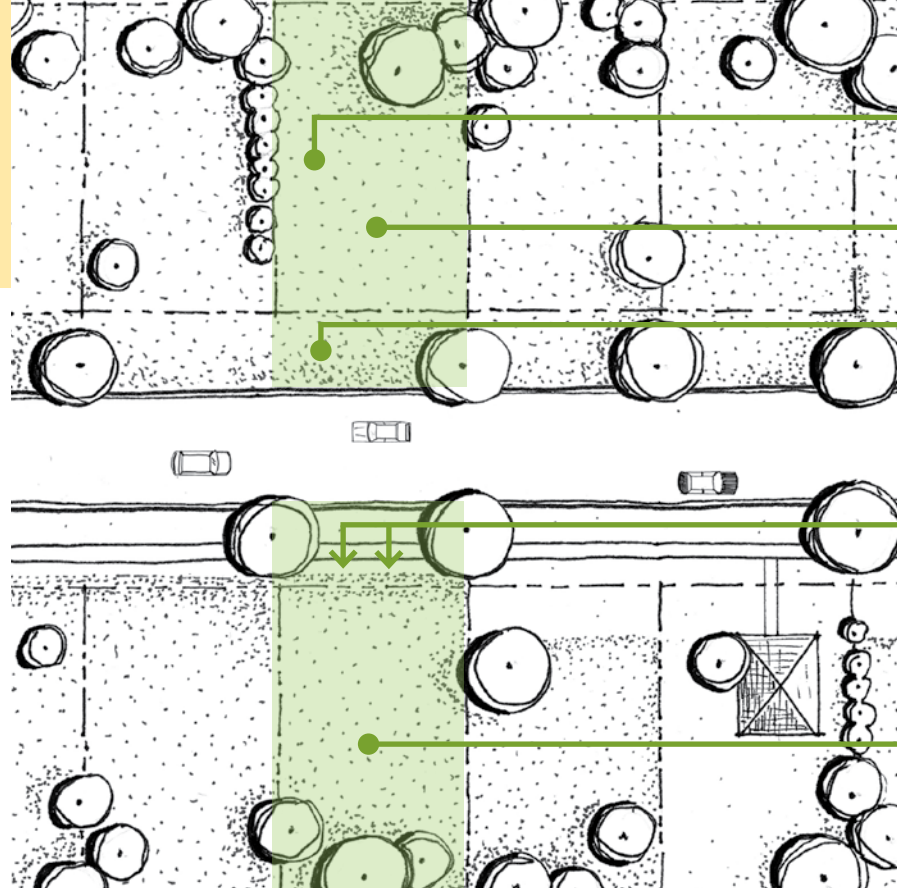


## URBAN ECOLOGICAL DESIGN PROPERTY

E. Bundy Avenue  
Flint

### VACANT LAND ON A BLOCK WITH HIGH VACANCY

This .13 acre lot is in a neighborhood with higher rates of vacancy, and it could be a strong candidate for being “adopted” by an adjacent property owner or other community uses, including habitat steppingstones. For now, since adjacent and nearby lots are also vacant, regularly mowing a strip three feet beyond the sidewalk and mowing the property annually conveys good care. Annual mowing should be done only in early fall to avoid disturbing wildlife that may nest in early summer grasses.



**IF** lot is vacant and adjacent lots are also vacant and street DOES NOT HAVE sidewalk...

**THEN...**

**mow lot annually**

**but do not use mow strip.**

**IF** lot is vacant and adjacent lots are also vacant and street has sidewalk...

**THEN...**

**regularly mow strip to 3' beyond sidewalk and mow lot annually.**



# Using vacancy to write the right stories for the future

While patterns of vacant land in Genesee County and other metropolitan areas around the nation will change with time, the enduring ecosystem services that are at stake do not change. The inherent water resources, amenity characteristics, and biodiversity potentials of the county could be enhanced, or these natural assets could be inadvertently damaged by the way that vacant properties are maintained and developed. This project lays the foundation for the county to use a time of weaker land markets to establish a powerful direction to benefit Genesee County for generations. The Now: Maintenance Concepts time frame map illustrates where to use different forms of community care and stewardship now, in ways that could engage citizens to develop a deeper sense of ownership for neighborhood landscapes and ecosystem services. By establishing the pattern for enhancing enduring ecosystem services now, before market pressures could lead to piecemeal impressions of progress, the county can build greater, enduring values for future markets – ensuring that the county is the beautiful, inviting, resource-rich location that it can be.



The three time frames lead from maintenance now through transformation of ripening amenities to ecological design of future land uses. Because the maps are based on underlying ecosystem values and widely held cultural norms for care and stewardship, they can continue to be used even as the specific inventory of vacant Land Bank properties changes. The stories of example properties show how the maps can



*Use a time when property is vacant to move toward a future that enhances the natural assets of the community.*

be used to make on-the-ground decisions for the nearly 5000 properties in the Land Bank inventory in 2006. As the property inventory changes, as neighborhood ownership of vacant properties increases, and as detailed information about ecosystem services on individual properties becomes known, other design and management approaches will develop to be appropriate to particular circumstances. However, the overarching idea should remain the same: Use a time when property is vacant to move toward a future that enhances the natural assets of the community. Building on the power of community care and the value of time, the Genesee County Land Bank Authority can establish a direction for landscape change that will make the future of the county even more promising than its past.





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*(list updated 1/2/07)*

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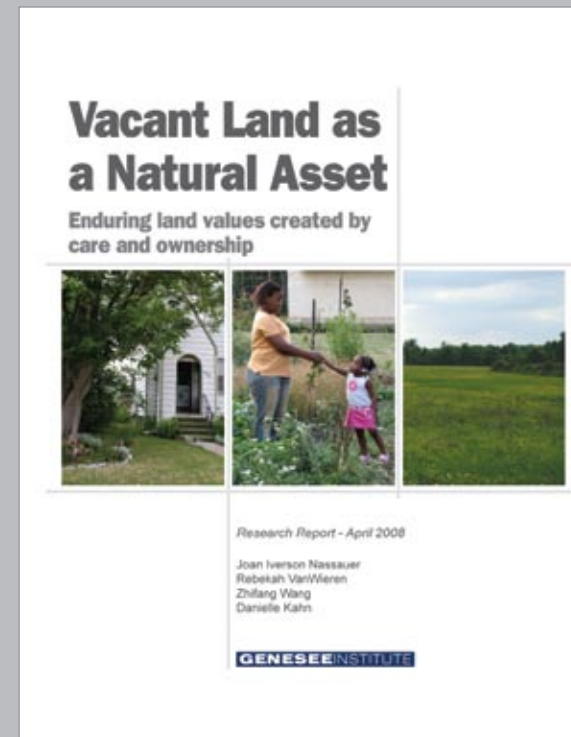
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\*Includes discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression.

## To learn more about past studies

- Dowdell, J., H. Fraker, and J. Nassauer. 2005. Replacing a Shopping Center with an Ecological Neighborhood. *Places*. 17:3, pp.66-68.
- Dowdell, J., D. LaClergue, E. Marshall, R. Van Wieren, 2007. **Alternative Futures for Sustainable Redevelopment of a Post-Industrial Brownfield Site: A Case Study in the Nation's Vehicle City: Flint, Michigan.** Masters Opus. School of Natural Resources, University of Michigan.
- Hager, Mary Catherine. Low-Impact Development. *Stormwater*. January/February 2003. 4:1, pp. 12 –25.
- Nassauer, J. I. 1995. Messy ecosystems, orderly frames. *Landscape Journal* 14 (2):161-170.
- Nassauer, J. I., ed. 1997. **Placing Nature: Culture in Landscape Ecology.** Washington, D. C.: Island Press.
- Nassauer, Joan, Brady Halverson, and Steve Roos. June 1997. **Bringing Garden Amenities into Your Neighborhood: Infrastructure for Ecological Quality.** A Guidbook for Cities and Citizens. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.
- Nassauer, J. I., A. Bower, K. McCardle and A. Caddock. June 1997. **The Cambridge Ecological Corridor Neighborhood: Using Ecological Patterns to Guide Urban Growth.** Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.



## For more information about this project

- Nassauer, J. I., VanWieren, R., Wang, Z., and Kahn, D. 2008. **Vacant Land as a Natural Asset: Enduring Land Values Created by Care and Ownership.** Genesee Institute, Flint, MI.

For more information, see  
Professor Joan Iverson Nassauer's Laboratory Website:  
[www-personal.umich.edu/~nassauer/Lab](http://www-personal.umich.edu/~nassauer/Lab)





*A time when land is vacant can be an extraordinary opportunity  
to pause and invest in the natural assets of a place.  
Attractive places to live must be healthy places.*

This project describes how to take care of vacant property in a way that builds enduring land values for the future.

To download the detailed research report, go to: [www-personal.umich.edu/~nassauer/Lab](http://www-personal.umich.edu/~nassauer/Lab)