Right-Sizing Cities

Presentation to the conference on

Strengthening Neighborhoods in Weak Market Cities

Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis
St. Louis, Missouri
September 24, 2008

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Outline

The Paradox
The Condition
The Options
The Action
The Opportunity
The Paradox

Small is beautiful...

But Bigger is Better...
The Paradox

“Accept that we are a smaller city.”

-- Youngstown 2010 Vision

versus

“If you say ‘downsize,’ politically you’re dead.”

-- A Detroit observer
The Condition

Budget
The Condition

Why the Mismatch?

• Economic transformation
• Exodus of industry and jobs
• Population aging
• Obsolescent infrastructure
• Fiscal stress; decline of public services
• Downward spiral of disinvestment & decline
The Condition

Residue of Mismatch

• Declining property values
• Abandonment and vacancy
• Housing and commercial surplus
• Infrastructure inefficiencies
• Crime, arson, squatters
• Civic disengagement
• Negative perceptions and image
• Stigmatization & demoralization
The Condition

Anatomy of Population Change, Buffalo Metro, 1880-2000

- Metro
- Erie County
- Niagara County
- Buffalo City
The Condition

Magnitude of mismatch

- as of 2006: 33,000 vacant housing units and lots, 4,000 other vacant structures in Buffalo
- 13% of all addresses are ‘undeliverable’ (2008 HUD USPS)
- increasing inner-ring suburban problems
- 500 vacant properties in Cheektowaga
- Empty storefronts in Amherst
- Tonawanda losing population at rate faster than Buffalo
The Condition

Vacant Homes Abundant in Buffalo

Even though the city demolishes hundreds of abandoned buildings each year, Buffalo continues to have among the largest percentage of chronically vacant housing units in the nation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cities with the most vacant units per 100 people</th>
<th>Vacant structures demolished in Buffalo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffalo</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>3.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gary, Ind.</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>2.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans</td>
<td>2.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dayton, Ohio</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannah, Ga.</td>
<td>1.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kansas City, Kan.</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Does not include short-term or seasonal housing.*

Sources: Federal Reserve Bank of New York;
The Options

a. Ignore It.
b. Accommodate It.
c. Combat It.
d. Embrace It.
The Options

1. Ignore it: Let the Market Work

2. Accommodate it: Treat the Symptoms
   - Anti-flipping efforts
   - Demolitions
   - Brownfield redevelopment
   - Land banks
   - Building moratoria
The Options

3. *Combat it: Exploit new opportunities*
   - Re-greening
   - Gardening collectives
   - Tax abatements
   - Deregulation – e.g., mixed use zoning
   - Code enforcement

4. *Embrace it: revitalization without growth; right-sizing*
   - Strategic planning
   - Targeted investment; triage
   - Relocations
   - Decommissioned infrastructure
   - Planned abandonment
The Action

Key Strategies

• Make Buffalo a “living laboratory” for vacant properties efforts
• Build property information system
• Develop comprehensive code enforcement policies/processes
• Redevelop brownfields and greyfields
• Right-size and reinvest, creating green infrastructure
The Action

Contiguous vacant lots and homes forming areas of at least ½ acre
The Opportunity

Seven to consider

• Community introspection
• Community development
• New (unexpected) partners
• Environmental, recreational & financial gains
• Increased capacity and confidence
• Changed perceptions & reputation
• Civic leadership
The Opportunity: Paradox Lost

Where the Urban Dream Life Is Going Cheap
What could possibly make someone want to leave New York and move to Buffalo?
By Adam Sternbergh
Published Aug 24, 2008
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