PARTNERSHIP FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD

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Greening Buffalo's Vacant Lots

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Summary
Greening vacant lots is one of the most cost effective ways for Buffalo to improve its neighborhoods. At a bare minimum, Buffalo can combat blight, raise property values, raise property tax revenue, lower crime rates and improve residents' quality of life with a simple program to clean up, green up, and maintain vacant lots. Vacant lots are also prime locations for parks, playgrounds, bike trails, walking paths, community gardens and urban farms.

Greening lots can benefit a community in different ways - providing jobs, educational opportunities, a rallying point and source of pride for a neighborhood, a place for children to play, or a very local source of fresh, nutritious food. Many local organizations are engaged in greening lots, including Community Action Organization of Erie County, Grassroots Gardens, Groundwork Buffalo, Massachusetts Avenue Project, and PUSH Buffalo.

Expanding one or more of these efforts into a larger scale, city-wide program would make a dramatic, eye-opening difference in Buffalo.

Lot cleaned and greened by PUSH Buffalo at 608 West Utica Street, Buffalo

Vacant Lots and Blight in Our City

The City of Buffalo had an estimated 10,170 vacant lots as of 2000.[1] Of these, almost half – roughly 4,200 – were owned by the City.[2] There are more and more vacant properties every day as Buffalo's population continues to decline – Buffalo has lost more than ten percent of its population since 2000.[3] Current estimates place the number of vacant lots at over 14,000. In addition, there are more than 8,600 abandoned structures facing demolition – creating more empty lots.[4]

These wasted spaces generate little or no tax revenue, and are a major source of blight. Uncared-for properties are a target for illegal dumping, crime, and drug use. They are eyesores, and they can drastically lower the property values of surrounding homes.[5]

A Buffalo Example

Groundwork Buffalo is hiring a team of youth from Buffalo's east side to green vacant lots in their neighborhood. The youth will get 20 hours of paid work per week. They will also learn resume writing and other job skills.

Philadelphia 'Clean and Green'

Faced with a similar problem, the City of Philadelphia devised a simple, cost-effective way to 'Clean and Green' some of its debris-choked, abandoned properties.[6] Under the guidance of The Philadelphia Horticultural Society (PHS), a small pilot program in one neighborhood has become a city-wide phenomenon: thousands of properties – almost nine million square feet – have been transformed from blight to green space in the last ten years.[7]

PHS is given license to improve city-owned vacant lots and properties that violate the City's nuisance ordinance. City crews help remove the largest pieces of garbage and debris.[8] Contractors then clean up the remaining refuse, import topsoil as necessary, and plant grasses and trees.[9] Next, wooden railings are installed around the perimeter, creating an important visual sign that the property is cared for and deterring dumping and other illegal activity on the property. [10] In the final phase, contractors perform bi-weekly maintenance during the summer months to cut grass and clean up additional garbage[11].

Clean and Green prioritizes strategically located properties – those that serve as 'gateways' to a neighborhood or are particularly visible. In some cases, the property may later move to a different use, becoming the site of a community garden or new, affordable housing, for example. [12]

Vacant lot in Philadelphia before and after clean and green.[1]

The simple cleaning and greening can have an outsized impact, however, as a well-kept parcel is more attractive to prospective buyers and raises the value of adjacent property.[13]

PHS estimates that it costs between $1.25 and $1.50 per square foot to stabilize a property. Maintenance costs as little $0.15/sq. ft. each year. As the average lot in Philadelphia is around 1,000 square feet, it costs roughly $1,250 to turn the average eyesore into a green space that the community can enjoy. The space can be maintained for around $150 a year.

In the meantime, the vacant lot will no longer drag down surrounding property values, but rather increase them by as much as 30%.[14] Properties up to a quarter-mile away can be affected by the condition of a single vacant lot.[15] In one neighborhood studied, a combination of improvements to vacant lots and tree plantings increased the value of the neighborhood by $16 million dollars.[16]

Philadelphia's Community LandCare

A second prong of Philadelphia's model, Community LandCare, involves neighborhood-based organizations and transition-to-work programs in the maintenance and improvement of vacant lots.[17] At the peak of this program, nine member organizations cared for hundreds of vacant properties, providing over one hundred seasonal jobs to members of the community.[18]

Philadelphia's Community LandCare Program created over 100 jobs, allowing members of the community to work productively – right in their own neighborhood.

Unfortunately, Community LandCare was decimated by budget cuts in 2010; currently, the work force is down to 30 or 40 individuals[19].

Buffalo Clean and Green

We propose that a program modeled after Philadelphia's program should be employed to clean and maintain vacant lots here in Buffalo. This would raise property values, increasing tax revenue and benefitting city government. The newly created green spaces would also improve the appeal of the city and the quality of life for thousands of residents. Cleaning and greening should serve as the "baseline" treatment for our vacant lots – the simplest, least expensive, most universally appropriate measure. Based on the Philadelphia model, it would cost roughly $1,250 to clean and green the lot and $150 per year to maintain it.

Building on the clean and green model, we can also develop a menu of other green lot treatments to be used where neighborhood residents desire more, funding is available, and a responsible organization is committed to the long-term maintenance of the lot. Models for these other treatments already exist in Buffalo; what is needed is education of residents and leaders about green lots and funding to expand them throughout the city.

Rain Gardens

Grass lots can serve as rain gardens, passively absorbing some of the rainfall and snowmelt that currently overwhelm our sewer system and dump raw sewage – among other pollutants – into Lake Erie and our waterways. The most basic clean and green lot already improves rainwater retention. By making the lot slightly concave, so that water flows into the lot instead of out onto the street, we can further decrease runoff.

Additional planting, grading, and other techniques can be added in key locations, and, in the case of vacant lots next to buildings, the downspouts of the buildings can be routed into the green lot instead of into the sewer system. Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper, PUSH

Buffalo, and others have built a number of rain gardens throughout the city.

Community Gardens
A community garden is a simple way to beautify and unite a community. Grassroots Gardens of Buffalo leases land from the City – and provides the $1 million dollar liability insurance that an individual cannot afford, but that the City requires – and then leases the property to gardeners. There are around 130 approved community gardens in Buffalo, including over 30 new gardens that just won City approval.

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Urban Farms
Urban farms bring jobs and healthy food choices to underserved neighborhoods, while promoting food security and lower food prices. The Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP) operates one of Buffalo's premiere urban farms, raising vegetables, chickens, and tilapia fish, while teaching youth nutrition, work skills, and entrepreneurship. MAP also has a Mobile Market; a modified bus that sells fresh produce to neighborhoods that lack of access healthy food.

Funding and Operations
Because the City owns such a large number of vacant lots, it would make a logical entity to spur the creation of a Clean and Green program. In Philadelphia, the city devoted some of its Community Development Block Grant funding from the federal government to the Clean and Green program. Such a program should also be an attractive one for local foundations and philanthropists to fund, and, given that the vacancy problem exists in cities, suburbs, towns, and villages all over the state, it would make a very good target for state funding.

The City could issue a request for proposals for a non-profit organization to run a Clean and Green program. Using Philadelphia as a model, it would cost approximately $500,000 to clean and green 400 lots and $60,000 to maintain them for one year. If the City greened an additional 400 lots each year, then maintenance costs would continue to rise by $60,000 per year. To green and maintain 4,000 lots in ten years, thus, would cost $8.3 million. To continue maintaining those lots would then cost roughly $600,000 per year.

[1] Buffalo's Comprehensive Plan, p. 24.
[2] Phil Fairbanks, "Buffalo wants them razed," Buffalo News, 7/7/08.
[3] U.S. Census.
[4] Buffalo's Comprehensive Plan, p. 24
[5] Susan Wachter, "The Determinants of Neighborhood Transformations in Philadelphia Identification and Analysis: The New Kensington Pilot Study, 2005, p. 15.
[6] Philadelphia Horticultural Society, "Philadelphia Green Project Profile: Vacant Land Management."
[7] http://www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org
[8] Philadelphia Horticultural Society, "Philadelphia Green Project Profile: Vacant Land Management."
[9] Id.
[10] Id.
[11] Id.
[12] Philadelphia Horticultural Society, "Philadelphia Green Project Profile: Vacant Land Management."
[13] Susan Wachter, "The Determinants of Neighborhood Transformations in Philadelphia Identification and Analysis: The New Kensington Pilot Study, 2005.
[14] Id.
[15] Id.
[16] Id.
[17] Id.
[18] http://www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org
[19] Dan Geringer, "Vacant-lot fund cut is no clean sweep, mayor says," Philadelphia Daily News, July 15, 2010.

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Appendix

A Rough Budget for Cleaning and Greening 4,000 Lots

	Clean	Maintain	Total
Year 1	$500,000	$60,000	$560,000
Year 2	$500,000	$120,000	$620,000
Year 3	$500,000	$180,000	$680,000
Year 4	$500,000	$240,000	$740,000
Year 5	$500,000	$300,000	$800,000
Year 6	$500,000	$360,000	$860,000
Year 7	$500,000	$420,000	$920,000
Year 8	$500,000	$480,000	$980,000
Year 9	$500,000	$540,000	$1.04 million
Year 10	$500,000	$600,000	$1.1 million
Total	$5 million	$3.3 million	$8.3 million