Vacant Land Stewardship

Improving Neighborhoods by Reusing Vacant Lots

Land is one of our greatest assets, and most finite resources. Vacant lots make up the majority—over 75 percent—of public vacant property inventories across the United States. Without intervention, these hundreds of thousands of lots will quickly become overgrown spaces that harm neighbors and neighborhoods.

Recognizing the incredible opportunity vacant land presents, many communities are finding creative and productive ways to actively repurpose lots and improve their neighborhoods. This "vacant land stewardship" can address some of our most pressing challenges.

What is Vacant Land Stewardship?

Vacant land stewardship is the comprehensive repurposing and maintenance of vacant lots in service to community needs, priorities, and goals. Lots can become everything from well-maintained side yards to vegetable farms to pollinator habitats to solar fields. See many examples of vacant land reuse in our project database.

Vacant land stewardship most immediately benefits residents. Neighborhoods with well maintained and stewarded vacant lots realize an increase in property values, a reduction in crime, deepened resident engagement, and higher quality of life.

In Flint, Michigan and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, researchers found that residents living in neighborhoods with better maintained vacant lots ***reported better mental health and less fear*** *than residents in areas with poorly maintained lots.*

In Saginaw, Michigan, the land bank partnered with Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy to seed ***1,500 lots with a native, pollinator-friendly seed mix*** *to improve environmental conditions of lots and reduce maintenance needs.*

KEY TERMS

Vacant property is inclusive of vacant buildings and vacant lots.

A **vacant lot** is a parcel without a structure, which could include a previously developed lot or an unbuildable lot.

Vacant land stewardship is the comprehensive long-term repurposing and maintenance of vacant lots.

Learn More about the benefits of vacant land stewardship at communityprogress.org/resources/vacant-land

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PROGRESS POINTS

Fundamentals of Vacant Land Stewardship

Vacant land stewardship requires four fundamental elements: knowing your community's **context**, having clear **goals and plans**, committing to **collaboration**, and enacting facilitative **policies**. These four elements will look different in every community, but they are all critical components of implementing successful vacant land stewardship.

CONTEXT

Before a community can comprehensively tackle vacant land, it needs to see the whole picture. By understanding what lots you have, who owns them, where they are, and who is already furthering vacant land efforts, you can begin to connect around what's possible.

PLANS

When you know what you have and who's involved, you can begin to dream, plan, and articulate the purpose of your efforts on vacant land. Any plan must address the full scope of vacant lots in your geography and be regularly updated.

COLLABORATION

Everyone has a role to play in vacant land stewardship. Resident participation and leadership are critical, as they are most immediately impacted. Bringing together all stakeholders can ensure all the necessary skills and buy-in are present to bring ideas to life.

POLICY

Vacant land stewardship depends on policies that facilitate action and innovation. Organizational, local, and state policies must adapt over time to allow for new uses, ownership models, and programs that individuals and communities may create in their pursuit of equitable communities.

__Crime density and severity declined__ around vacant lots owned and stewarded by a land bank, found a 2023 study in Flint.

In Detroit and Milwaukee, community gardens on formerly vacant lots were associated with __higher fruit and vegetable consumption__ because gardeners felt more connected to the food they grew. Community gardeners also reported a greater sense of neighborhood connection.

In Youngstown, Ohio, steets near professionally mowed vacant lots saw __deeper declines in violent crime__ than streets near unmowed vacant lots. Vacant lots repurposed by community groups were associated with even greater declines in crime in the surrounding neighborhoods.

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