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Re-imagine a more sustainable Cleveland

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Marc Lefkowitz

Neighborhood Progress, Inc is working with the Urban Design Center of Northeast Ohio on a strategy that would put vacant land in Cleveland back into productive use. Starting in 2008, they have identified ways to reuse abandoned properties—both in the city's landbank and in the hands of private owners who might be interested in an opportunity to convert it, for example, into a garden, an apple orchard or other productive green space.



After mapping the sites and meeting with residents to listen to what they want, the groups will tap a major grant from the Surdna Foundation to produce a resource book and to pay for demonstration projects in 2009. These may ultimately be holding strategies until development interest increases, or they might be longer term. The group has mapped where vacant parcels exist—some where houses long since torn down have become fields. Some of the bigger vacant lands in the city might be ripe for a proposed urban tree farm, a place to research using plants to draw toxins out of the soil (a process known as phytoremediation), or as the site of small scale wind or solar fields or even sown for crops.

Initially, the project is working on a "pattern book", a resource for neighborhoods that will contain data, guidance and examples of how to redeploy vacant land in a way that addresses the aesthetic, ecological and economic needs and enhances neighborhood life, Schwarz says.

Cleveland is one of five "weak market cities" in which Surdna will invest \$2.5 million during the next five years, says Bobbi Reichtell, Senior VP of Planning at NPI. In the first year, Surdna has asked NPI to explore ways to address the impact of a smaller population and excess vacant land. The project includes:

- 1) Implementing a citywide planning initiative to address the reuse of vacant properties in underutilized areas of Cleveland with the goal of enhancing Cleveland's sustainability;
- 2) Creating a Regional Learning Network with Pittsburgh and Youngstown on the topic of right-sizing and reinventing older industrial cities; and
- 3) Exploring ways to enhance the "green" community development work in Cleveland

UDC started producing a series of maps identifying pockets of city decline and growth and the location of green vs. gray land cover. The maps have already been used in plans for the "Forgotten Triangle" a former industrial corridor on Cleveland's east side that has large swaths of vacant land. UDC's work for community development organization Burton, Bell, Carr, for example, proposed the city convert a vast sea of vacant lots on the eastern edge of the Triangle into a tree farm for the city to grow its own treelawn trees.

