

Michigan Vacant Property Campaign

Site Visit Report: Vassar, Michigan

June 19, 2017



michigan municipal league

Better Communities. Better Michigan.

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A. Introduction

The Michigan Vacant Property Campaign (MVPC) exists to efficiently and effectively meet the needs of leaders in the state who are committed to turning the vacant properties in their communities into assets. MVPC is a working collaboration among four organizations with unique expertise related to vacant property issues: Center for Community Progress, Community Economic Development Association of Michigan, Michigan Municipal League and Michigan Community Resources. Created to develop a statewide network of practice and expertise, MVPC assists small, rural, suburban, and metropolitan areas. MVPC's core activities are to provide education and outreach, community and partner technical assistance, local campaign formation, and policy and systems development.

In working with a community, the role of MVPC is to learn about the challenges related to blighted and vacant properties facing that community and to identify effective ways to address those challenges. This report provides an overview of the challenges that key stakeholders in Vassar shared with MVPC during a recent site visit and the potential strategies, programming, and resources that the MVPC team identified for the Vassar community during that site visit. MVPC also recommends the City review the [Michigan Blight Elimination Guidebook](http://miblightguidebook.org/) at <http://miblightguidebook.org/> for assistance handling vacant, abandoned, and problem properties.

B. Methodology

MVPC was originally engaged by Brian Chapman, City Manager of Vassar. Brian contacted MVPC in February of 2016. His Request for Assistance focused mainly on issues of blight and vacancy with residential structures. He stated that to the best of his knowledge the community had never really focused on housing issues and did not currently have a plan to do so. After a discussion with MVPC partners, the group determined that the time wasn't right for an MVPC site visit, but MVPC did offer to follow up with the City regarding its blight ordinance. In June 2016, one of the MVPC partners, Center for Community Progress, reviewed the City's blight ordinance and provided preliminary recommendations for the City's consideration. They included, but were not limited to: implementing a rental ordinance; implementing a vacant

property registration ordinance; improving property data collection; strengthening the mowing ordinance; and utilizing an escalating fee schedule for violations. Since initial engagement with the City of Vassar, it has already made progress by shifting to a proactive inspections and code enforcement process. A comprehensive strategy for addressing the city's housing issues, however, has not yet been developed. The MVPC re-connected with Brian in early 2017 to assess the viability of a site visit this spring to further assess and provide assistance regarding housing and other revitalization efforts, and he welcomed the opportunity.

The purpose of the site visit was to further explore blight and vacancy issues from the perspective of community stakeholders and to generate ideas for how to address these issues. MVPC conducted the site visit on June 19, 2017, and the following individuals participated on behalf of MVPC and its constituent members:

- Richard Murphy and Tyler Hardy, Michigan Municipal League (MML)
- Julie Hales Smith, Michigan Vacant Property Campaign (MVPC)
- Payton Heins and Janell O'Keefe, Center for Community Progress (CCP)
- Jamie Schriener, Community Economic Development Association of Michigan (CEDAM)
- Amanda Reintjes, Michigan Historic Preservation Network (MHPN)
- Kathleen Reilly, Michigan Community Resources (MCR)

The Tour

The first destination on the tour was a pocket neighborhood that exemplifies the most significant residential blight and vacancy issues in Vassar – small, dilapidated homes (many are manufactured housing) with damaged siding, broken windows, porches in disrepair, and yards full of debris. Many of the homeowners and renters in this neighborhood are low income and Brian observed that property owners, whether owner-occupants or landlords, likely do not have the resources to bring these structures up to code. Because of this and other obvious challenges, the city has not yet started ticketing for code violations in this neighborhood.

Next we drove by the major problem property in the community, the 80 acre, vacant Means Plant and Grede Foundry site. This sprawling site is very close to the downtown and poses the biggest challenge to and opportunity for Vassar's long term vitality. Encouragingly, a \$600,000

US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) grant was recently awarded to assess the environmental liability; the first step in better understanding the cost of remediation and marketing the site for redevelopment.

This east side of town had neighborhoods with a mix of occupied industrial in various conditions and one- and two-unit single-family housing in poorer condition. Brian reported that here the city had a lower compliance rate with code enforcement citations. Many homes suffered from deferred maintenance.

Our group drove through several other neighborhoods – some were transitional in nature with a smattering of lovely older homes mixed with smaller, post-war marginal structures, while other neighborhoods were more consistently well kept. Brian explained that northeast neighborhoods are largely in the floodway and floodplain, which significantly limits rehabilitation and new construction. Past major flood events have resulted in the demolishing of many homes, and thus a significant number of vacant lots on which little physical re-use is possible. The limits on residential construction in the floodplain—a new home, or a home where renovations cost more than 50% of the existing value, must be raised above the historic flood level—make it difficult to reuse vacant lots as well as inhibit reinvestment in existing homes

Unfortunately the drain systems aren't properly engineered to mitigate future, significant flood events. The City is working on improving storm drainage, but there is very little existing infrastructure with which to work. The City has also been working with the drain commissioner to expand upstream detention capacity on the Moore Drain (including some on vacant land reverted to city) in order to reduce flooding from that source.

The tour concluded with a swing through downtown which is filled with two and three story historic buildings, and although there are some vacancies, the community has attracted six new businesses in the past year.

Small Group Meetings

MVPC conducted a series of meetings with community stakeholders including City and school district staff, business owners, economic development professionals, elected and appointed

officials, community groups, social service agencies and federal agencies. The objectives of the site visit were to:

- Solicit feedback from stakeholders as to the city's blight and vacancy issues;
- Identify through stakeholder discussions what vacant property and blight remediation efforts are taking place in Vassar;
- Identify partners and networks, both current and potential, willing to work on vacant property and blight issues; and
- Compile information and recommendations in a report that can serve as the initial groundwork for a blight elimination and housing strategy.

Each small group was asked to consider and answer the following questions:

- What are the biggest vacant property challenges in the community?
- What current strategies are being implemented to address vacant property?
- What is the city doing, or what can the city do better, to address vacant property?
- Who are the primary stakeholders in the community working on vacant property issues?
- If you could have one thing to improve your community, what would it be?

C. Observations

Background

According to the U.S. Census's 2011-2015 American Community Survey, ¹ in 2010 Vassar had a population of 2,697 and an estimated 2,596 in 2016 (a decrease of 101). It is a small city (only 2.18 square miles) in southern Tuscola County. It has 1,174 housing units of which 1,013 are occupied and 161 are vacant². No new housing has been built since 2013 and the age of the housing stock varies. Of the 1,013 occupied housing units, 617 (61%) are owner occupied and 396 (39%) are rentals. According to what we saw and heard from Vassar stakeholders, many of those rental properties are in need of repair and owned by out of town landlords. Approximately 17% of Vassar's owner occupied housing is valued at less than \$50,000 and 75% valued at less

¹ <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

² American FactFinder, U.S. Census, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmlk

than \$150,000, although according to a prominent lender, the market is recovering and stabilizing in Vassar.

The community is dotted with lovely parks and the river running through downtown with its stately bridge is a prominent and memorable feature. The quaint downtown also has managed to keep its historic movie theatre, whose brightly lit, ornate marquee serves as a beacon attracting visitors and residents alike.

Observations and Key Themes:

Imagine old fashioned, carefully crafted wooden puzzle pieces: beautiful parks, dilapidated homes, a reinvigorated approach to code enforcement, a historic downtown, swaths of floodway properties, lack of jobs, council support for shifting priority to housing and blight reduction, lack of data to base decisions or planning on, many city-owned vacant lots, a huge plant/foundry site with amenities and possibilities. Scattered among these disparate pieces, are smaller, sparkplug pieces that include various excited volunteers and community groups and a school system with energy and plans. They also include a dedicated, visionary city staff that seems to move stealthily among other puzzle pieces. What does this puzzle need to pull it all together? Well, a solidly crafted base, of course. It needs a base of trust and communication; a base that supports innovation and a certain amount of risk taking. But before any pieces can start to fill in and build on that base, it needs a plan for how all the pieces fit together. And everyone in the community needs to participate in putting the puzzle pieces together in that plan.

Seven key themes emerged from the discussions that occurred during the site visit, which this report will work to address:

1. **Communication between government and residents:** Most stakeholders don't seem to know all the progress that's being made – only bits and pieces. We heard many people comment on needs where others were commenting on accomplishments on those very same issues.
2. **Housing Quality:** Many participants noted a need for financial support to homeowners to address home maintenance and repair. They want to see blighted residential and industrial properties cleaned up, to improve community appearance.

3. **Manpower to manage blight:** Limited city staff capacity to manage blight came up repeatedly as a concern.
4. **Downtown:** In the past year the downtown has seen several new businesses open (and has the potential for more; targeted work is being done on attracting small manufacturers), however the downtown could benefit from sustained focus.
5. **Need for Jobs:** Jobs were mentioned repeatedly as a need, due to high profile major employers closing during the recession – a look at the Census Bureau’s LEHD dataset confirms that Vassar was home to only 588 primary jobs in 2014 (most recent available data), about half of the 1,185 jobs located in the city pre-recession, in 2006.³
6. **Lack of good data:** City staff lamented inability to efficiently and effectively identify vacant properties. The DDA stressed that they sorely need an inventory of downtown buildings.
7. **Vacant city-owned lots:** There was mention in each of the groups about the many vacant lots owned by the city. Some saw the lots as opportunities, others complained that the city didn’t have the resources to properly manage them.

Entities Currently Working on Blight Elimination

Representatives and stakeholders identified the following entities that are currently working on blight elimination in Vassar:

Entity	Activity
City of Vassar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Generous trash, large item and yard waste collection system ● Aggressive mowing campaign ● New, clearer / systematic code enforcement process: Using police/public works to report/monitor infractions through a Trello interface. City Manager issues

³ (<https://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>)

	<p>doorhanger warnings and citations, CM's office staff writes notices under CM's signature.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Very effective – most property owners (owner-occupied and landlord) comply quickly upon being noticed. In the past two months, only 2 of the 40 notices resulted in \$500 tickets. All others achieved voluntary compliance. ○ Non-responsive property owners typically vacant properties / absent owner. City hauls junk / mows. ○ City council in full support <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Have gotten good handle on grass/weeds and junk/cars – next, much harder step is addressing issues with physical structures, both vacant and occupied.
<p>Habitat for Humanity Lapeer and Tuscola</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Hopes to rehab and sell to eligible families several properties in Vassar in this next year, possibly purchased through tax sale ● Just launched an owner-occupied home repair program (serving below 80% AMI) up to \$7,500 repair funds through Federal Home Loan Bank Indiana (FHLBI) utilizing Accessibility Modification Program (AMP) and Neighborhood Impact Program (NIP)
<p>Vassar School District</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Developing programming to re-purpose green spaces owned by the city ● Hope to fully utilize a building (city previously wanted to demolish) as a community center where they currently house Headstart programs ● Working with First Fruits and others to use school kitchen facilities as business incubator/food maker space ● Seeking a partner to similarly activate school's shop space

	for business incubator activities
Vassar Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan for riverfront pavilion area
First Fruits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Church based nonprofit recently bought greenhouses and is looking to establish orchards or community gardens on city-owned vacant land.
Tuscola County Economic Development Corp	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EDC is lending money to downtown businesses to support startup costs (equipment purchase, etc.); also working to make it easy (re: regulations) for businesses to open downtown • Pursued and was awarded a large EPA grant for an environmental assessment on Means factory/Grede foundry site in order to engage prospective users.
Chamber of Commerce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively promoting and producing events and activities to activate downtown. Successfully attracting folks to not only attend but volunteer to help plan and implement

D. Recommendations

MVPC has developed the following recommendations for Vassar and its residents based on the June 19, 2017 site visit and the input MVPC gathered from government officials and other community stakeholders.

Issues identified in Vassar

Issue #1: Communication between government and residents: Most stakeholders don't seem to know all the progress that's being made – only bits and pieces. We heard lots of people comment on needs where others were commenting on accomplishments. This disconnect—stakeholders not knowing everything that's being done already—seems to lead to many being fixated on certain high-profile issues, and not sharing staff's (and City Council's) perceived urgency on residential blight issues. Also, opportunities are being missed to involve community residents in city activities.

Examples noted by stakeholders during site visit:

- Desire to do something about the old Means plant / foundry sites vs. County EDC receiving large EPA grant to do environmental assessment in order to engage prospective users.
- Desire to address empty downtown storefronts vs. progress in getting new businesses open, supporting through EDC, and follow up from ReCast City workshop etc.
- City staff noting limited volunteer capacity vs. stakeholders praising the level of volunteer support for various special events and other activities

Recommended Strategies & Resources

1. **City should promote the successes and work-in-progress** on some of these (and other) issues in order to make space for people to think about the issues that still need to be tackled. The City's Facebook page appears to get some traffic, but maybe it could be re-energized and be used as a billboard for successes. Perhaps guest writers could chronicle events such as store openings, current progress on big projects, and/or

interviews with elected/appointed officials about what is going great in Vassar. Maybe the high school or a college marketing/communications class could participate.

2. **Consider an annual “State of the City” address** by the Mayor that could highlight both successes and efforts underway. This would serve to keep residents updated on the city’s work, as well as provide acknowledgement of remaining needs.
 - The National League of Cities has produced a guide with tips on composing an effective State of the City address: http://nlc.org/sites/default/files/2017-02/NLC_State_of_the_Cities_Brief_WEB_2017_0.pdf
 - The Michigan Municipal League is completing an analysis of State of the City addresses from around Michigan, and anticipates releasing a report in August 2017 that can be used as a reference.
3. **Main Street Promotions:** If the Main Street program is introduced and pursued (see more detail under Issue #3, 8. below), this could be a mechanism to work more closely with the city and improve communication. Inherent in the Main Street model is consistent marketing and celebration of successes as well as cultivating, training and managing volunteers. Both needs that surfaced in the site visit conversations.
4. **Master Plan Implementation:** The City working closely with stakeholders to implement the Master Plan could be an opportunity to improve communication. The RRC evaluation noted the following about the Master Plan:

The City of Vassar current master plan was adopted on July 6, 2015, and includes 15 goals ranging from promoting aesthetic improvements throughout the city to improving housing opportunity and place-making. Each goal is associated with specific actions for a total of 65 actions the city and its partners should undertake to make the plan a reality. These goals and actions are based heavily on the results of a community-wide survey which garnered 397 responses from a wide cross-section of Vassar’s population. While the plan includes many actions, only a small handful are included in the implementation schedule which runs from 2015–2017 and includes only items directly implemented by city staff. In order to meet RRC certification, the city should review the actions and

*create a complete implementation schedule that includes responsible parties and estimated timelines for all actions.*⁴

- The City might consider assembling and staffing a committee to oversee and guide the implementation of the Master Plan actions. As recommended above, the committee could review the actions and create a complete implementation schedule that includes responsible parties and estimated timelines for all actions. They could then track and herald accomplishments. This process would no doubt spawn several special subcommittees, one of which could be a housing committee. See more under Issue #2, 2. below. The second could be a blight elimination strategy subcommittee. See more under Issue #6, 2. below.

Issue #2: Housing Quality: Many participants noted poor housing quality and need for financial support to homeowners to address home maintenance / structural blight issues. They want to see vacant and/or blighted homes/properties cleaned up, to help neighborhood/community appearance. Many homeowner and rental properties are in dire need of assistance because owners cannot afford to pay for repairs. The community needs information and education on resources that are available.

Examples noted by stakeholders during site visit:

- City staff can handle grass, abandoned cars, dumping, and other “front yard” issues, but structures pose a significantly heavier lift
- Residents often don’t have financial ability to tackle repairs and routine maintenance – downward spiral of deteriorating buildings is leading to lower sale prices leading to buyers with even less capacity to make repairs. Fines do not incent compliance, as it is just another stretch on a tight budget.
- Blighted structures are safety issue – fire traps and havens for criminal activity. Haven’t done structural blight enforcement in 20 years.

⁴ Report of Findings, Vassar RRC Evaluation, May 2017
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- “We don’t know what resources are out there, so residents certainly don’t either.” The community would be interested in a housing fair or other way to get word out about available resources.
- Some pushback from residents about enforcement – but from both sides.
- Some residents complain city isn’t addressing blight in their neighborhoods. They believe poorly-kept properties are a combination of age/ability, financial means, and apathy.
- “Don’t know the demographics, but it appears Vassar’s owner-occupants are an aging portion of the population, who face more difficulty maintaining their homes and yards.”
- From a resident’s point of view, there’s no money to fix things. It then feeds on itself, which then drops the value of the home. The next owner doesn’t have the money to fix it and the price keeps dropping. The property owner doesn’t have money to pay the fines and it’s a catch 22. Eventually if they don’t comply, they could be charged with a criminal misdemeanor, setting the property owner back even further.
- City is currently working to create a code enforcement plan that has the goal of compliance, rather than one of punishment.

Recommended Strategies and Resources

1. **The City might want to consider establishing a Neighborhood Enterprise Zone (NEZ).** The program provides a tax incentive for the development and rehabilitation of residential housing. A qualified local unit of government may designate one or more areas as a NEZ within that local unit of government through a local resolution. The program was established to support the development and rehabilitation of residential housing in communities where it might not otherwise occur. The program also encourages owner-occupied housing and new investment in communities. If the City chooses to pursue the creation of NEZ areas, it should use its Master Plan to support the strategic placement of these areas and consider where it wishes to strengthen homeownership.
<http://www.michiganbusiness.org/cm/files/fact-sheets/neighborhoodenterprisezone.pdf>
2. **The City could create a Housing Subcommittee** under the auspices of the Master Plan implementation committee. This subcommittee could put plans in place for gathering and

distributing information about resources for housing rehabilitation such as those mentioned below. Perhaps information flyers could be included with water or property tax bills. Or could print on the door hanger violation notices. Ultimately their efforts could culminate in a community-wide housing fair with partner entities such as Genysis, Habitat for Humanity, Human Development Commission, realtors and others.

3. Help match homeowners with financial assistance to improve property:

- Federal Home Loan Bank programs: In partnership with their members, FHLBI offers three grant programs designed to address affordable housing needs: the Homeownership Opportunities Program (HOP) to help first-time homebuyers with down payment assistance; the Neighborhood Impact Program (NIP) to assist low-income homeowners with home repairs; and the Accessibility Modifications Program (AMP) to aid seniors and households with disabled family members with home improvements that will allow them to remain in their current homes. (<https://www.fhlbi.com/products-services/communities-and-housing>).
- USDA Rural Development Single Family Home Repair Loans and Grants can help very low income applicants remove health and safety hazards, make essential repairs, or make accessible for residents with disabilities. (<http://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/single-family-housing-repair-loans-grants>). Wanda Dziwura, the Area Specialist for USDA Rural Development attended the small group session and is very eager to engage with Vassar about their many programs. 989-414-0660, wansa.dziwura@mi.usda.gov.
- Lapeer Tuscola Habitat Critical Home Repair Program: This extremely low interest loan program is available to eligible persons in Lapeer and Tuscola counties. Learn more at <http://www.lapeerhabitat.org/critical-home-repair.html>
- Genysis Credit Union will be releasing a new product in late July; Second Mortgage to fill appraisal gap of up to 133% of appraised value (future equity). For more information contact Steve Heinemann at sheinemann@genisyscu.org.
- Human Development Commission (HDC): Vassar is a target area for the HDC Home Repair Program, a zero interest loan program for eligible homeowners and for specific home repairs. Learn more at <http://www.hdc-caro.org/home-rehabilitation---weatherization.html>

4. **Develop/improve relationship with community foundation**, perhaps creating a Vassar specific grant program with donations from bigger donors in town. The Housing Subcommittee could be the point on this approach. After cataloguing all of the existing funding resources available, the subcommittee could identify critical gaps in current home repair programs, the master plan and/or the Vassar Vision plan and make a pitch to the community foundation to help fill these gaps.
5. **Consider ways to boost homeowner pride and spur visible property improvements** – example: Oswego (NY) Renaissance Association’s “Renaissance Block Challenge Grant”. This program offers 50/50 matching grants (up to \$1k) to property owners for exterior improvements to their properties, but applications can only be submitted by groups of at least 5 property owners on a single block. This allows relatively small property improvements to add up to neighborhood-scale changes, and could be a campaign for the Community Foundation to lead or support: <https://www.oswegonyonline.com/renaissance-block-challenge-grant>
6. **The City should explicitly prohibit parking vehicles on the grass in front, side and rear yards.** A sample ordinance from the city of Roseville (see Appendix 1) includes both a standard for the surfacing of parking areas on residential properties, as well as a prohibition from parking between the front of a home and the street except for on a formal driveway. This language can be compared to Vassar’s code, especially Sec. 86-526, to identify potential updates that allow Vassar to limit parking on front yards.
7. **The City and the Housing Subcommittee can work with employers to establish an employer assisted homebuyer program.**
 - Look for inspiration from Ypsilanti and their [Live Ypsi](#) grant program for Eastern Michigan University employees to buy homes in targeted neighborhoods. Detroit institutions have a similar program, [Live Midtown](#) and [Live Downtown](#).

Issue #3: Staff Capacity to manage blight: Limited city staffing to manage blight came up repeatedly as a concern. Both city staff and stakeholders were concerned about a lack of manpower. Not only does it affect code enforcement, but more proactive code enforcement also redirects attention away from regular upkeep of city parks and other city owned properties.

Examples noted by stakeholders during site visit

- Lack of adequate resources to keep up public spaces – public works department is stretched thin with burden of mowing city-owned vacant lots, inhibits keeping parks up as well as wanted
- Everyone is stretched too thin and playing too many roles. Stuff falls through the cracks. Fighting blight needs to be a sustained, dependable effort.
- Since we don't have manpower to do it all we need to at least triage maintenance of major properties to improve "curb appeal" along corridors – at least get grass/weeds mown along street frontages

Recommended Strategies and Resources

1. Consider a neighborhood stabilization / triage approach to focus limited manpower: prioritize intervening with individual vacant or blighted homes on otherwise well-kept blocks, in order to keep those other homeowners' efforts from being harmed. This seems to be already happening somewhat, but there does not appear to be an explicit strategy.

2. Master Plan Implementation Committee could commission a Blight Elimination Strategy subcommittee to develop and oversee a Blight Elimination strategy. See [Michigan Blight Elimination Guidebook](#) at <http://miblightguidebook.org/> for assistance.

3. Continue to utilize courtesy notices for property owners in an attempt to gain voluntary compliance and cut down on City-led abatement.

Issue #4: Downtown: In the past year the downtown has seen new businesses (and the potential for more small manufacturers), however the downtown still needs more focused attention. Although the Chamber has showed initiative in activating the downtown, a sustainable effort to manage and reinvigorate is needed. Also, there were conflicting opinions about quality and desire for second and third story rentals, but we heard from at least one landlord who claimed that she would welcome assistance to develop housing in upper floors of her three story building.

Examples noted by stakeholders during site visit:

- DDA suffering from low TIF capture since recession – during Cool Cities had done some building acquisition/rehab but doesn't have capacity now.
- The biggest problem with blight and vacancy in Vassar is Downtown – vacant storefronts. Some filled in last year, “but they're hitting the struggle point in the small biz life cycle”. We have to keep momentum in the face of a couple of closures.
- Where upper stories are rented, not well kept up, and some even cause problems for downstairs businesses.
- Some buildings need facelifts / façade work, but vacancy is a bigger issue
- Need to do more in downtown to get buildings and streets fixed up. Need to address the visible building rears: make things look nice and welcoming from all sides.
- We have battled vacancies downtown for years, although we're probably at the best point we've been in years. This is an ongoing issue - to keep downtown occupied. A few need facelifts, but need to keep downtown vibrant.
- DDA and property owners have invested in façade repair in the past and they are in pretty good condition, especially based on the flood in '86 and other floods

Recommended Strategies and Resources

1. **Initiate a small business assistance program** to help people get their business open.
 - A group in Detroit is working to empower and support grassroots businesses. Called ProsperUs Detroit, the mission is to empower entrepreneurs and community partners to transform low-income neighborhood economies from within. (<http://www.prosperusdetroit.org/>).
 - Michigan State University partners with economic development and nonprofit organizations throughout the state to grow businesses and leverage knowledge resources. Learn more about their Innovation Center (<http://innovation.msu.edu/economic-outreach.html>).
 - Work with the local Small Business Development Center (SBDC) to assist potential small business owners to create and hone their business plans. (<http://sbdcmichigan.org/i-69-trade-corridor/>)

2. **Pop-up Retail:** Many large and small communities have been able to attract new businesses by offering temporary space for little-to-no cost to small businesses and entrepreneurs. The City of Allegan recently led a successful pop-up retail event and the final report can be found (<http://placemaking.mml.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Allegan-PlacePOP-Final.private.compressed.pdf>), which outlines what they did and specific resources available to communities.
3. **Support entrepreneurs:** Look to entrepreneurship ideas from:
[Detroit SOUP](http://placemaking.mml.org/how-to/detroit-soup/) (<http://placemaking.mml.org/how-to/detroit-soup/>)
[Revolve Detroit](http://placemaking.mml.org/how-to/revolve/) (<http://placemaking.mml.org/how-to/revolve/>)
4. **Consider historic district designation for downtown** to support appropriate rehabilitation of these assets and provide owners access to federal tax credits. The Michigan Historic Preservation Network (MHPN) has offered to meet with city staff to discuss the process and available incentives associated with the nomination (Amanda Renitjes, reintjes@mhpnp.org). For example, Federal Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credits provide credits up to 20% of qualifying costs for eligible buildings in National Register Downtown Districts. Learn more about this designation and the incentives at (<https://www.nps.gov/tps/tax-incentives/before-you-apply.htm>).
5. **The Michigan Historic Preservation Network also has a low interest loan program** available for buildings in threatened conditions i.e. roof repair, foundation, structural issues, etc. up to \$15,000. This loan program is available to nonprofits, municipalities and churches. Learn more at <http://www.mhpnp.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/MHPN-Announces-Launch-of-an-Intervention-Loan-Program.pdf>
6. **Repurposing Downtown Buildings:** For ideas regarding the use of historic buildings downtown the MHPN also has a new resource: "A Community Guide to Repurposing Vacant and Underutilized Historic Buildings" (<http://www.mhpnp.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/A-Community-Guide-to-Repurposing-Vacant-and-Underutilized-Historic-Buildings-FINAL.pdf>).
7. **Michigan Main Street Program:** The City should consider joining the Michigan Main Street program at the Associate Level to help attract and retain local volunteers dedicated to economic development, and to better capitalize on the many assets to be found in and near downtown. (<http://www.michiganmainstreetcenter.com/>) Participating in the Main Street Program as an associate member could assist Vassar in multiple ways. Creating a volunteer driven Main Street program will help revitalize and reinvigorate the downtown, systematically work to engage more citizens in

community/downtown projects and initiatives, and provide planning and implementation support to the downtown.

Benefits of the Michigan Main Street (MMS) Program include:

- Protecting and strengthening the existing tax base
- Creating a positive community image
- Enhancing economically viable buildings
- Supporting business recruitment and retention
- Fostering the development of new jobs
- Attracting new residents to the Main Street area
- Increasing investment in the Main Street area
- Preserving historic architectural resources
- Providing services tailored to specific community needs

Issue 5: Need for Jobs: Jobs were mentioned repeatedly as a need, due to high profile major employers closing during the recession – a look at the Census Bureau’s LEHD dataset confirms that Vassar was home to only 588 primary jobs in 2014 (most recent available data), about half of the 1,185 jobs located in the city pre-recession, in 2006.⁵ The number of employed Vassar residents remained virtually unchanged, however, with 1,146 Vassar residents holding jobs in 2006, and 1,170 in 2014. As noted below, residents are now driving further to reach jobs – this can significantly cut into people’s time and resources available to commit to their home, school, neighborhood, and civic networks.

Examples noted by stakeholders during site visit:

- Need the foundry site to be redeveloped, and could use some decent-sized new employers.
- If I could change one thing in Vassar I would get a large employer back here

⁵ (<https://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>)

Recommended Strategies and Resources

1. **Support Ongoing Efforts:** Vassar is already tackling this need, both through County EDC efforts on the large industrial properties and city/EDC/schools efforts to support startup / small businesses. This strategy of supporting multiple, diverse opportunities for job creation is positive, and should be continued—but requires “slow and steady” expectations.
2. **Explore recent transformational brownfield bills** which may provide additional financial leverage for redevelopment of the large industrial sites:
[https://www.legislature.mi.gov/\(S\(lpkту0lmm1hvol5r5gdw4otv\)\)/mileg.aspx?page=getObject&objectName=2017-SB-01111](https://www.legislature.mi.gov/(S(lpkту0lmm1hvol5r5gdw4otv))/mileg.aspx?page=getObject&objectName=2017-SB-01111)
3. **Understand the Current Employment Situation:** Vassar’s commuter profile (also from Census LEHD) appears to show relatively local in-commutes, with longer-distance out-commutes, both pre- and post-recession.
 - In-bound commuters: In 2006, 57% of people employed within the city limits lived within 10 miles of their job. Only 3% commuted from more than 50 miles away to reach a job in Vassar. In 2014, 60% of people employed within Vassar lived within 10 miles of their job. Only 8.2% commuted from over 50 miles away. Both pre- and post-recession, most of Vassar’s workforce appeared to come from within Tuscola County, living in Vassar, Caro, Reese, Mayville, and the surrounding townships.
 - Out-bound commuters: In 2006, 39% of employed Vassar residents commuted less than 10 miles to reach their job, while 20% commuted over 50 miles. In 2014, only 27% of employed Vassar residents still had jobs within 10 miles of home, with 38% now commuting over 50 miles to their workplace—Lansing, an hour and a half away, is now one of the top ten commute destinations for Vassar residents (with about 2.5% of working residents employed there in 2014).

This inbound/outbound commute profile suggests that adding jobs locally has the capacity to support residence, since local workers live relatively close, while Vassar is appealing enough to keep people living locally even while working a significant distance away.

The jobs/commute data seem to affirm city staff's opinions that Vassar is a desirable place to live, but that housing condition and curb appeal can be barriers to people choosing to live in Vassar.

Issue #6: Lack of good data: City staff expressed frustration with the inability to efficiently and effectively identify vacant properties. The city has just begun to use (and work the bugs out of) Trello, a data management system to help them catalogue and track properties. The DDA stressed the need for an inventory of downtown buildings.

Examples noted by stakeholders during site visit:

- Don't have good count/inventory of vacant properties – water billing is flat monthly rate. No meters exist for residential units to allow for usage tracking.
- DDA needs to inventory downtown buildings in order to market or set build-out strategy. Some building owners not cooperative; staff capacity to do survey also an issue
- The city needs to do an inventory of the vacant downtown buildings so they could be better marketed.

Recommended Strategies and Resources

1. **Post Office:** Ask the post office whether they can provide a listing of unoccupied/undeliverable addresses to support identification and management of vacant properties.
2. **Downtown Property Survey and Database:** If the Main Street program is pursued a property database is a requirement. Whether Main Street is pursued or not, the Main Street staff could still provide a sample template and guidance (Laura Krizov, krizov1@michigan.org). A basic Excel spreadsheet and volunteers hitting the pavement can help to accomplish a simple database that can help to track progress over the years. Basic items to include should be the date the building was built, the date it was last rehabbed, the property owner and their contact information, the businesses owner (if there is one) and their contact information, the type of business, the number of residential units and if they are vacant or occupied, etc.

3. **City wide parcel survey** – could easily be done with resident volunteers and does not need to be incredibly detailed to begin. See Motor City Mapping (MCM) – property condition, occupied or not, link to assessor’s info and/or property tax info. MCM is a comprehensive effort to digitize Detroit’s property information and create clear communication channels back and forth between the public, the government, and city service providers.
 - In Phase 1 of the project, 150 Detroiters surveyed all 139 square miles of the city, capturing photography and condition information for every property. That information was used in the Detroit Blight Elimination Task Force’s report at timetoendblight.com. Learn more about MCM at <https://motorcitymapping.org/about>
 - For more guidance around data collection, see Center for Community Progress’ recent publication, [Neighborhoods by Numbers: An introduction to finding and using small area data](#).

Issue #7: Underutilized vacant city-owned parcels: There was mention in each of the groups about the many vacant parcels owned by the city. Some saw the lots as opportunities, others complained that the city didn’t have the resources to properly manage them.

Examples noted by stakeholders during site visit

- City is spending time mowing vacant lots instead of maintaining parks, etc.
- How do we use the vacant land that the city owns?
 - Parks and open space maintenance is a burden – needs are greater than DPW’s capacity to keep up
 - Many of them are in the floodway and cannot be built on

Recommended Strategies and Resources

1. **Blue/green infrastructure** – there’s a great opportunity to do some unique work in the floodway and in other vacant lots and/or on the really large private lots

- <http://therouge.org/rain-gardens-to-the-rescue/>
- <https://www.epa.gov/green-infrastructure>

- <http://www.conservationfund.org/what-we-do/strategic-conservation-planning/resources/green-infrastructure-resources>
 - <http://www.gicinc.org/index.htm>
 - <https://www.planning.org/cityparks/briefingpapers/greeninfrastructure.htm>
2. **Cass River Greenway:** Possibly Cass River Greenway could be a partner to transition vacant city lands into native habitat / created wetlands for reduced maintenance + increased flood control. <http://www.cassriver.org/>
 3. **Detroit Future City a Field Guide to Working with Lots:** Detroit Future City's Field Guide to Working with Lots is a tool for community members to use for improving vacant lots. The guidebook provides readers with tips and tricks for engaging the community, evaluating their lot, determining an appropriate design or implementation for the lot, and helpful organizations to contact. The Field Guide is not only a paper publication; it is also a website and grant program. The Field Guide site (<https://dfc-lots.com/>) has similar information to the hard copy publication plus much more. It contains information on the type of lot you have and what plantings would work best, a glossary of terms, and links to other helpful resources.
 4. **Consider an adopt-a-lot program** – capitalize on the interest of the school system to be involved with the community. See the Genesee County Land Bank “Adopt-a-lot Program” as an example <http://www.thelandbank.org/downloads/adopt-a-lot.pdf>. Or check out Calhoun County program at <https://calhounlandbank.org/adopt-a-lot/>.

Conclusion

Vacant, abandoned, and problem properties contribute to neighborhood and community decline, drive up crime and negatively impact the quality of life for residents. Vacant properties also become liabilities for local governments; they can detract businesses from investing in a city and mean less revenue generated when property taxes decline and/or go unpaid.

With limited capacity and resources, it is increasingly difficult for local governments to adequately maintain property and foster a strong community. The dedication of the residents of Vassar, the City of Vassar, and their many partners was evident in the small-group interviews.

Leadership in the community appears to be supportive of the effort to engage new partners, eradicate blight, develop a plan of action, and attract people and businesses to the city.

This report contains strategies, programs, and initiatives to help return vacant and blighted property in Vassar to productive use and to address housing issues. These will only be effective if carried out as part of a coordinated, comprehensive approach in which all community stakeholders are working together to pursue common goals for the community. This assessment can serve as the catalyst for change by challenging outdated assumptions and rethinking existing systems. The City of Vassar should be commended on taking the first step in facilitating the assessment. The next step is to translate the recommendations into an action plan and identify where more detailed analysis is required. Ideally, the City of Vassar and participating stakeholders will review this document, adopt it, and prioritize the recommended steps in their overall revitalization planning.

F. Appendices

Appendix 1: Roseville Off-Street Parking Ordinance

Appendix 2: Do-it-yourself Strategies for Neighborhood Residents

Appendix 3: MVPC Blight Elimination Guidebook

Appendix 4: Case study examples

Appendix 1: Roseville Off-Street Parking Ordinance

§ 213-1 PARKING, OFF-STREET § 213-3

ARTICLE I

Residential Property

[Adopted 3-10-1981 by Ord. No. 834; (Art. I of Ch. 213 of the 1984 Code)]

§ 213-1. Parking spaces.

Residential off-street parking spaces shall consist of a parking bay, driveway, garage or combination thereof and shall be located on the premises they are intended to serve and shall be provided with asphaltic or concrete surfacing and, further, shall be subject to the provisions of Section 2006, Off-Street Parking Space Layout, Standards, Construction and Maintenance, of the Roseville Zoning Ordinance No. 1009.1

§ 213-2. Parking in certain areas prohibited.

No persons shall park any motor vehicle in the front setback area of a residential lot, or that area between the front of a building and the city sidewalk of any residential lot, or that area of any residential lot between the city sidewalk and the street, unless the motor vehicle is fully parked on a residential off-street parking space as described above or as approved by the Building Director. In no instance shall the requirement for hard-surfacing of such parking spaces be waived.

§ 213-3. Violations and penalties.2

Any person or entity violating the provisions of this chapter shall be punished as provided in Chapter 1, General Provisions, Article I

1. Editor's Note: See Ch. 370, Zoning.

2. Editor's Note: Amended at time of adoption of Code (see Ch. 1, General Provisions, Art. II).

Appendix 2: Do-it-yourself Strategies for Neighborhood Residents

- Consider creating a “paint patrol” to help improve facades of small businesses or homes that may just need a small makeover. Consider working with a local paint store to get their miss-tint or “oops” paint to help paint the facades.
- Consider doing plant exchanges and seed shares to beautify vacant properties.
- When considering urban gardens, look at how you can connect this to health issues in order to find additional funding.
- Talk to Lowes and Home Depot about their small grants to help provide small dollar grants for the beautification program revitalization.
- Consider a mural program on large walls to begin to address graffiti or even a class on how to paint brick.
- Consider going door to door and talking to neighbors to get people together to do activities.
- Tap into the artist community to paint informational signs in heavily littered areas or to create art with trash found on-site. Look to the [Heidelberg Project](http://www.heidelberg.org/) in Detroit for an example. <http://www.heidelberg.org/>
- Communities as far as Alaska are struggling with the issue of litter and here’s an interesting [article](http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/08/littering-and-following-the-crowd/374913/) about changing the community’s culture on litter. <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/08/littering-and-following-the-crowd/374913/>
- Work with schools to do special anti-litter educational campaigns with elementary students. The Ferguson Foundation offers an Anti-Litter Campaign template <http://fergusonfoundation.org/trash-free-potomac-watershed-initiative/education/litter-prevention/resources/>

Appendix 3: Michigan Blight Elimination Guidebook

The document is designed to provide municipal leaders with a variety of blight elimination resources and lead them through the development of a blight elimination plan. The guidebook is available online at miblightguidebook.org—making it an ever-changing document that compiles the most recent blight mitigation resources, opportunities, and ideas from across the state. It also serves as a primer for Michigan communities interested in developing a strategy to more effectively address blight with limited resources.

Appendix 4: Case Examples⁶**Fremont
(pop. 4,081)
Yard of the Month
Newaygo County**

To encourage neighborhood pride and beauty through the upkeep of yards, a volunteer group of citizens (including the former Mayor Pro Tem, the current Mayor and volunteers under the oversight of the Director of Neighborhood and Economic Development), initiated a “Yard of the Month” program for the months of July, August, and September. Yards are nominated by citizens and the “Dead Heads” (volunteers responsible for weeding the four downtown blocks—often while listening to the Grateful Dead) choose a yard for each of the three months. The winner receives a Proclamation from city council, a high-quality bright orange and green sign metal sign for their yard to display for the month, and a picture of the winning family is placed in the local paper. Families get involved and are delighted with the recognition. Cost for the program is minimal, which includes cost of the sign and shirts for the current eight “Dead Head” members.

Contact: Mayor James Rynberg; mayor@cityoffremont.net

**Scottville
(pop. 1,214)
Peer Pressure Property Maintenance
Mason County**

The city of Scottville decided to handle citizen complaints about vacant and blighted properties with peer pressure instead of tickets. When city hall receives a complaint about a property, the city commission, as a whole, visits the property. The violations are documented, and a “Letter of Concern” is sent to property owners describing the violations. There is no ticketing. The process has resulted in great responses from property owners. The peer pressure, rather than immediate ticketing, is getting results.

Contact: Bruce Krieger, Mayor — (231) 757-2279

**Wayland
(pop. 4,079)
Main Street Building Revitalization
Allegan County**

⁶ From Local Success Stories, 2013 Michigan Association of Mayors Summer Workshop, Frankenmuth
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The city of Wayland benefitted from an innovative partnership with Michigan Works, the Michigan Mains Street Program, and the owner of a deteriorated downtown building. Through Michigan's Workforce Investment Act (WIA), low-income 16-21 year-olds get practical experience while learning the construction trade. The crew renovated a building in downtown Wayland with roof repairs, interior repairs, paint job, and handicap accessible bathroom. The young adults earn money and learn construction skills, and the city benefits from the improvements. The building owners paid for the repair costs, and the WIA paid the workers' wages.

Contact: Mayor Tim Bala, tbala@cityofwayland.org

Zeeland

(pop. 5,504)

Farmers Market/Zeelmania

Ottawa County

Zeeland's farmers market was dying. In an effort to revive it, the city expanded the traditional farmers market to include a craft sale. There is a small fee to participate, and sellers bring their own tables. In addition, nonprofits use the expanded farmers market as an opportunity to sell items and for public outreach. The farmers market coincides with the eight-week Zeelmania healthy street fair. Zeelmania is a downtown attraction offering family-friendly fitness activities and demonstrations. Each week during the summer, a different event is featured—the first week included a balloon drop off a city fire truck.

Contact: Mayor Kevin Klynstra, kklynstra@ci.zeeland.mi.us

Battle Creek

(pop. 52,347)

Stache Bash/Leilapolooza Music Fest

Calhoun County

In the name of fun and fundraising, the Battle Creek Metropolitan Area Moustache Society holds an annual "Stache Bash." The bash raises money with a sense of humor "changing the face of charity right under your nose." The Bash is held in tandem with Leilapolooza, the Leila Arboretum Music Festival. The Stache Bash includes moustache contests (such as longest, prettiest, and most patriotic), and a homemade raft race (the raft has to float and be able to carry someone). The event raises money for the Arboretum and brings the community out in force.

Contact: Mayor Dave Walters, 269-209-0626

Adrian
(pop. 21,133)
First Fridays**Lenawee County; MML Region 2**

This monthly event was launched in 2012 to get businesses in downtown Adrian hopping. A collaboration of artists, musicians, performers, businesses, organizations, and volunteers gather to host an artist, or musician/entertainer, and each month has a theme. Twenty-five to thirty businesses stay open late—there is a surge in activity downtown. The cost to the city was minimal to non-existent—the businesses sponsor the event. The city is responsible for communication and marketing, and the Chamber of Commerce and the DDA also participate.

Contact: Mayor Jim Berryman, jberryman@adrianmi.gov;

Hastings**(pop. 7,350)****Riverwalk/Downtown Sculpture Tour/Spray Plaza****Barry County; MML Region 2**

The city of Hastings has a placemaking and walkability strategy. The city constructed a downtown trail, incorporated sculpture into its downtown streetscape, and put a splash pad in a downtown plaza creating a wonderful, active public space. The trail, art, and public plaza space are interconnected and build a healthier community and quality of life. The DDA and the Thornapple Arts Commission hosted their fourth sculpture tour this summer, featuring 23 unique sculptures selected by an advisory committee of residents, artists, art enthusiasts, and art instructors. Two of the sculptures are on lease from local artists, 14 have been purchased and gifted back to the city for permanent display, and seven are on lease from the MidWest Sculpture Initiative. The Spray Plaza is a downtown public space right next to the theater and was built with 85 percent private funds. The Spray Plaza features its own sculpture and mural.

Contact: Mayor David Tossava, 269-945-2468