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Mount Carmel Abandoned Property Issue

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Introduction

For our project, we looked to find solutions to the vacant and abandoned property issue occurring in Mount Carmel. We wanted to look into this issue because of the negative effects it is having on the town population and local businesses. Mount Carmel has experienced an outflux of its population which has had a negative effect on the already vacant housing issue. With an Arc Collector App that students created of Mount Carmel last year, we added additional properties and pictures to create a visual that people of the town can use to manage vacant and abandoned housing. We understand that properly grasping this issue can be difficult due to the constantly changing conditions of properties in the town and for this reason, transfer of the app to the Borough for ongoing updates is in process. However, with the changes and additions we have made to the map, the people of Mount Carmel will be able to understand where the abandoned properties are currently located, what condition the properties are in, and why they are located where they are with a map they can visualize effectively.

Vacant and abandoned properties are something that has been prevalent for decades. Whether it be in areas suffering national disasters, a job-loss shock, or a population shift, abandoned houses are a concern in many places. Through case studies, we looked to find solutions for Mount Carmel based on successful missions in other towns that have experienced the challenges of abandoned properties in ways similar to Mount Carmel. We then used this information to present a plan that Mount Carmel can benefit from in the years to come. We recognize that this is a costly, and

difficult resolution, but based on our research we are confident that can provide suggestions for potential next steps. Lastly, we will offer advice as to what Bucknell students can do in the semesters to come to continue to address the issue. .

Through our updates of the vacant and abandoned housing app, viewers will be able to not only note where the properties are within the town, but make inferences of why this could be. For example, it is clear that many neighboring properties are suffering due to the “spillover” effect of vacant housing. The pictures of the property will supply images of what properties are suffering in relation to others.

Mount Carmel Visualization

The ArcGIS map of Mount Carmel developed in the spring of 2017, lists a number of vacant houses. However, we have learned from Sam Schiccatano and other Mount Carmel borough council members, that this list is changing frequently. After two visits, we were able to complete this map based off a list of vacant houses provided by Sam Schiccatano. We also had to actually drive around to note additional houses that were not listed. The properties that were not listed, were noted by a red X on the front of the house, which was placed by the Fire Department. We marked the condition of the properties based off of a rating developed by students in Geography 326 in Spring 2017. For example, properties are listed as yellow or red depending on the danger level of the property. A property, based on our visual assessment at the sight, that looked like it was in danger of collapsing and thus, a hazard was marked red. While an abandoned property that did not necessarily look to be a threat was marked yellow. Part of the reason for finishing this map is twofold. One, is so that residents and the local government will be able to visually see where these properties are located. This can be



helpful in knowing how close the vacant properties are to the viewer, which can be helpful information. When houses are

vacant and abandoned for a period of time, as we saw in Mount Carmel, the debris and even broken windows and roofs can be an extreme hazard to properties next door. Since the properties are attached in Mount Carmel, piling debris and broken glass can be extremely dangerous to not just neighboring properties, but community members walking by. Secondly, in our research we have learned that vacant housing can have extremely detrimental effects on neighboring properties, such as the collapsing of properties and dangerous debris spilling over. Ben Carson notes that “studies attempting to quantify the effect of foreclosures on surrounding property values find that foreclosures depressed the sales prices of nearby homes by as little as 0.9 percent to as much as 8.7 percent” clearly shows how properties near abandoned houses are at an extreme risk not only visually, but financially as well. Therefore, by having a spatial catalogue, the new markings of vacant and abandoned properties can be a warning that properties nearby may be at risk. The map can be informational in giving warning signs as to what areas of the town may be susceptible to hazards. For example, if a property is recently marked yellow, noting an abandoned but not yet hazardous property, members of the town and the government can take necessary steps to monitor to the property before it affects the area around it.

Reflection on Prioritizing Housing for Intervention

The biggest thing that we observed and took away was the negative effects vacant housing had on neighboring properties. According to a study done by professors at Wichita State, properties that are vacant and abandoned are 38% more likely to have issues than properties that have tenants. This study includes both fires and code



violations. It was clear that the piled up debris, broken ceilings, and other dilapidated aspects of the properties were taking a serious toll on attached properties. For example, on N. Hickory Street, there was one house that had a tremendous amount of damage, that clearly began harming the rest of the street, causing 8 properties

to be vacant. A fire on February 1st, 2018 that stemmed in a vacant property is the cause of this strip of yellow and red properties that are now uninhabitable. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development notes that “Arson is a particular problem for vacant and abandoned properties. The U.S. Fire Administration estimates that there were 28,000 fires annually in vacant residences between 2006 and 2008, with half of these spreading to the rest of the building and 11 percent spreading to a nearby

building.” This map paints the concept of the spillover of vacant and abandoned properties. For example, as the map moves away from the source of the fire, the properties appear to be less hazardous as marked by the different color rating.

It became clear at this point of the project that this is an issue that can lead to continuous destruction if not immediately examined. The app collector will therefore be a tell sign of what properties have recently been abandoned and thus, a potential threat to the rest of the block. For example, much of the information in our database is all new just in the last year which goes to show that just within a year, changes can be made to blocks of the town. The different color ratings of properties also can let members of the community know which houses may be recently abandoned. Buildings do not become dilapidated overnight, but can certainly deteriorate quickly if not properly maintained. We observed beautiful homes that were clearly struggling to maintain a visually attractive property line as a result of nearby homes being vacant. This prompted us to do research on how this issue can be both mitigated in the short run, and eliminated in the long run.

Commercial properties in Mount Carmel are also an extremely prevalent issue. There are numerous churches that are vacant and abandoned that have been slowly deteriorating in condition. A similar issue in Kalamazoo, Michigan has been present but the town has been taking steps to amend. The town has been turning churches into offices and living spaces in order to fix the condition of the properties, as well as encourage businesses. Malachi Barrett doing research on the issue notes, “zoning board member Chris Flach said churches can often be difficult to repurpose, but would

provide an option for residents being priced out of housing.” Another example of solving the vacant and abandoned property issue with this response is seen by “Brian Halbower, a local dentist, said he is looking to start a private practice in the building. He bought the property in July 2016, seeking to be a part of new development in the city.” There are numerous commercial properties in Mount Carmel that can benefit through these gentrification efforts.

Alternative Case Studies

Abandoned and vacant properties have been an ongoing issue in America for decades now. To begin with, in the early 2000's New Orleans had one of the worst vacant housing issues in the country according to the International Economic Development Council. When Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, it exacerbated the problem even more. In 2010, the mayor of New Orleans tackled the issue by implementing data driven strategies. Similarly to what we have done with the map of Mount Carmel, the city created a map of the abandoned properties. The website with this data is <https://blightstatus.nola.gov/>. From that, they were able to visualize the 44,000 vacant properties in the city. New Orleans' city council then held monthly meetings that citizens could attend to ask questions and become updated on the progress of the vacant properties. This forced the city to stay on top of the topic as it involved the people of the community. This proactiveness led to increased efforts and a timely resolution rather than the properties not being maintained.

Other areas of the country such as Philadelphia, Warren, Michigan, Youngstown, Ohio, and Cleveland all suffer from high rates of vacant housing. Philadelphia created a program which stated that all properties must have functioning windows and doors or the owner would receive a fine. As a result of this, the city saw a 31% rise in home prices over a 4 year period, compared to a 1% rise in comparable areas. For more information surrounding the program, one can visit www.pablightlibrary.com as well as <http://restoreyoureconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Addressing-Vacancy-and-BI>

ight.pdf. In comparison, in Warren, Michigan, the town committed to higher fines for property violations. Should tenants not take any action after a five day notice, they would receive a \$1,000 fine. Since the program began, over 30,000 notices have been administered while only 800 fines have been issued. In Youngstown, various organizations have turned vacant areas into suburban agriculture. The Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy stated that a small amount of land allocated to agriculture can be profitable and create jobs.

In Cleveland, the local government created a land bank, a non-profit organization aimed at diminishing the vacant property problem. The land bank was made possible in 2008, when the state of Ohio passed a law that county land banks could be formed and then funded by the penalties of properties. Since the program is a non-profit, they could receive various donations and to purchase foreclosed houses and a discounted price. Once they had accumulated enough funding, they could use the money to purchase properties, improve them, or demolish them. As of December 2013, the land bank was receiving 80-100 properties per month and in turn demolishing 50-80 properties a month. After these properties were demolished, these lots were used for community gardens, urban agriculture, and small parks. One can visit www.cuyahogalandbank.org for more information.

In the six case studies completed by the International Economic Development Council, the common themes included establishment of public-private partnerships, strategic development, and harnessing a holistic approach to problem solving. Implementing just one of these themes when attempting to resolve the problem of

vacant and abandoned homes can not single-handedly steer the redevelopment of a neighborhood on a sustainable path. It is key that there are multiple strategies incorporated in this plan. With a combination of these themes, Mount Carmel can find long term success in their efforts to combat the town's issue of vacant and abandoned housing.

Mount Carmel Potential Solutions

After exploring case studies from other towns, several solutions could be applied to Mount Carmel in order to improve the vacant and abandoned property issue. The creation of a land bank organization in Mount Carmel would be extremely beneficial.



The land bank organization would operate in a similar fashion as our example of the organization in Cleveland, a non-profit organization aimed at diminishing the abandoned property issue. This means, using fines within the community in order to help fund the

purchase, improvement or demolition of the properties that have been identified as vacant. In addition to this, the land bank organization can take the properties that are demolished and help to transform them into agricultural land. This could ultimately provide jobs and make beneficial use of the land. This program is essentially a cumulation of all the cases we have studied. Through this program, Mount Carmel would be encouraging citizens to maintain their properties like in the case of Philadelphia. Similar successful projects within Mount Carmel, such as the reading garden that was created by the library in town have created a precedence for turning

demolished properties into beautiful agricultural gardens. Second, if the land bank gets enough funding, buildings can be knocked down in order to create something that can be profitable, and visually attractive like in the case of



Youngstown. The organization would have access to the map of abandoned houses that we created, which also identifies the severity of the condition of each house, allowing for prioritization of which houses to act on. Proactiveness within the community is vital to maintain or demolish vacant housing. Therefore, similar to the New Orleans example, monthly meetings should be held in which Mount Carmel community members should be able to attend in order to discuss the progress around the vacant housing solutions. This can also be a topic of discussion in block captain meetings as an effort to maintain the strength of that program as well.

By implementing multiple complementary policies to address abandoned housing, Mount Carmel can create a new approach to successfully and creatively resolving the issue. While all of these are viable solutions, the town will benefit the most by incorporating different parts of each of these strategies.

Conclusion and Bucknell Action

We feel that the completion of the ArcGIS map can supply the people of Mount Carmel an important visualization as to where the abandoned properties are, and in what condition they are in. It is easy to conclude that neighboring properties of vacant houses are at a high risk of devaluation, collapse or abandonment as the spillover of debris can be costly. Based off research in other parts of the country, we feel that the best short and long term remedy for this issue is the implementation of the land bank. Through this, landowners will have an incentive to maintain their properties. A failure to do so will result in an increase in fines that will fund the land bank which will deal with the recovery of the property. Bucknell students can begin with figuring out what members of the community would be the best candidates to make up this bank. Following this action, the students can do research to figure out what the appropriate pricing of fines would be that would be enough of an incentive to take action. Lastly, the land bank would have to have a document making it clear what would constitute a property that was not being maintained properly, as this can be a debatable topic. We feel that through this policy and organization, members of the community will be forced to keep their land attractive and safe which will ultimately encourage tourism and an influx of habitants.