

Opinion: Transform Trenton's vacant and abandoned buildings into opportunities for renewal



This vacant home in Trenton, seen in this 2013 file photo, had been set ablaze. (Brendan McGrath/The Times)

Times of Trenton guest opinion column By **Times of Trenton guest opinion column**

on April 27, 2014 at 6:36 AM, updated April 27, 2014 at 9:51 AM

By Julia Taylor and Diane Sterner

Trenton's nearly 3,300 vacant and abandoned properties are a burden on our neighborhoods, but they are also one of our greatest opportunities. With the right intervention in the right places, these "problem properties" can: become the homes, businesses and amenities that we need; help stabilize the tax base; improve quality of life, and restore the appeal that Trenton neighborhoods historically offered. The Trenton Neighborhood Restoration Campaign encourages Trenton's next mayor to take a hard line against problem properties by implementing a comprehensive strategy that includes the following well-tested components.

Assemble and share information

Good information about properties, neighborhoods and market conditions can help the city track and redevelop problem properties, focus resources where they can be most effective and identify appropriate interventions for different neighborhoods. The next administration should collect information on problem properties and keep it up to date; integrate it with other city data; analyze it in the context of city-wide trends; and share it with the public so Trenton residents can be part of the solution.

Regulate problem property owners

The majority of Trenton's problem properties are privately owned. The city must fully use its enforcement capacity to compel private owners to maintain their properties appropriately. The next administration should start by strengthening two key aspects of its regulatory framework:

- Vacant Property Registration Ordinance. The city should strengthen its VPRO and actively require all owners of vacant property to register them. Properly administered, the VPRO can raise significant funds to offset the city's cost of maintaining and tracking problem properties.
- Code enforcement. The city should develop strategic priorities for code enforcement to ensure they can have the greatest impact with the limited resources available.

Use city powers strategically

Trenton has powerful tools at its disposal to deal with problem properties. Coupled with good information and effective regulation, the city needs to strategically and aggressively use the tools it has, including:

- The Abandoned Properties Rehabilitation Act. APRA gives Trenton strong powers to deal with abandoned properties by creating abandoned property lists, singling properties out for special tax sales and using spot blight eminent domain to take properties from owners who have abandoned them. When owners fail to maintain their properties, the city should use its APRA powers to ensure they are returned to productive use.
- Strategic demolition. Many problem properties cannot be reused because of their size, condition or location and will have to be demolished, but the number needing demolition exceeds the city's resources. Decisions about which properties to demolish must be strategic and focused, targeting resources for greatest impact.
- Strategic stabilization. There are many buildings of historical or other value that, with relatively little effort and expense, can be spared the wrecking ball and stabilized for later redevelopment. The city should identify such buildings, prioritize those with greatest potential and stabilize them until they can be rehabilitated.
- Land banking. To ensure that properties are properly maintained and reused, the city needs to create a land bank that has responsibility for targeted and timely property acquisition and assembly, maintenance and disposition for redevelopment.

- Green reuse of vacant land. Many vacant lots may not be suitable for redevelopment, but they must not be neglected. The city should identify properties for green reuse, such as open space or community gardens, and develop a timely, user-friendly process to find qualified users for those properties.

Build strong community partnerships

The city's efforts will be most successful if it builds strong partnerships with the many others who have a stake in solving this problem.

- Partner with developers. Responsible developers, for-profit or non-profit, are essential partners for the city in redeveloping problem properties. The city needs to establish user-friendly and time-sensitive systems for critical activities such as site assembly, plan review, permitting and inspections, and targeted financial and other assistance where necessary to make it more attractive for developers to redevelop problem properties.
- Encourage and incentivize homebuyers. Finding homebuyers who are willing and have the financial capability to acquire and restore vacant properties is critical to getting properties reused in ways that will sustain neighborhoods. The city should create systems to cultivate and incentivize these homebuyers.
- Prevent more abandonment. Residents need assistance in maintaining and protecting their homes from the negative effects of nearby problem properties. The city should create programs that assist residents with maintenance and code compliance to ensure they are able to remain in safe, comfortable homes.
- Create community partnerships to leverage resources. No city has the resources to mount a successful problem-property strategy by itself. It needs to engage residents, neighborhood associations, community development corporations, and others as partners to maximize the limited resources available.

Today's problem properties can be tomorrow's community assets—if the next administration takes aggressive, informed action quickly. The TNRC, working in concert with city staff and others, has brought resources to the city and initiated positive, collaborative action against blight. We urge the next administration to make continuing this strong working relationship a high priority. Working together, we can restore Trenton's neighborhoods.

Julia Taylor is managing director at Isles Inc. Diane Sterner is communities strategies advisor for NJ Community Capital, on behalf of the Trenton Neighborhood Restoration Campaign. The TNRC (visit trentonnrc.org) is a diverse coalition of stakeholders that has been collaborating with the City of Trenton since November 2011 to eliminate blight and abandonment.



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