



Housing and  
Neighborhoods  
Strategy Document

A collage of various neighborhood photographs is arranged on the left side of the cover. The photos include: a row of historic houses with gabled roofs; a street view with parked cars and trees; a close-up of a yellow house with a porch; an aerial view of a residential area with winding roads; a row of houses with a white picket fence; and a group of people walking on a sidewalk. The photos are interspersed with solid orange and red geometric shapes, primarily squares and rectangles, some of which are partially overlapping the photos.

# Complete Communities for a Changing Region

Housing and Neighborhood Strategies  
to Move One Region Forward

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Complete Communities for a Changing Region was prepared by  
the University at Buffalo Regional Institute in partnership with  
Make Communities, LLC

DECEMBER 2014

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## About this Report

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### **Building Complete Communities for a Changing Region** **Housing and Neighborhood Strategies to Move One Region Forward**

Quality housing lays the foundation for the vibrant and connected communities that are central to the task of making a better Buffalo Niagara for everyone. Where we live impacts how we live, and respecting our history, embracing existing neighborhoods and preparing for the communities of tomorrow will ensure all residents have access to housing choices throughout the region.

*Building Complete Communities for a Changing Region* expands on the summary recommendations found within Buffalo Niagara's regional plan for sustainable development, looking at a suite of tools, best practices and initiatives that the region can employ to build neighborhoods of lasting value.

This report does not serve as proscriptive set of actions and directives. To the contrary, it was compiled with the support of regional housing stakeholders and experts to begin to inform and help guide decisions that carefully consider local context and local knowledge. It is a first step in providing planning departments, non-profit organizations, community groups, foundations, private developers and additional stakeholders in community improvement and revitalization the resources they need in order to make targeted plans and investments that reflect an inclusive and multi-faceted approach to fulfilling our region's vision.

Starting with an acknowledgement of the vast potential created by profound changes now underway, including an aging and diversifying population unlike anything the region has ever seen before, *Building Complete Communities* suggests that an integrated cross-sector approach, a higher lever of resident engagement and a shift in the way housing support is delivered within the region will each be key in realizing the shared prosperity we envision for Buffalo Niagara.

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Recommended Citation: University at Buffalo Regional Institute, State University of New York at Buffalo, School of Architecture and Planning. Complete Communities for a Changing Region: Housing and Neighborhood Strategies to Move One Region Forward (2014).



This document was produced as part of One Region Forward, a regional initiative to promote more sustainable forms of development in Erie and Niagara counties. Research, analysis, and planning for this report were conducted by the University at Buffalo Regional Institute, of the State University at Buffalo, School of Architecture and Planning, under the leadership of Anthony Armstrong of Make Communities, LLC. Funding was provided by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development through its Partnership for Sustainable Communities, an interagency collaboration also involving the US Department of Transportation and the Environmental Protection Agency.



School of Architecture and Planning  
**UB Regional Institute**

#### PROJECT LEADERSHIP:

##### **Robert G. Shibley, FAIA, AICP**

*Professor and Dean, School of Architecture and Planning  
Director, UB Regional Institute; Campus Architect  
Principal Investigator*

##### **Anthony Armstrong**

*Research Affiliate  
Housing and Neighborhoods Research Lead*

**UB Regional Institute Research and Support Team:** Bart Roberts, Bradshaw Hovey, Brian Conley, Brenda Stynes, Darren Cotton, Teresa Bosch de Celis, Matt Wattles, Laura Quebral, Kathryn Friedman, Paul Ray, Beverly McLean, Sharon Ana Entress, Brendan Anderson (Graduate Assistant), Tanveer Singh Dhillon (Graduate Assistant).

#### 1RF Housing and Neighborhoods Working Team Members

Grace Andriette, *Neighborhood Legal Services, Inc.*  
Catherine Braniecki, *Community Development Manager - KeyBank*  
Roxanne Button, *Design Synergies*  
Michael Clarke, *Buffalo Local Initiatives Support Corporation*  
Brandi Collins, *Mobile Safety Net Team, established by The John R. Oishei Foundation*  
Richard Greenberg, *Home Buyers Marketing II*  
Cyndie Huynh, *Mobile Safety Net Team, established by The John R. Oishei Foundation*  
Tod Kniazuk, *Arts Services Initiative of Western New York*  
Shannon Koehn, *Housing Opportunities Made Equal*  
Carla Kosmerl, *Town of Cheektowaga - Office of Community Development*  
Robyn Krueger, *Community Missions of Niagara Frontier*  
Cara Matteliano, *Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo*  
Ellary Mori, *Erie County Department of Environment and Planning*  
Christie Nelson, *City of Buffalo, Real Estate Division*  
Christopher Ollinick, *Jaeckle Fleischmann & Mugel, LLP*  
Michael Riegel, *Belmont Housing Resources for WNY, Inc.*  
David Rodriguez, *Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority/Hispanics United*  
Stephanie Simeon, *Heart of the City Neighborhoods, Inc.*  
Dale Zuchlewski, *Homeless Alliance of WNY*  
Lori Borowiak, *New York State Energy Research and Development Authority*  
Jenifer Kaminsky, *People United for Sustainable Housing of Buffalo*  
Tom Lowe, *ReNU Niagara*  
Jill Shuey, *ReNU Niagara*  
Roseann Scibilia, *University District Community Development Association*



The work that provided the basis for this publication was supported by a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant. The author and publisher are solely responsible for the accuracy of the statements and interpretations contained in the publication. Such interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views of the Federal Government.

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# SUMMARY, BACKGROUND, GOALS AND STRATEGIES

## A. Summary

*Complete Communities for a Changing Region* embodies the principles of One Region Forward by fostering neighborhoods that are great places to live while providing housing choices for a changing population – choices that are affordable, accessible, well-served, energy efficient, and suited to the needs of a diversity of residents.

Creating and maintaining great neighborhoods and quality housing are central to the task of making a more sustainable region. Neighborhoods are the frameworks which support our daily lives – school, work, shopping, recreation and more. Our homes are the foundation of our health, happiness, and prosperity.

The good news is that Buffalo Niagara, in general, has strong housing resources and a wide variety of great neighborhoods. The rest of the story is that much of the housing in our central cities – Buffalo, Lackawanna and Niagara Falls – has become vacant, dilapidated, and in many cases has been demolished. The value of much of our housing in our first-ring suburbs has stagnated because of shifts in demand and the aging of the stock. Many suburban homes are slow to sell and some are also vacant. Demographic shifts are also impacting traditional rural communities, creating increased vacancy even as housing has been built on the periphery of the region, often disconnected from the framework of neighborhoods, and generating new energy demand in the

form of long commutes and larger interior spaces to heat and cool. Put together, sprawl without growth has meant we are abandoning city houses to build ex-urban houses and the new infrastructure that goes along with them.

While Buffalo Niagara largely missed the bursting of the housing “bubble,” of the late 2000s, a different kind of crisis has been building. While more than 14 percent of all housing units in Buffalo are vacant, nearly half of renters pay more than 30 percent of income for housing. Buffalo Niagara is ranked as the ninth worst metro region in the nation for housing affordability. Buffalo has the nation’s third highest poverty rate (see attachment 3) and average energy costs second highest in the nation (30 percent above the national average). A City of Buffalo housing assessment cites the need for nearly 12,000 additional affordable units. Two thousand residents are homeless on any given night. The condition of housing also continues to deteriorate, not only in the City of Buffalo where 68 percent of all structures were built before 1940, but in the suburbs where the number of vacant homes (listed as “undeliverable” by the US Postal Service) increased by 46 percent (4,794 units) over a recent five-year period. Unlike many other regions, a high instance of housing vacancy stems from long-term depopulation and decentralization away from the urban core, not private mortgage foreclosure.

The future will be a challenge. Housing demand is shifting dramatically – as our

current population continues to age, younger generations seek new forms of housing, more people choose to live alone, and families with children decline as a proportion of all households. At the same time, housing supply – and the neighborhoods that support housing – doesn’t always fit the demand. We need strategies for regenerating troubled urban neighborhoods, for reinforcing suburban neighborhoods in the throes of change, and for increasing the capacity to provide neighborhood services to urban, suburban and rural housing throughout the region. We also need strategies to retrofit existing homes both for new residents and to meet the need to conserve energy.

## B. Background

Buffalo-Niagara has experienced an ongoing net population loss each decade since 1970, for a cumulative regional decline of 15.8% as of 2010 (down from 1,349,211 to 1,135,509). Much of the early decline was due to the collapse of local heavy manufacturing, particularly the steel industry, but from 1979 through 2010, the region’s 10% population decline should also be placed in contrast the country’s 38% population increase to understand the extent to which the fortunes of the region have diverged from the nation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PERE USC Program for Environmental & Regional Equity, Open Places Initiative: Equity Indicators for the Buffalo Region. Manuel Pastor, Jennifer Ito, Rhonda Ortiz Justin Scoggins, Mirabai Auer, Anthony Perez. Derived from US Bureau of Economic Analysis data. June, 2013.





dropped nearly 61,000 people, but the overall losses were offset by a total increase of 41,550 people in Black, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander and Other Race categorizations.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the racial and ethnic changes occurring within the region, Buffalo-Niagara is seeing a shift in the age of the population. The Buffalo-Niagara region is older (Median Age of 40.6) than the country as a whole (37.2) and older than New York State (38.0). From 2000-2010, while the region's population shrank by 34,602 people, the population 18 years and over actually grew by 4,751. The loss in population, then, was entirely attributable to children under the age of 18, of which there were 39,353 (-14%) fewer in 2010 than in 2000. Only two municipalities (Clarence and Wheatfield) gained children throughout the decade, while central cities and rural areas – particularly in southern Erie County – suffered the greatest losses.

The changes in the composition of the population that are already occurring have a direct impact on the region's housing stock needs. Projections about the future composition of the region's population show an additional shift requiring thoughtful approaches and changes to current development and infrastructure patterns.

One Region Forward has constructed a series of development scenarios to help guide future development and growth. These scenarios have been culled from a broad range of community outreach initiatives, topped by a community visioning tool by which more than 800 participants collectively created 115 maps that spelled out a future for investment in the region. Though they differed somewhat in approach, a number of overriding themes arose from this shared input:

- We Should Grow Where We've Already Grown
- We Should Build Walkable, Livable Communities and Preserve Those that Are Vibrant and Working
- We Should Connect Our Places by Expanding and Diversifying Our Transportation Options
- We Should Protect Farm Land, Parks and Natural Areas to Ensure a Good Quality of Life

This feedback is detailed fully in the One Region Forward Regional Plan for

<sup>5</sup> USC Program for Environmental & Regional Equity (PERE), derived from US Census Bureau ; Woods & Poole Economics.

Table 1. Buffalo-Niagara Population Change by Race and Ethnicity 1980-2010

	Total Population	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other Races
1980	1,242,756	1,097,873	112,887	16,206	5,775	10,015
		88.3%	9.1%	1.3%	0.5%	0.8%
1990	1,189,288	1,025,984	120,213	24,347	10,804	7,940
		86.3%	10.1%	2%	0.9%	0.7%

Source: Brown University: US2010 Discover America in a New Century

Sustainable Development, but additional conclusions from the public feedback likewise constituted specific preferences about where and how development should occur. A strong preference arose for revitalizing neighborhoods in decline, like those in Niagara Falls and the east and west sides of Buffalo. Compact development was favored over auto-centric suburban forms, and this was demonstrated not just in cities, but also with a focus on investing in village centers and creating new traditional, walkable residential neighborhoods.

The goals and strategies delineated below were designed to help shape the region's housing and its neighborhoods for the changes to come and have a strong connection to these emergent themes. The disbursed nature of responsibility and initiative for regulating, developing and maintaining these communities, suggests that there will be different capacities, approaches and character for each community, but by approaching change from a shared perspective of sustainability, equity, quality and choice, we can collectively re-establish Buffalo Niagara as a thriving and vibrant region.

## C. Goals

- **Housing Choice and Accessibility.**
- **Vibrant and Connected Communities.**
- **Respect for Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow.**

This document acknowledges our position as a community of great disparity. While second ring suburban communities continue to add housing and populations, rural communities, inner-suburban areas and many city neighborhoods face challenges of shifting demographics and aging

infrastructure. Meanwhile, some communities are emerging as high-demand neighborhoods where the private market was previously lagging. Ongoing changes to the region's population demand changes in the way housing is developed, in the way land use is regulated and in the way municipal and regional plans are coordinated.

The Housing and Neighborhoods working team of the One Region Forward regional planning process developed a series of eight goals to guide the activities of the housing sector. Together, these goals aim toward a vision of housing that provides a variety of options in high-quality communities for all of Buffalo-Niagara's residents while preserving the incredible assets inherent in our traditional housing stock and communities.

These goals acknowledge that a house is more than just a home. The real estate mantra of "Location, Location, Location" can be interpreted in its broadest sense to acknowledge that neighborhood amenities and quality-of-life are paramount to quality housing. Though we strive to provide safe, decent, and efficient housing that residents can afford, we also strive to create complete communities that are inclusive, accessible and diverse. These complete communities must be accommodating to users across the lifecycle though a variety of housing types and transportation, education, employment and recreation options. This will require cross-sector coordination and collaboration as well as resident engagement and appreciation of local conditions and local knowledge. Ultimately creating sustainable communities is not just about energy efficiency, reusing the existing housing



### 1. Housing Choice and Accessibility.

- Goal 1:** Expand choices for distinctive, high quality neighborhood environments in the city, the suburbs, village centers, and rural hamlets
- Goal 2:** Provide equal opportunity for all to choose from a full range of housing types, tenures, locations and prices throughout the region.
- Goal 3:** Employ inclusive design and supportive housing to accommodate all residents regardless of ability or means.

### 2. Vibrant and Connected Communities.

- Goal 4:** Design neighborhoods to be safe, healthy, accessible and walkable appropriate to central city, suburban, or rural contexts
- Goal 5:** Create mixed-use neighborhoods where daily needs are accessible on foot, bicycle, or transit as well as by automobile.
- Goal 6:** Focus housing investments where residents will have easier access to employment especially by transit and other modes.

### 3. Respect for Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow.

- Goal 7:** Preserve and revitalize our existing housing stock to preserve history, embedded energy, and neighborhood integrity.
- Goal 8:** Design new housing and retrofit existing housing for energy efficiency, conservation, and renewable energy production.

and for regional stakeholders and neighborhoods. Additionally, this centralized support is needed to improve on-the-ground planning efforts by facilitating neighborhood driven, integrated and inclusive planning efforts, connected both to government and private resources. Even where quality planning has existed in the region, however, too often these plans have gathered dust because of a lack of implementation capacity. For this reason, centralized support activities should also include helping neighborhoods, developers, and government devise and implement specific projects based on these community-driven plans.

Still, the current legal, systemic and market frameworks for housing and neighborhood development each present specific challenges to creating vibrant and inclusive communities. The housing and community development systems that were established with the onset of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding in the 1970s have not changed substantially to respond to the shifting resource, demographic, geographic, economic, market and technological changes that have occurred in the interim. Zoning regulations and land use plans are in many cases even more outdated, and the capacity to deal with vast tracts of vacant industrial, commercial and residential properties has yet to reach the scale necessary to stabilize neighborhoods and reverse decline.

Rather than developing a proscriptive process for each of these strategy sets and in keeping with the notion of developing a regional tool-kit and providing technical assistance for on-the-ground practitioners, this document has compiled a series of methodologies and best practices for each of these strategy sets. There is flexibility implicit in this approach, and local communities and municipalities can tailor these practices and approaches to meeting community capacity and community need. However, as discussed above, this is only a first step to ensuring that planning departments, non-profit organizations, community groups, foundations, private developers and additional stakeholders in community improvement and revitalization have the resources they need in order to make targeted plans and investments that reflect an inclusive and multi-faceted approach to fulfilling our region's vision.

stock, or new reusable materials and other green technology, but about creating communities that people value and will care for in the long-term.

Within this framework, the Housing and Neighborhoods goals for this document can be placed broadly in three categories: Housing Choice and Accessibility; Vibrant and Connected Communities; Respect for Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow.

## D. Strategies guiding this document

- **Provide Data and Analytical Resources for Informed Decision Making.**
- **Anticipate, Accommodate and Embrace Demographic Shifts.**
- **Pursue Neighborhood-Specific Asset-Based Strategies for Redevelopment.**
- **Improve the Housing Support Delivery System.**

To meet these goals of preserving and enhancing existing communities, the Housing and Neighborhoods working team developed four strategy themes. These themes aim to enhance the region's understanding of conditions, trends and best practices; respond to

ever-evolving dynamics within the regional housing market; engage a broader spectrum of residents and respond more ably to local challenges and opportunities; and to increase the capacity of the non-profit and municipal housing sector.

Generally, these strategy sets can be divided into a series of overarching action items that feature a centralized support system to a cycle of neighborhood development, as well as a fulfillment of the need for region wide systems change to support distributed plan implementation.

In much the same way that the broader One Region Forward effort acknowledges a persistent lack of regional planning or development coordination, the focus on housing and neighborhood development has lacked an overarching support agency or network. These support activities may take the form of a single agency or organization, or they may take the form of a network or collaborative. To fill the gaps, however, centralized support activities for a cycle of neighborhood development should start with a data and knowledge base about local conditions including gathering, organizing and presenting data and interpreting this data with

## STRATEGIES

**Set 1** **Provide data and analytical resources for informed decision-making** for housing and neighborhoods. A strategic approach to preserving and modernizing our housing stock and neighborhood environments will require a clear picture of where we are and where we are headed.

**A. Develop a Regional Property Information System** including open source data on housing, land, neighborhoods and municipalities to support ongoing planning and policy-making around housing and neighborhoods. The need is for a system that will be continually refreshed rather than provide a single point-in-time analysis; encompass a breadth and depth of data from neighborhood level indicators on assets and needs to parcel level data; and provide data for use by the public in general, although some categories of data might be private and password protected. Key questions include what local organization or institution might host such a system and how it would be sustained financially over time. Finally, a Regional Property Information System might be part of a larger data and analysis capacity to serve the overall planning and implementation effort behind One Region Forward.

**B. Conduct a current analysis of housing supply and demand** as an essential starting point for discussion of planning and development strategies for neighborhoods. No comprehensive assessment of housing and neighborhoods has been conducted in recent memory. But one would provide the basis for the informed decision-making we seek. It should address market and neighborhood dynamics on both a broad regional and hyper-local basis. This might be a first use of the developing Regional Property Information System (see part A. above) and a step toward implementing other recommendations in this plan.

**Set 2** **Anticipate, accommodate and embrace demographic shifts** in housing development and neighborhood revitalization. As noted above, the impacts of an aging population, an influx of New Americans through immigration, and changing lifestyle preferences by younger generation all promise to put a strain on existing housing resources and provide incentives for new designs, forms of tenure and neighborhood environments. We need to deploy information, promote prototype projects, and provide tangible supports for development of new housing types and forms of tenure in mixed use neighborhoods.

**A. Develop a housing toolbox** for municipalities, developers, non-profits and residents who need models and precedents for designing and producing sustainable housing types and neighborhoods. This would include an on-line repository of best practices and case study information about a range of housing types (townhouses, lofts, and “granny flats”, etc.) and forms of tenure (co-ops, condos, co-housing, etc.). In addition, information should also be supported by in-person technical assistance.

**B. Deploy new housing models** to meet the changing needs and preferences of residents. But new housing models require local proof of concept. It has to work here. Partners involved in One Region Forward should organize a coalition of local governments, not-for-profit community development companies, developers and others to pioneer a range of new housing types and forms of tenure to meet the increasingly diverse needs of the regional housing market and to develop the neighborhoods that support these housing types. This would include housing tailored to the needs or preferences of senior citizens, the disabled, artists, immigrants, students, young professionals, empty-nesters, and others. Requirements include a lead agency for advocacy and education, a market analysis for housing types not currently in production, technical assistance to help communities implement new housing types, and new funding mechanisms for development types not supported by conventional lending products.

**C. Relieve regulatory roadblocks to housing innovation.** In many cases zoning codes or other housing regulations may need to be amended to allow some new types of housing or forms of tenure. This is particularly true of suburban communities that grew up around a model of single-family households with children – a demographic segment that has decreased dramatically in recent decades. To lead the effort, partners involved with One Region Forward could establish technical assistance for zoning and planning regulation reform to work with the coalition of municipalities, CDCs, and developers engaged in this effort.

## Set 3

**Pursue neighborhood-specific asset-based strategies for redevelopment.** Public and private resources for housing and neighborhood redevelopment need to be strategically targeted where new investments can build on strong neighborhoods nearby, leverage existing assets, engage active residents and help neighborhood-scale housing markets work again. Municipal leadership and collaboration with community based organizations and residents is key to set strategy, conduct participatory planning, and align capital investments with neighborhood plans.

- A. Emphasize community based planning** with residents and stakeholders to maximize participation, leverage diffuse resources and focus on quality of life improvements. Working closely with residents and stakeholders is essential because so much of the knowledge, energy and money that is needed to regenerate neighborhoods exists at that local scale. Success will depend as much on investments by homeowners and small scale entrepreneurs as it does on municipal government, developers, or banks. The active engagement of all is needed to produce plans that work for specific neighborhoods and have the active support of those who stand to benefit. But neighborhood planning can be resource intensive. A strong commitment from local government, philanthropy and business will be needed to provide the support structure for local planning that lasts.
- B. Focus and coordinate public investments in neighborhoods with strategic assets** and coordinate public policy and capital investment priorities with local plans to create complete neighborhoods. Even mundane capital projects like street paving, curbs, sidewalks and street lighting can buoy resident efforts at regeneration. Larger investments in parks, transit, schools, community centers, business districts and the like can have an even greater impact – but only if all of these are coordinated with local planning initiatives. Participatory budgeting and crowd-sourced project financing can support these strategic investments. But alignment of local, county, state and federal investments with local plans is the key. Also important is treating neighborhoods holistically where “complete streets,” local services and neighborhood retail are part of the mixed-use environment that supports diverse, accessible, quality housing. For some communities, this means repairing or restoring existing fabric. For other communities, this may mean retrofitting or repurposing dated and underutilized commercial stock, or creating town centers where none currently exist.
- C. Leverage the energy of new demographic groups.** Urban neighborhoods have long been identified with specific ethnic groups, industrial specializations or cultural tendencies. Neighborhood planning should embrace the potential for immigrant communities, artists, or other groups to lead regeneration efforts and use unique ethnic, cultural or occupational identities to leverage investment and customer traffic. Changes already underway throughout the region can be leveraged to enhance these opportunities. These approaches can help create stronger neighborhoods if the initiatives are authentic, are supported by neighborhood input, and backed by reliable market information.
- D. Design alternative long-term strategies** for areas where disinvestment has left few of the assets, anchors and actors that are needed to power successful neighborhood revitalization. For such neighborhoods the time for conventional neighborhood redevelopment may be decades away. Where housing stock and commercial fabric have mostly been eroded and anchor institutions have departed, scarce public resources in conventional approaches cannot be expected to overcome immense private disinvestment. Both interim and long-term strategies are needed to support the redevelopment process and provide options for those who call these neighborhoods home. Far from the “benign neglect” of decades past, however, these neighborhoods need active management of community change, driven by local residents and a firm understanding of the existing market potential.

**Improve the housing support delivery system.** The network of community-based organizations providing services for housing and neighborhood revitalization needs to achieve significantly greater productivity while retaining its responsiveness to local conditions and contexts. Partners involved with One Region Forward should identify a trusted institutional funder and trusted convener to lead a patient and broad-based collaborative effort to reform the system.

- A. Reconsider the scope and scale of the system.** It should be possible to increase region-wide capacity and share expertise across the system while remaining responsive to local constituencies. Small neighborhood-based organizations can serve as a conduit for high quality regional services for their communities even as they provide local knowledge and community needs to a high-capacity support organization or network. This model allows for opportunities to enhance services to traditionally underserved communities in cities, suburbs and rural areas alike. But redesigning long-term arrangements will not be easy. It will require skilled facilitation supported with patient resources and encouraged by state and federal-level funders of housing services to bring such a process to a successful conclusion.
- B. Better protect renters and home buyers.** Develop better opportunities, supports and protections for renters and home buyers, particularly from traditionally vulnerable groups. Persons of color, those of low-income, seniors, immigrants, limited-English proficiency speakers and non-traditional families are among the groups that have been traditionally marginalized by the mainstream conventional housing and finance industries. The current housing support system attempts to break down barriers to quality housing for these – and all – demographic groups, but housing discrimination, public opposition and individual and institutional discrimination present tremendous challenges. Increased resources, focus and options need to be directed toward providing quality affordable housing near transit as a precursor and support for broader opportunity for these populations.
- C. Cultivate a positive image of housing aid to improve participation.** A stigma often attaches to programs designed to provide assistance to households struggling to get or keep affordable housing. In some cases, the stigma is perceived by residents of neighborhoods where officials seek to locate affordable housing resources. In other cases, those who need and qualify for such assistance see the stigma in accepting help. Housing providers should launch a broad-based effort to rebrand affordable housing and educate the public on its benefits. This should include an extensive outreach effort to identify barriers to participation and to involve civic leaders and officials in a marketing and advocacy program.
- D. Improve the code enforcement system** and link it to education and support programs. Municipalities and housing providers should work together to develop new policies and tools to address slumlords and vacant properties more effectively. Better use of information technology and focused prosecution through a dedicated housing court are both possibilities. But homeowners in violation of housing codes and in need of assistance should be able to get help through the enforcement system. Therefore, work to integrate financial and technical assistance programs for homeowners with the code enforcement mechanism.

2.

# BRIDGE TO IMPLEMENTATION OF THE HOUSING STRATEGIES

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Part two of this document strives to form a base for and a bridge to implementation of the housing strategies identified throughout the planning process.

This section goes into greater depth on each of the themes and individual strategies and provides, context, examples and best practices for use by the innumerable actors engaged in the Buffalo Niagara housing sector on a daily basis.

In keeping with the approach outlined in One Region Forward Plan for

Sustainable Development, the One Region Forward Implementation Council will continue to support and implement these tools and strategies in the years to come. By serving as a resource for housing providers, advocates and policy makers, this portion of the plan provides a crucial early resource and guidebook for creating the changes we wish to see in our region.

Part two of this document is divided into the four strategy themes outlined in Part one:

1. **Provide Data and Analytical Resources for Informed Decision Making.**
2. **Anticipate, Accommodate and Embrace Demographic Shifts.**
3. **Pursue Neighborhood-Specific Asset-Based Strategies for Redevelopment.**
4. **Improve the Housing Support Delivery System.**



## A. Strategy Set 1: Provide data and analytical resources for informed decision-making for housing and neighborhoods.

No comprehensive assessment of housing and neighborhoods has been conducted in recent memory, but one would provide the basis for the informed decision-making we seek. It should address market and neighborhood dynamics on both a broad regional and hyper-local basis. This might be a first use of the developing Regional Property Information System (see part A. below) and a step toward implementing other recommendations in this plan.

A strategic approach to preserving and modernizing our housing stock and neighborhood environments will require a clear picture of where we are and where we are headed.

Data is foundational to making sound, forward-thinking decisions about investment in neighborhoods. The lack of reliable data about the trends and issues in communities across Buffalo-Niagara is increasingly hampering redevelopment efforts. As such, a complete picture of neighborhood based trends and an integrated system for collecting and sharing accurate and timely information on these issues is emerging as an overarching priority to inform all of the recommendations in this document, as well as various other components of One Region Forward.

**A. Develop a Regional Property Information System** including open source data on housing, land, neighborhoods and municipalities to support ongoing planning and policy-making around housing and neighborhoods. There is a need for a system that will encompass a breadth and depth of data from neighborhood level indicators on assets and needs to parcel level data; and provide data for use by the public in general, although some categories of data might be private and password protected. Key questions include what local organization or institution might host such a system and how it would be sustained financially over time. Finally, a Regional Property Information System might be part of a larger data and analysis capacity to serve the overall planning and implementation effort behind One Region Forward.

### Strategy Set 1. Action Steps for the One Region Forward Partners

**Identify** a local organization or institution to lead the creation and maintenance of a database

**Establish** dedicated resources to ensure longevity of the project

**Solicit** or develop a technical assistance provider to facilitate understanding and use of the system

While acknowledging the need for an accurate neighborhood-level analysis in the short-term, the Housing and Neighborhoods Working Team expressed a strong preference for a data system that can be continually refreshed rather than a one-off analysis. While national vendors are available that can provide these services as a snapshot in time, the desire for on-going data implies a preference for a local host. By creating a comprehensive web-based collection of indicators and data sets, a clear picture of existing and emerging real property market conditions will materialize and can be used for framing and implementing solutions to blight abatement and renewal, but also a guide for strategic investment, focused redevelopment, and economic growth. Such a system has previously proposed as the Buffalo Niagara Property Intelligence Network.

An integrated data system should have breadth and depth, providing neighborhood level indicators of assets and needs, but also information at the parcel level. Throughout the One Region Forward planning process, project partners have been assembling and analyzing existing plans and a multitude of regional data and marrying them with local knowledge and public input. This strategy set speaks both to the power of that methodology as well as the need to institutionalize this knowledge in a way that is fluid, accessible and relevant for all regional partners in housing and neighborhood development.

Other cities and regions – such as Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where the University of Pennsylvania houses the Neighborhood Information System<sup>1</sup>, and North East Ohio, where Case Western Reserve University hosts Northeast Ohio Community and Neighborhood Data for Organizing (NEO-CANDO)<sup>2</sup> [see case studies below] – have implemented similar information networks that can

be built upon and adapted for use in Western New York. In fact, the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership, a collaborative initiative of the Urban Institute and partners operating locally based data systems, provides a central convening and best practice sharing forum for those operating and launching collaborative community oriented data projects.

Based on these national best practice examples, a tool that provided current and detailed information could be helpful in developing tactical programs and incentives to encourage development patterns that are efficient, cost effective, and sustainable, or to develop interventions as warning signals emerge. For instance, the data products from the system could be useful as:

- **A means for identifying redevelopment strategies**  
As the region reevaluates its development patterns, geographic features, such as watersheds, elevations, and wetlands, can be overlaid with vacancy data, revealing candidates for active and passive greening, for instance. Some of these lands may be used as natural storm water filtration systems, saving local municipalities hundreds of millions of dollars in sewer system expansion.
- **A means for identifying neighborhoods with elevated risk of foreclosure.**

A neighborhood displaying an increase in sub-prime mortgages, or an increase of lis pendens filings (initial notices of foreclosure action), could become a target for a concentrated “Don’t Borrow Trouble” campaign, with door-to-door outreach. Partner banks can be identified to create area-specific flexible refinance programs to keep owners in their homes and keep properties out of the hands of fraudulent flippers.

1 <http://cml.upenn.edu/>

2 <http://neocando.case.edu/cando/index.jsp>

Figure 2. The Erie-Niagara Planning and Development GIS website, which may provide a basis for a Regional Property Information Network



Source: [gis1.erie.gov/ErieNiagaraFramework/planningmap.aspx](http://gis1.erie.gov/ErieNiagaraFramework/planningmap.aspx)

- **An early warning system for vacancy and abandonment.**

A clustering of increased utility and tax delinquency on a block or neighborhood level may indicate owners' intentions to abandon their property. Based on outreach to this area, a series of steps can be taken to address neighborhood concerns before the area is depopulated.

The University at Buffalo Regional Institute's experience in developing the Regional Knowledge Network (RKN)<sup>3</sup> and its on-going work across regional initiatives positions that institution well, given the proper resources, to fulfill a coordinating function for the Buffalo Niagara Property Intelligence Network. This recommendation is in keeping

with a similar assertion by the National Vacant Properties Campaign's Blueprint Buffalo report. This coordinating function would involve expansion of the GIS data system developed as part of the One Region Forward project, merging data already in that network (population & demographics, education and schools, economy, etc.) with disparate existing data sources, such as parcel data from Erie County and property records from the City of Buffalo. A variety of additional data needs and sources have also been identified, such as US Postal Service data on undeliverable addresses, Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA) data, lis pendens filings, code enforcement history, permit activity, utility and water department delinquencies and shut offs, and geographic data.

The expanded network would also

be flexible to incorporate additional information as it becomes available, such as digital photography of individual parcels, and property assessments by building condition surveyors. Though most information in the system would be open to the public, it has been acknowledged that some information, data sets or functionality may be behind a log-in to protect individual confidentiality.

The system should also become a portal for open source governmental data. Across the country, cities and regions of all sizes have made raw public data accessible electronically, not just to improve transparency but also to provide the opportunity for software developers and analysts to reinterpret and repackage data in ways that can create a broader interaction with the public.

In Portland, Oregon, for example, the city passed a resolution to open its civic data to the public, as well as provide entrepreneurial and economic development opportunities through the data.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the city acknowledges the importance of the open source software community in the city as well as the economic development opportunities public data can provide. The resolution instructs Portland's Bureau of Technology Services to implement the program. Specifically, the BTS should "enter into agreements with our regional partners to publish and maintain public datasets that are open and freely available..."<sup>5</sup> The City Attorney is responsible for identifying privacy and security concerns that BTS must "respect". BTS is also given the assignment of establishing the "prevailing" open standard formats for the released data. In addition, the resolution calls for the establishment of a regional contest to "encourage the development of software applications to collect, organize and share public data".<sup>6</sup>

The initiative was launched in 2010 via CivicApps a website containing data from the city of Portland and other municipalities in the Portland metro, including Multnomah County, TriMet (regional transit agency), and the Portland Public Schools.<sup>7</sup> The website

4 City of Portland, Oregon: Resolution 36735 (2009) <http://files.portlandoregon.gov/webdrawer/rec/3675248/view/City%20Auditor%20-%20City%20Recorder%20-%20Council%20R-ons%20-%2036735%20Regional%20technology%20community%20mobilization%20and%20expansion%20resolution.PDF>

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 CivicApps for Greater Portland. Retrieved from <http://www.civicapps.org/>

3 <http://rkn.buffalo.edu>



enables users to upload ideas for apps.<sup>8</sup> CivicApps also offers a contest to encourage the development of apps from the data provided.

In 2011, Portland introduced PDX City Sync.<sup>9</sup> Users have access to customizable news, information, events and open data. The site also contains neighborhood forums for engagement between neighbors, a civic idea board and more. News can be customized based upon neighborhood/address. City Sync also offers unique services to businesses including a business forum. The site also offers various city related apps to users. Portland launched the City Sync Challenge to offer prizes for top apps and ideas.<sup>10</sup>

In total, the proposed data system for Buffalo Niagara is a fundamental component of a broader tool-kit needed to encourage and support sustainable and equitable development throughout the region (see Strategy Set 2). The tool-kit could be tied to the data system, but the tool-kit can't simply be an on-line repository. Direct technical assistance, expertise and training will need to be made available to a variety of users with a variety of different knowledge and experience levels.

## B. Conduct a current analysis of housing supply and demand

as an essential starting point for discussion of planning and development strategies for neighborhoods. No comprehensive assessment of housing and neighborhoods has been conducted in recent memory. But one would provide the basis for the informed decision-making we seek. It should address market and neighborhood dynamics on both a broad regional and hyper-local basis. This might be a first use of the developing Regional Property Information System (see part A. above) and a step toward implementing other recommendations in this plan.

Municipalities, Community Development Corporations (CDCs), economic development agencies, the finance, real estate and insurance sector and private firms all have their own methodologies and approaches to assessing neighborhood conditions and local markets and defining typologies

8 CivicApps and CitySync: using open data to make a better Portland, Winning Mark, 6/13/12, <http://www.winningmark.com/2012/06/13/civicapps-and-citysync-using-open-data-to-make-a-better-portland/>

9 About City Sync, <http://www.civicapps.org/about/city-sync>

10 Ibid.

## Data System Case Study #1: NEO CANDO-Northeast Ohio Community and Neighborhood Data for Organizing

NEOCANDO is a publicly accessible database with mapping capabilities containing population, poverty and income, education, property, foreclosure filings, TANF usage, crimes, business pattern data and more. The data levels vary, but begin at the parcel level. The data is obtained from various sources including: Cuyahoga County Auditor, Cuyahoga County Treasurer Tax Delinquency, Cuyahoga County Sheriff's Department, USPS, Cleveland Metro Housing Authority, etc.

NEO CANDO was launched in 1992 by the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. Among the benefits of NEO CANDO is the ability to identify homeowners at risk of foreclosure using the data provided. The specific data found in NEO CANDO used to determine at risk homeowners include: weekly foreclosure filings, loans from subprime lenders, high cost loans in HDMA data, future ARM resets. NEO CANDO has also enabled housing code violators to be tracked. This data was used to examine the "bulk buyers and sellers of post-foreclosure" properties. High volume investors, landlords with frequent court appearances and tax delinquents were identified. This led the targeting and fining of specific violators, resulting in "multi-million dollar" fines. The data was also used to identify a mortgage fraud ring in one neighborhood. The parties responsible were indicted and convicted. NEO CANDO has also been used for targeted land banking; identify sustainable uses for vacant land, tracking housing market recovery, etc.

and approaches. For decades, for instance, the City of Buffalo used a series of indicators to categorize neighborhood conditions into different strategy areas, ultimately categorized in three place types: Reinforce, Revitalize, and Rebuild. However, the ability to coordinate sustainable planning and development for the region requires a common analysis across the two-counties that does not presently exist. This sort of comparative market analysis has been undertaken in other regions, which can provide best practice examples and applications.

The Reinvestment Fund, for example, employs a methodology of Market Value Analysis (MVA) to identify strategic locations to invest resources.<sup>11</sup> This allows specific strategies to aid weaker markets by focusing investment on strengths and help leverage private investment.<sup>12</sup> The MVA accomplishes this

through a cluster analysis and a targeted project analysis. Indicators including median and variability of housing sale prices, housing and land vacancy, mortgage foreclosures as a percent of units, rate of owner occupancy, presence of commercial land uses, share of the rental stock that receives a subsidy and density are all used.<sup>13</sup> The indicators are analyzed at the block group level. However, before the cluster analysis can begin, researchers evaluate the accuracy of the indicators.<sup>14</sup> This is accomplished by creating block group maps of each indicator and conducting actual field work, as well as interviews with "subject-matter experts."<sup>15</sup>

Once the indicators are deemed accurate, the cluster analysis begins.<sup>16</sup> The cluster analysis is essentially

Markets. Putting Data to Work: Data-Driven Approaches to Strengthening Neighborhoods, P.49. <http://www.federalreserve.gov/communitydev/files/data-driven-publication-20111212.pdf>

13 Ibid. P.52.

14 Ibid.P.53.

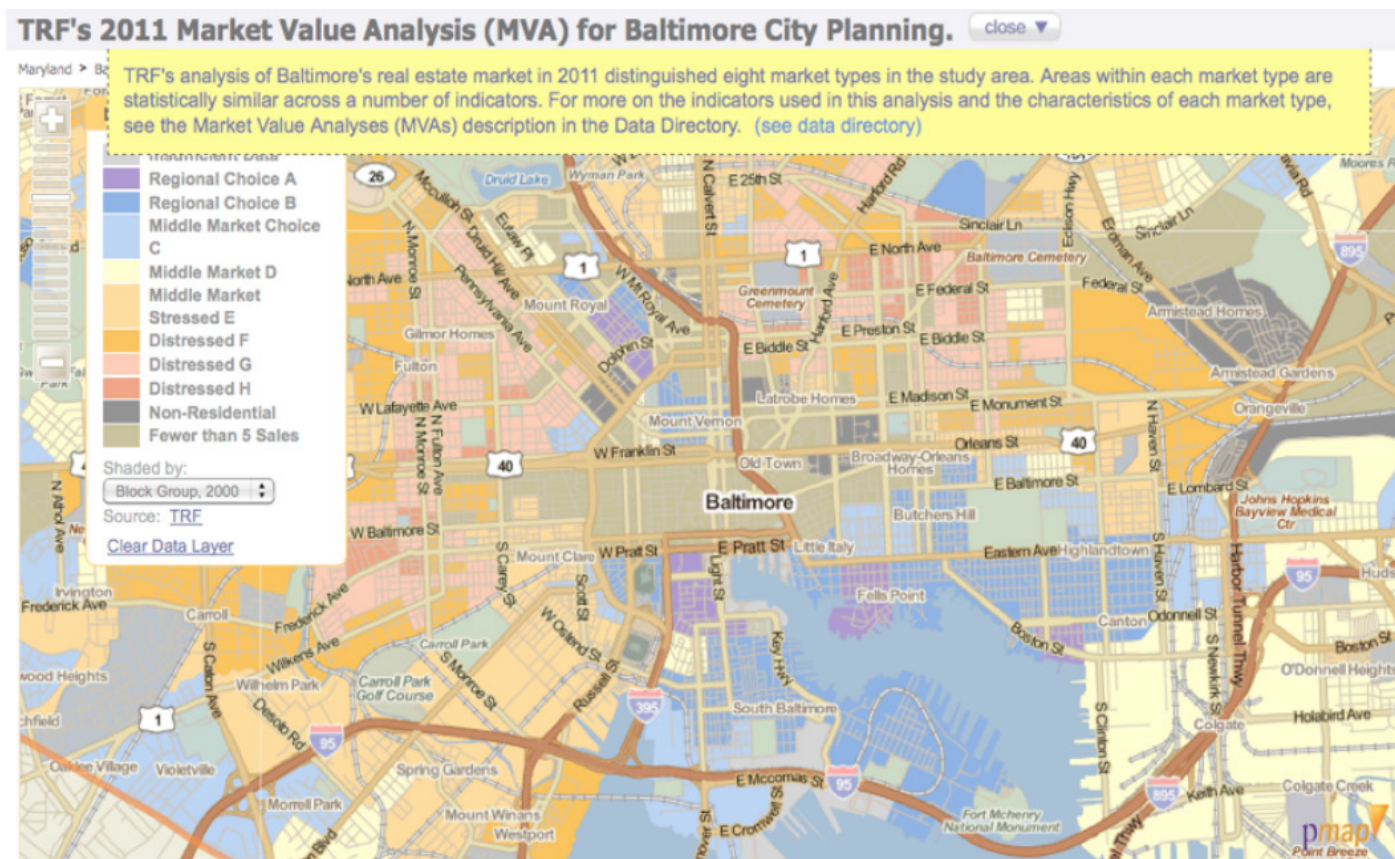
15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

11 Goldstein, Ira and Closkey, C. Sean (2006). Market Value Analysis: Understanding Where and How to Invest Limited Resources.

12 Goldstein, Ira (2011). Market Value Analysis: A Data-Based Approach to Understanding Urban Housing

Figure 3. An Example of The Reinvestment Fund's 2011 Market Value Analysis for Baltimore



Source: www.trfund.com

a statistical analysis done at the block group level which seeks to identify groups with similar market characteristics.<sup>17</sup> The area within the group is very similar but groups as a whole are intentionally different from one another.<sup>18</sup> The analysis provides that each block group is assigned to a specific market-type.<sup>19</sup> The number of market types per city in previous studies has usually been around eight. Cluster analysis results are then reviewed through field work, which focuses on assuring that areas within a certain market type have a similar appearance<sup>20</sup> The analysis is also reviewed by subject-matter experts re-modeling and re-mapping may be necessary to ensure accuracy.

The targeted project analysis helps to identify the best investment and use for individual properties. This is done

### Data System Case Study #2: Philadelphia Neighborhood Information System (NIS)

Philadelphia NIS is a “web-based property and social indicators information system used by city agencies and community based organizations.” Philadelphia NIS was created and is currently managed by the Cartographic Modeling Lab at the University of Pennsylvania. The Philadelphia NIS is similar to NEO CANDU, in that it features data from the parcel level and larger levels as well. The NIS is divided into 4 areas: 1) parcelBase, which features data from the parcel level; 2) neighborhoodBase featuring population characteristics, vacancy & abandonment data; 3) CrimeBase, which contains police data to analyze crime over areas; and 4) MuralBase which maps murals in the city. Like NEOCANDO, the NIS is open to the public and has been utilized by non-profit organizations, community groups and the general public. NIS also has been used to predict properties at risk for abandonment.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Goldstein and Closkey.

<sup>19</sup> Goldstein P.54.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



through collecting and analyzing micro level data for specific properties. The properties are then analyzed through the lens of the larger market, considering their impact and relationship with one another.<sup>21</sup>

The Reinvestment Fund has conducted multiple MVAs in Baltimore. The first took place in 2005 and was followed by another MVA in 2008.<sup>22</sup> While the methods for conducting the MVA were similar, there was some difference between the variables used in the two studies. The 2005 variables were: homeownership, commercial properties, vacant lots, foreclosure filings, median home sales price, code violations, rental subsidies, vacant housing notices. The 2008 MVA used the same data except commercial properties was changed to commercial area, code violations was swapped out for occupied units and housing unit density was added.

The city took a varying role with each market type in the MVA. For example in distressed neighborhoods, a policy of pursuing “investment partnerships with neighborhood anchors” was put forth. The city actively used the plan in policymaking and action towards zoning, code enforcement, demolition, etc.<sup>23</sup> Baltimore also incorporated the MVA in forecasting market demand in transportation planning.<sup>24</sup> Baltimore made both MVAs publicly available on internet and has used it in collaborative efforts such as the “Vacants to Value” initiative.<sup>25</sup>

However, the Housing and Neighborhoods Working Team exercised caution in the way that any similar process is carried out. Any comparative analysis cannot be allowed to become an excuse for stemming capital flows into marginalized communities, limiting investment or reducing credit availability, in essence, to contribute to a new form of redlining.

## **B. Strategy Set 2: Anticipate, accommodate and embrace demographic shifts.**

The impacts of an aging population, an influx of New Americans through immigration, and changing lifestyle preferences by younger generation all promise to put a strain on existing housing resources and provide incentives for new designs, forms of tenure and neighborhood environments. We need to deploy information, promote prototype projects, and provide tangible supports for development of new housing types and forms of tenure in mixed use neighborhoods.

As the region continues to lose population, age and diversify, the face of Buffalo-Niagara now and in the future will look radically different from the region of the last 60 years. Actions taken now to accommodate demographic change and promote equity and opportunity will have a profound impact on the success of the region for decades to come.

Much as Buffalo-Niagara’s population loss has not been uniform, the region’s shifting demographics and increase in diversity have been uneven throughout the two counties. Buffalo-Niagara is seeing a shift in the age of the population. The Buffalo-Niagara region is older (Median Age of 40.6) than the country as a whole (37.2) and older than New York State (38.0). From 2000-2010, while the region’s population shrank by 34,602 people, the population 18 years and over actually grew by 4,751. The loss in population, then, was entirely attributable to children under the age of 18, of which there were 39,353

(-14%) fewer in 2010 than in 2000. Only two municipalities (Clarence and Wheatfield) gained children throughout the decade, while central cities and rural areas – particularly in southern Erie County – suffered the greatest losses. Throughout New York the overall number of children also shrank during this period, though not as extreme as in Buffalo-Niagara. Nationally, the number of people under 18 grew, but not as fast as the over 18 cohort.

Though the region’s median age in 2010 was 40.6, only three municipalities have a median age under 40. Even with a 20% loss in children throughout the decade, Buffalo is the youngest municipality with a median age of 33.2, followed after a large gap by the City of Lockport (38.1) and then the City of Niagara Falls (39.8), while the City of Lackawanna has a median age of 40.0. Yet each of the region’s three Reservations which register populations in the Census count have median ages of 33 or under.

Even in growing areas, unstable numbers of school-aged population creates immense challenges for school districts often drawn along municipal lines. Regionally, the number of children enrolled in public schools has dropped much more quickly than the regional population. Overall the metro area had 29,385 fewer students – a loss of more than 16% in the decade, and 35 of Buffalo-Niagara’s 38 school districts had fewer students enrolled in 2011 than 2001.<sup>26</sup> While Clarence, Lancaster and Starpoint districts gained students during that period, the most recent New York State Education department

26 G. Scott Thomas. WNY school enrollment drops by 43,000 students in 10 years. Buffalo Business First. Aug 20, 2012, 10:30am EDT. <http://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/news/2012/08/20/wny-school-enrollment-drops-by-43000.html?appSession=6861267107681608RecordID=6&PageID=2&PrevPageID=2&cpipage=5&CPISort-Type=desc&CPIOrderBy=County>

### **Strategy Set 2. Action Steps for the One Region Forward Partners**

**Identify an education and advocacy lead**

**Perform a market analysis of units-types not currently in production**

**Provide technical assistance to help communities assess, interpret and plan for changing populations**

**Coordinate zoning, planning regulations and investment decisions**

21 Goldstein and Closkey.

22 Partnering with Governments on Strategic Planning. The Reinvestment Fund, <http://www.trfund.com/stories/baltimore-mva.html>

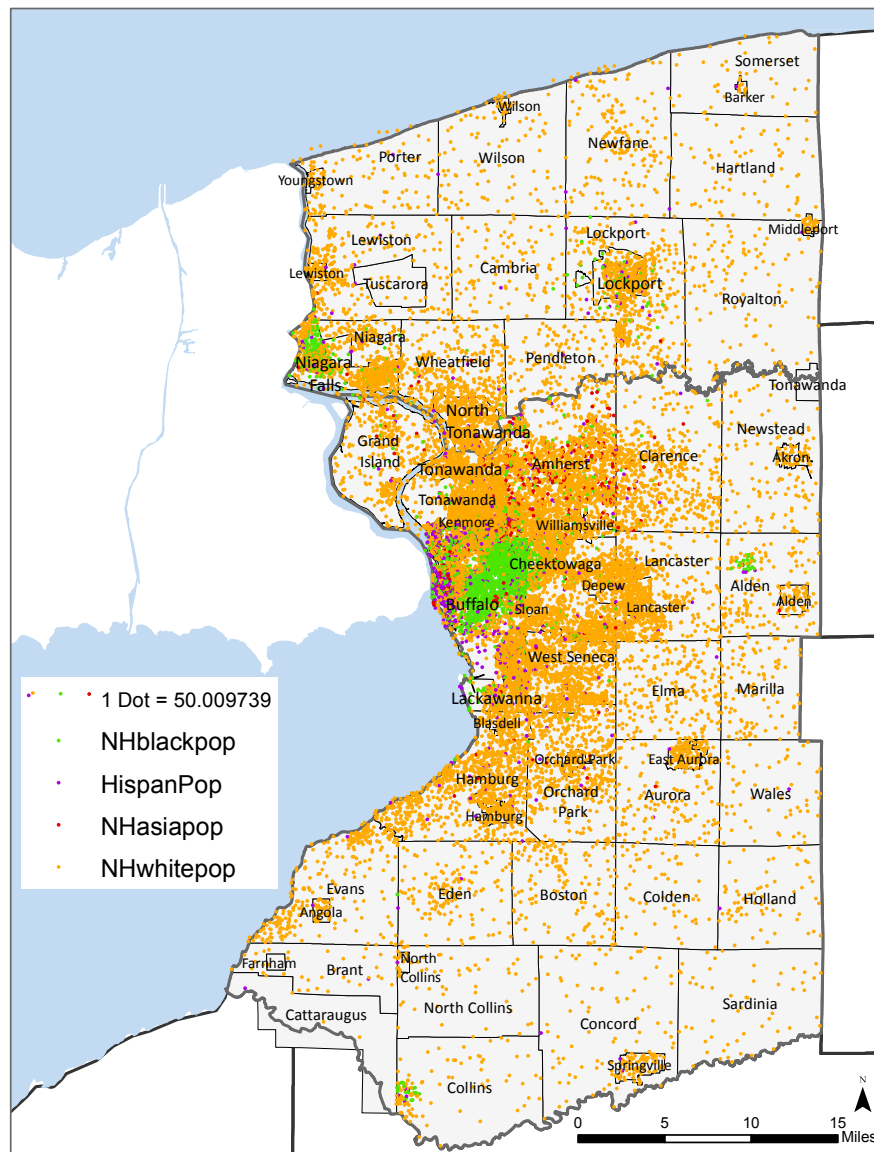
23 Goldstein P.59.

24 Ibid

25 Ibid



Figure 4. Scatterplot Image of Racial and Ethnic Population Distribution, Buffalo-Niagara 2010



Source: US Census, 2010

district report cards (2011-2012) show enrollment declines in each of these districts over the period from 2009-2012<sup>27</sup>

For the elderly cohort, Buffalo-Niagara has 216,489 residents 65 or older, composing 19.0% of the population compared to a 13% national average and

27 The New York State Report Card. New York State Education Department. <https://reportcards.nysed.gov>, Clarence: 2009/10 – 5,101; 2010/11 – 5,024; 2011/12 – 4,916; Lancaster: 2009/10 – 6,170; 2010/11 – 6,108; 2011/12 – 5,990 self-reported 5,812 on its website for 2013/2014; Starpoint: 2009/10 – 2,757; 2010/11 – 2,788; 2011/12 – 2,710 self-reported 2,656 on its website for 2013/14

a 13.5% New York State average. Heavy concentrations of elderly populations are found in the earlier developed, primarily inner-ring suburbs of both Erie and Niagara County – including Lewiston (25.4%), West Seneca (24.2%), and Cheektowaga (23.9%). The central cities are fairly underrepresented in this cohort, with the City of Buffalo (14.0%) ranked 42 of the 43 municipalities, second only to Collins (13.0%) where the demographics are skewed by a proportionally large prison population.

In addition to the age related changes

occurring within the region, on the whole, Buffalo-Niagara is more integrated than in previous decades, yet large-scale separation and segregation persists within the region. A current snapshot of racial and ethnic settlement patterns reveal clear concentrations of the black population in the City of Buffalo – particularly on the city's east side and to an extent on the city's west side – and in the City of Niagara Falls – mostly on that city's west side and near the downtown core. Hispanic/ Latino population in the region is centered on the city of Buffalo's west side, while the Asian – Pacific Islander population is also on Buffalo's west side in addition to portions of Amherst and the northern Erie suburbs. Native populations are concentrated in southwestern Erie County – in and around the Cattaraugus Reservation and at the eastern end of the Erie-Niagara border, close to the Tonawanda Reservation.

Since 1990 the region has seen an increase of roughly 8.5% points in the overall share of the population claiming racial or ethnic heritage (up from 11.9% to 20.5% in 2010). The share of racial and ethnic minorities has increased in every municipality, however the increases are far from uniform. From a high in Buffalo (+20.5%) to a low in Elma (+1.2%), the majority of the larger increases (10% and greater) are centered in the region's inner cities (Buffalo, Niagara Falls, Lackawanna) and older first ring suburbs (i.e., Cheektowaga, Amherst). Villages range from a percentage share increase of 8.0% in Williamsville to a low of 1.3% in the Village of Hamburg. The region's three reservations showed either no change or a small net loss of racial and ethnic minorities.

The region does benefit from foreign-born immigration. However, those levels have been lower than the nation and the state, which sees immigration numbers heavily skewed toward the New York City Area. At the same time, refugees have made up a larger share of immigrants in Buffalo-Niagara than in New York or in the country as a whole.<sup>28</sup> The countries of origin for the region also differ substantially from the nation. From 2003-2006, for example, none of the top five countries of origin for Buffalo-Niagara immigrants were ethnically Hispanic/Latino: Canada, Yemen, India, China and the Ukraine. Meanwhile the highest number of

28 31% of foreign-born immigrants to the region were refugees from 2003-2006, compared to 10% for New York State and 12% for the U.S.A. as a whole. Upstate's Recent Arrivals. The Regional Institute, University at Buffalo. January 2008. P.2.

immigrants to New York State came from the Dominican Republic, China, Jamaica, India and Guyana; and Mexico, India, China, the Philippines and the Dominican Republic for the U.S.<sup>29</sup>

Of the 66,509 foreign-born residents in the Buffalo-Niagara MSA, 24,587 are from Asia, 20,097 are from Europe, 16,451 from the Americas, 5,215 from Africa, and 159 from Oceania.

There are eight tracts in the region with a foreign born population greater than 20%. These include two tracts (91.09 and 91.15) adjacent to the University Buffalo North (Amherst) Campus, and two tracts (93.01 and 46.01) adjacent to the University at Buffalo South (Main Street) Campus, as well as three tracts (66.01, 69.01 and 71.01) on Buffalo's west side and one tract (27.02) in the Broadway-Fillmore area of Buffalo's east side. In addition, a clustering of tracts on Buffalo's west side, extending into north Buffalo, as well as a corridor connecting the University at Buffalo's two campuses and extending further north into Amherst have foreign born percentages between 10 and 20%. The western-most tract in Lackawanna (174) and the two tracts comprising downtown Niagara Falls (211 and 212) also register in this range, as do tract 244.04 in Lewiston, 97.01 in Cheektowaga and 9400 in the Cattaraugus Reservation. In North West Buffalo there is a concentration for Eastern European immigrants in Riverside (tract 58.01) and a concentration of residents from South Central Asia in Black Rock (tracts 55, 56 and 69).

A cluster of tracts on Buffalo's west side has a foreign born total of 18.9%, with 5,632 foreign born residents. Approximately 39% of these residents were born in Asia – primarily South Eastern Asia, including concentrations from Burma and Thailand, though with significant representation from Western Asia, South Central Asia and East Asia as well. 40% of these residents were born in Africa – primarily from Eastern Africa, but with some representation from North, West and Middle Africa. About 13% of these residents are from Latin America – primarily the Caribbean.

#### A. Develop a housing toolbox

for municipalities, developers, non-profits and residents who need models and precedents for designing and producing sustainable housing types and

29 *Ibid.* P.2. 31% of foreign-born immigrants to the region were refugees from 2003-2006, compared to 10% for New York State and 12% for the U.S.A. as a whole

Figure 5. Promotional material for the Citizen Planning School. University at Buffalo Regional Institute.



Source: UBRI; <http://www.oneregionforward.org/>

neighborhoods. This would include an on-line repository of best practices and case study information about a range of housing types (townhouses, lofts, and "granny flats", etc.) and forms of tenure (co-ops, condos, co-housing, etc.). In addition, information should also be supported by in-person technical assistance.

The Housing and Neighborhoods Working Team considered a tool-kit for sustainable community development a vital resource for implementing One Region Forward. However, various considerations arose from the best practice research of other system. In other regions, these system run a gamut of styles and depths, some providing referrals to other existing sources and some creating and compiling direct local information for web-users.

A pair of best practice tool boxes described below provide a "one stop shop" for practitioners seeking information on policy, tools and more. A similar system could provide benefits in Erie and Niagara counties as an easily accessible guide can ensure organizations and individual practitioners are aware of policies and strategies that are important to

their work. Such a resource could help coordinate housing and neighborhood development practitioners and provide community leaders/organizations in the region with some of the tools they need to be successful.

In addition, the University of Kansas Community Tool Box provides free teaching modules for the public. This toolbox does not specifically cater to housing policy, but rather general community development and problem solving. However, it contains easy to understand learning modules aimed at community leaders, governments and organizations. The Community Toolbox was developed and is maintained by the Work Group for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas. The toolbox provides capacity building through step by step guidance in community development practices.<sup>30</sup> Topics include: Analyzing Community Problems and Designing and Adapting Community Interventions, Organizing for Effective Advocacy, Evaluating Community Programs and Initiatives, etc.<sup>31</sup>

Housing Policy: Minnesota is an

30 "About Us" Community Toolbox. Retrieved from <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/About.aspx>

31 *Ibid.*

online guide with Minnesota state/local housing policy and tools. The guide is designed to be simple to use and provides guidance on how to assemble tools to develop a housing strategy.<sup>32</sup> The guide is built upon the national HousingPolicy.org site containing knowledge from policymakers nationwide, as well as within Minnesota.<sup>33</sup> The toolbox presents general housing policy goals and allows the user to narrow down to specific policies/strategies. Users are also allowed to submit insights or best practices from their experience. In addition, the site contains a forum for practitioners to exchange questions and ideas.

The guide is maintained by the Center for Housing Policy and the Urban Land Institute of Minnesota's Regional Council of Mayors- Housing Initiative.<sup>34</sup> ULI Minnesota created the Minnesota specific tools within the guide.<sup>35</sup>

While accessibility of information is a large portion of need, the Working Team underlined the necessity of expert technical assistance to bring these resources to life and help solve real world problems.

Some elements of this need may be filled by the Citizen Planning School which is being housed within the University at Buffalo Department of Architecture and Planning. This program gives Buffalo-Niagara residents the opportunity to learn planning basics and put that knowledge to task by proposing their own idea for a community sustainability project. The Citizen Planning School is comprised of four sessions on key informational topics lead by local experts based around the elements of the One Region Forward Plan, such as creating sustainable transportation systems, securing our food system, planning for a green economy, and organizing for action, among others. Participants will also have access to an Online Citizen Toolkit that will empower them to gain skills and strategies to help implement sustainability projects in the context of One Region Forward.

As an extension of the initiative, Champions for Change will have access to the same resources as Citizen Planners, as well as technical assistance for the creation of their own community-action project, office hours with One Region Forward staff,

and the opportunity to showcase their work at a Sustainability Action Summit in Fall 2014. Citizen Planning School students will also be invited to attend the Action Summit as a celebration of their dedication and completion of the program.

These program also create a potential pathway for more intensive education of regional leaders in the field through a certificate programming in sustainability that the School of Architecture and Planning is considering in conjunction with future rounds of the Citizen Planning School.

These program by themselves, however, will not fill all the capacity needs regarding the provision of direct consultation on current and developing projects throughout the region. These projects may be led by non-profits, local governments or for-profit real estate interests. Delivering real world expertise will be a necessary component of any tool-kit to ensure best practices in sustainability become an active and ingrained component of development in Buffalo-Niagara.

This technical assistance, advice and even ideation for developers of all kinds and in all settings (urban, suburban and rural) is important to enhance projects individually but also ensure that the total of new development is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, this technical assistance provider should have a perspective that is telescoping, with the ability to zoom in and help work through the details of any proposal, but also zoom out to consider the surrounding context of how this proposal may impact existing community fabric or encourage or discourage additional sustainable development.

The proposed One Region Forward Implementation Council may be able to serve this function in some manner. However, this function can not be an add-on to existing workloads, burdening the currently stretched capacity of the partners. Resources must be dedicated to providing on-going and dedicated project assistance, and this enhanced capacity should also be capable of provide assistance to municipalities, particularly those lacking planning and development staff members.

## B. Deploy new housing models

to meet the changing needs and preferences of residents. But new housing models require local proof of concept. It has to work here. Partners involved in One Region Forward should organize a coalition of local governments, not-for-profit community development companies, developers and others to pioneer a range of new housing types and forms of tenure to meet the increasingly diverse needs of the regional housing market and to develop the neighborhoods that support these housing types. This would include housing tailored to the needs or preferences of senior citizens, the disabled, artists, immigrants, students, young professionals, empty-nesters, and others. Requirements include a lead agency for advocacy and education, a market analysis for housing types not currently in production, technical assistance to help communities implement new housing types, and new funding mechanisms for development types not supported by conventional lending products.

The region is experiencing a demonstrated demographic shift and as a result we are an older and more diverse region. While the extent of the change varies, this generally aligns with national trends in both areas. As it does nationally, these trends have dramatic implications for the region's housing stock and housing needs in the coming years and decades.

Trends have been shifting to a preference for more walkable, mixed-use communities. Both empty nesters of the Baby Boom generation and young adults of the Millennial generation – the two largest generations – are in large measure driving this trend. This has caused a revival of downtown areas across the country, but it has also led to a change in new development patterns in suburban communities as well as a significant amount of retrofitting existing development. In some instances this retrofitting has taken the form, for example, of re-envisioning greyfields (underperforming commercial areas) into new town centers whether through incremental infill or through a clearance and redevelopment strategy. These redevelopments have proven not only a way to revitalize problem properties, but have also been effective in drawing new interest, investment and development in adjacent areas, effectively revitalizing

<sup>32</sup> "About Us" HousingPolicy.org-Minnesota [http://www.housingpolicy.org/about\\_us\\_MN.html](http://www.housingpolicy.org/about_us_MN.html)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



suburban communities.<sup>36</sup>

This trend also aligns with a shift in transportation patterns. Millennials are driving less than previous generations, and as Baby Boomers are aging toward retirement they have passed their peak traveling years. Mobile technologies are also shifting work and recreation habits, consumer preferences, and new forms of access (such as car sharing and on demand ride services) are also pushing trends toward other forms of travel, such as walking, biking and transit. Vehicle Miles Traveled plateaued in 2007 and has been falling on a per capita basis ever since, with long range trends in the age of the population, rates of labor force participation, vehicle ownership and licensure appear to be setting up an ongoing decline in driving rates.<sup>37</sup>

Complete Streets, local services and neighborhood retail are important components in creating diverse, accessible housing. New forms of housing stock that remain isolated from the services and amenities found in traditional town centers will not fundamentally expand choice or provide a range of lifestyle options. Creating complete communities means that streets, sidewalks, recreation opportunities and zoning revision efforts need to be interrelated.

These national preference trends were supported by the local preferences expressed in the One Region Forward Community Congresses and Scenario Modeling Workshops. Hundreds of local residents expressed a strong desire that as a region we should grow where we've already grown, where the infrastructure and amenities are already in place. In addition, the community expressed a strong desire for building walkable, livable communities while preserving those that are vibrant and working.

Through a mapping scenario wherein residents showed preferences about future development, walkable and vibrant village centers were highlighted as places that should be supported and have their existing character preserved for future generations. Residents also held up village centers as a place type that they would like to see future development take. At the same time, participants also turned away from

Figure 6. Mizner Park, Boca Raton, Florida, an early example of a suburban retro-fit project on the site of an underperforming retail center



Source: Elfgy at English Wikipedia

single family, exurban residential and auto-centric retail development styles in favor of mixed-use traditional neighborhood development. All of these preferences were underscored by a desire for a more people-centered transportation system reflecting infrastructure built for pedestrians and bicycles.

Two examples of how these revitalized and vibrant neighborhoods are being redeveloped include local projects aligned with mixed-use reinvestment in core areas, such as the University at Buffalo's new medical school on the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus. This compliments a series of other medical related facilities in development and has spurred a new round of announcements of adjacent housing and mixed-use developments, primarily by private developers. In a different but example, that is more heavily institutionally driven, about an hour away in Rochester, NY, the University of Rochester, in what has been a more suburban setting, is developing a \$100,000,000 mixed-use project on a series of underutilized spaces at its main campus. This project, known as College Town, is a placemaking effort aimed at walkable urbanism and making the area, and the university, more attractive for residents, students

and employees.

Another retrofit, this one among the earlier examples throughout the country, is Mizner Park Boca Raton, FL. Mizner Park was built on the site of a failed shopping center or "dead mall."<sup>38</sup> Mizner Park is a mixed use development that was built in multiple phases in the 1990's.<sup>39</sup> The first phase opened in 1992. It features dense walkable neighborhoods with housing, retail, offices and park space. The area offers townhomes and apartments, with some apartments located about first floor retail spaces along Mizner Park's main boulevard.<sup>40</sup> A drawback to the community is limited public transportation options, as only two bus routes serve the neighborhood. They are located on the edge of Mizner Park, on the busy US Route 1. This project shows the limitation of a retrofitting project that does not have transit access. As a result, this mixed use development is isolated from the neighborhoods that surround it to the south and west.

Another example is the Mosaic District, a mixed use development in suburban

36 Dunham-Jones, Ellen. Retrofitting suburbia. TEDxAtlanta. Filmed Jan 2010. [https://www.ted.com/talks/ellen\\_dunham\\_jones\\_retrofitting\\_suburbia#t-569589](https://www.ted.com/talks/ellen_dunham_jones_retrofitting_suburbia#t-569589).

37 Tony Dutzik, Phineas Baxandall. A New Direction: Our Changing Relationship with Driving and the Implications for America's Future. U.S. PIRG Education Fund, Frontier Group. Spring 2013.

38 Smart Growth Illustrated: Mizner Park. Retrieved from: <http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/case/mizner.htm>

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

Figure 7. The BLVD, Lancaster CA



Source: [www.theblvdlanaster.com](http://www.theblvdlanaster.com)

Merrifield in Northern Virginia. The development is essentially infill in on an unoccupied low density suburban site.<sup>41</sup> The project dates to 1998 when Fairfax County introduced a plan to convert the area into a mixed use community.<sup>42</sup> A private developer joined the project in 2004.<sup>43</sup> The county established the Mosaic District Community Development Authority to issue bonds for the funding of infrastructure and utility construction for the project.<sup>44</sup> These bonds will be repaid by the developer through future property taxes.

The site features a dense walkable retail area that includes both local businesses and national chains.<sup>45</sup> The retail element was the first phase of the design, with “urban style” townhomes

being completed this year.<sup>46</sup> Due to high demand, the townhomes sold out ahead of schedule. Future plans call for apartments to be built within the development as well.<sup>47</sup> The development is located less than a mile from a DC Metro station and is an example of transit oriented development. This project provides an examination of infill development that transformed a sparsely populated suburban area into a dense, mixed use neighborhood. This project comports with the working group strategy of encouraging mixed used neighborhoods, as well as safe, accessible and walkable neighborhoods.

In addition to the preference expressed by residents nationally and locally, however, there are also issues of equity and need for individuals, as well as shared costs of supportive services to be considered in thinking about the evolution of communities and neighborhoods.

The growing senior population, for instance, often has difficulty maintaining independent lifestyles as they age. While this may involve household tasks such as basic maintenance, or daily activities such as cooking, tasks that occurring outside of the home can become equally

challenging if communities are not conducive to the needs of the elderly. Living in a neighborhood where walking to shopping is not an option — because of distance to stores or a lack of infrastructure such as sidewalks, crosswalks or high speed arterials, for instance — makes elderly residents more dependent on outside assistance. A lack of neighborhood infrastructure can also severely limit residents’ physical mobility, and the challenges to exercise as part of a daily routine can impact physical health.

There is certainly no one-size-fits all solution or defined timetable for aging residents’ needs. However, by providing a variety of options that are more considerate of people’s needs throughout the lifestyle, the ability for more residents to retain a higher level of independence and community inclusion will be heightened. A spectrum of approaches can be developed filling a very large middle ground in between independent, unassisted living in one’s traditional home and the move to retirement community or to a skilled nursing facility.

Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs), is one concept that has been advanced for helping keep aging members of society connected to their communities. In this scenario, neighborhoods where many families purchased houses at a similar phase of their life, often decades prior, still compose a large portion of a community. By either retrofitting these neighborhoods or by bringing services in to these neighborhoods on a regular basis, more residents will be able to age in place, in the houses they have spent a better part of their lifetimes.

Another concept is similar, but intentionally and proactively provides housing with features suited toward persons with limited mobility (i.e., universal design) in either clusters or in larger apartment buildings that are also linked with services. “Affordable Senior Housing with Services” is the broad category that the American Association of Homes & Services for the Aging uses to incorporate the concept of “[a]ligning affordable senior housing practices and policies with those of home and community based services”.<sup>48</sup> In addition to an accessible home and an accessible community, core elements of these strategies include a resident centered environment, where residents

41 Rice, Alison. (2012, December, 19) A Suburban Wasteland in Virginia Gets a Modern Urban Feel. The New York Times, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/19/realestate/commercial/a-suburban-wasteland-in-virginia-gets-a-modern-urban-feel.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/19/realestate/commercial/a-suburban-wasteland-in-virginia-gets-a-modern-urban-feel.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

42 Douglas, Danielle (2012, January 1) Pieces of Mosaic District coming together, The Washington Post [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-01-01/business/35441679\\_1\\_first-phase-neiman-marcus-site.html](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-01-01/business/35441679_1_first-phase-neiman-marcus-site.html)

43 Ibid.

44 Fairfax County Establishes First Community Development Authority (2009, April 27) <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/news/2009/county-community-development-authority-established.htm#>

45 Mosaic District Retrieved from: <http://www.mosaicdistrict.com/shop-dine>

46 Rice.

47 Ibid

48 National Summit on Affordable Senior Housing with Services. American Association of Homes & Services for the Aging. May 25, 2010. P.26..



have a choice of available health-related and social services that are coordinated by an entity that assists in evaluating current needs and planning for future needs.<sup>49</sup>

Populations with disabilities of any age also need to be considered as development and redevelopment projects are proposed and implemented. As a region, Buffalo-Niagara has a higher percentage of persons with disabilities than both the state and the country. Whereas the United States has a percentage of 12.0%, New York State has a disability percentage of 10.9% while Buffalo-Niagara is at 12.8%.

These percentages vary widely throughout the region. At the high end are a cluster of the region's cities, Lackawanna (20.0%), Buffalo (16.7%), Niagara Falls (16.4%), Lockport (15.0%), and North Tonawanda (13.9%). These cities are joined by the towns of Niagara (15.7%) and Collins (14.9%) as well as the Cattaraugus (17.6%) and Tuscarora Reservations (14.4%). At the low end are the towns of Grand Island (7.2%), Lewiston (7.5%), Clarence (7.6%), Orchard Park (8.4%), Sardinia (8.5%), Wales (8.8%), Boston (9.0%), Marilla (9.1%), Elma (9.3%) and Amherst (9.3%).

The data do not give clear answers to these discrepancies, however, these may be attributable to differences in neighborhood accessibility including infrastructure, transit and housing typologies as well as differences in income and poverty across the municipalities. Across the country, for instance, persons living in poverty are 47% more likely to have a disability than the population as a whole, but in New York that number rises to 61%, and in Buffalo-Niagara 65%. In 32 of the region's 42 municipalities, that number is at least 50%, and in 17 of those persons living in poverty are at least twice as likely to have a disability than the population as a whole.

For the over-65 age cohort, the region has a somewhat lesser percentage of persons with disabilities (33.9%) than the state (34.6%) or the nation (36.8%). As this implies, then, Buffalo-Niagara's percentage of persons with disabilities in the under-65 age group is higher (9.0%) than both the state (7.3%) and the U.S. as a whole (8.3%).

The region is particularly well suited to be a leader in universal design an access because of the presence of the Center

Figure 8. Sawns Market Co-Housing, Oakland, CA



Source: [www.swansway.com](http://www.swansway.com)

for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access within the University at Buffalo's School of Architecture and Planning (IDEA Center). The IDEA Center has a thirty year history of exploration on universal design, and currently has projects ranging from improving transit access to those with disabilities, to ensuring visitability in new construction, developing standards and understanding perceptions of universal design and even a rural aging in place initiative. The IDEA Center is an active partner in local complete streets

efforts and has the potential to be a major ally in any regional initiative to design communities that are suitable for all users, particularly the persons with disabilities and the aging population.

One example of a community that has incorporated housing and public accommodations for persons with disabilities in revitalization efforts is the BLVD in Lancaster, California. The BLVD is a redesign of nine blocks of Lancaster Boulevard in the downtown section of Lancaster, a suburban city in Los Angeles County. The project was conceived

<sup>49</sup> National Summit on Affordable Senior Housing with Services. American Association of Homes & Services for the Aging. May 25, 2010. PP.6-7.

and implemented by the Lancaster Redevelopment Agency. Prior to the start of this project in 2009, the areas had an unemployment rate of 18 percent.<sup>50</sup> The redevelopment agency partnered with the downtown merchant's association and private developers. The boulevard was redesigned by adding crosswalks, single travel lanes, foliage, outdoor seating, etc.<sup>51</sup> This design form encourages walking and discourages speeding automobile traffic. The city also switched from Euclidian zoning to a form-based code for the Lancaster Boulevard corridor.<sup>52</sup> The downtown district has added 40 new businesses since the conversion and features an online business/shopping directory and guide.<sup>53</sup> To assist businesses, the agency partnered with the Small Business Development Center to provide advice on business management.

As a result of these changes, property values have risen nearly 10 percent and 9 buildings totaling 800 housing units were built or rehabilitated.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, three of the nine buildings are for low-income seniors and handicapped adults.<sup>56</sup> The housing units were restored by both private developers and the Lancaster Redevelopment Agency. The agency also worked with area non-profits to bring support services to downtown Lancaster. Specifically, the agency assisted a local mental health agency in the construction of downtown housing complex and support services center.<sup>57</sup>

The BLVD project in Lancaster provides an example of the successful redevelopment of a blighted downtown into a mixed-use, walkable hub. The project blends pedestrian friendly infrastructure improvements with public and private housing investment and commercial growth. More importantly the Lancaster Redevelopment Agency undertook efforts to ensure mixed income housing was created in the area, as well as accessible support services for an at

need population.

In a similar fashion, this document suggests that the non-profit sector, local government or a resident-driven organization is needed to seed diversification of the housing stock and revitalization of communities. Though there is some diversification of new-building happening — patio-homes in second ring suburbs, a new mid-rise mixed-use project on Main Street in Williamsville, and an increasing number of downtown apartments — developer driven housing has tended to follow established patterns. The strong market that has emerged for downtown-living, for instance, was seeded by a City of Buffalo planning process which helped develop the conditions and incentives for the initial reintroduction of residential properties in the core. But even with the proliferation of new units, these residences tend to cluster within a mid- to upscale rental market, with some high-end condo units also coming available. The market analysis performed as part of the planning process identified a greater demand for a variety of unit types (such as hard lofts and townhouses, for instance), but private developers have generally continued to build those units for which an on-the-ground demand has been demonstrated.

For the downtown area, a government-initiated project that requests developer proposals for additional housing types (such as those mentioned above) may have the potential to demonstrate the success of alternate market segments. However, other municipalities can also follow this method to encourage the diversification of their local housing stock. This can take, and has taken, many forms, such as the repurposing of a building already owned by a town or city (a vacant school, for example), a property acquired for this purpose, or an infill building site. Alternatively, an organized group of end-users, buyers or renters who are seeking a different form of housing than currently available (such as co-housing, for example), may initiate the process of seeking a developer/ operator of a project that suits their needs. Though this type of example has precedent in other regions, it is not as prominent locally and may require additional technical support for the would-be residents.

Even with municipal or non-profit support, though, at the federal level there are numerous constraints on obtaining financing for mixed-use projects. The federal government

has a large role in the nation's real estate market. The government offers loans, loan guarantees, tax credits, tax deductions, tax exclusions, grants and subsidies. While there are numerous agencies involved, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and its parent agency, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) play the largest role. Some examples of the constraints on mixed use project financing at the federal level include Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac in addition to HUD 220 & 221(d)4 Programs.

Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac are privately owned, government sponsored enterprises. Both are regulated by HUD. Both organizations were designed by the federal government to help provide mortgages to low- and moderate-income Americans.<sup>58</sup> However, both enterprises are not direct lenders. They purchase loans from lenders to sell on the mortgage market as mortgage backed securities. This provides lenders with the liquidity to offer more loans to consumers.

In order for Fannie or Freddie to purchase a mortgage, it must meet their underwriting guidelines.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, lenders use Fannie and Freddie's guidelines when screening a borrower. Among these guidelines are restrictions on the total percentage of a project's gross floor area which can be devoted to commercial space. Fannie Mae caps this at 35%, while Freddie Mac caps it at just 20%.<sup>60</sup> Both enterprises also have restrictions on the percentage of gross income which can be derived from commercial space. Fannie Mae caps it at 20 percent and Freddie Mac caps it at 25 percent.<sup>61</sup>

Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac's guidelines are important because they are very influential on mortgages. Nearly 77% of mortgages issued in the United States are backed by these two enterprises.<sup>62</sup> Lenders selling mortgages to them must meet these standards. These standards have a clear influence on the

50 The BLVD Transformation Project. (2012). Lancaster Redevelopment Agency. [http://www.insitedevelopment.com/pdfs/BLVD\\_transformation\\_project.pdf](http://www.insitedevelopment.com/pdfs/BLVD_transformation_project.pdf)

51 Benfield, Kaid. How retrofitting a California suburb for walkability is spurring economic development. Switchboard: Natural Resources Defense Council Staff Blog 1/4/13 [http://switchboard.nrdc.org/blogs/kbenfield/how\\_a\\_california\\_suburban\\_retr.html](http://switchboard.nrdc.org/blogs/kbenfield/how_a_california_suburban_retr.html)

52 Ibid.

53 The BLVD Story, <http://www.newlancasterblvd.com/blvd-story.php>

54 The BLVD Transformation Project

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Longley, Robert, (2008, July 13) Who Are Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac? About.com Government Guide. <http://usgovinfo.about.com/b/2008/07/13/who-are-fannie-mae-and-freddie-mac.htm>

59 Merchant, Paul. Fannie Mae Underwriting Guidelines [http://mortgage.loveto know.com/Fannie\\_Mae\\_Underwriting\\_Guidelines](http://mortgage.loveto know.com/Fannie_Mae_Underwriting_Guidelines)

60 Congress for New Urbanism. Live/Work/Walk: Removing Obstacles to Investment. Retrieved from: <http://www.cnu.org/liveworkwalk>

61 Ibid.

62 Nocera, Joe The End of Fannie and Freddie? The New York Times, June 27, 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/27/opinion/nocera-the-end-of-fannie-and-freddie.html>



development of mixed-use properties in the United States. If someone behind a mixed-use project wishes to get a mortgage from a lender backed by Fannie or Freddie, the project must meet the space commercial space limits specified in their standards. This limits the amount of mixed-use space for a building. Those seeking a mortgage that does not meet Fannie or Freddie's guidelines must obtain a privately backed mortgage.

HUD Section 220 and Section 221(d)4 are programs to insure mortgages taken out for the constructions or rehabilitation of multi-family housing units.<sup>63</sup> Section 220 applies only to mortgages for projects within urban renewal areas, code enforcement areas and other areas where governments have undertaken designated revitalization activities.<sup>64</sup> Section 221(d)4 applies only to mortgages for projects designed for moderate income households, seniors and the disabled.<sup>65</sup> Both programs apply to loans taken out by public, private and non-profit entities.

Similar to Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, both 220 and 221(d) 4 have restrictions on the on the total percentage of a project's gross floor area which can be devoted to commercial space. This is capped at 20 percent for Section 220 and 10% for Section 221(d) 4.<sup>66</sup> Both sections also have restrictions on the percentage of gross income which can be derived from commercial space. Section 220 caps it at 30 percent, while Section 221(d)4 caps it at 15 percent.<sup>67</sup>

These restrictions are important because like Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Section 220 and Section 221(d)4 influence mortgage lenders. Therefore, an entity wishing to rehab or construct a building with a greater amount of commercial space may have a more difficult time obtaining a loan for the project.

<sup>63</sup> Mortgage Insurance for Rental Housing for Urban Renewal and Concentrated Development Areas: Section 220. Retrieved from <http://www.hud.gov/offices/hsg/mfh/progdesc/renturbanhsg220.cfm>

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Congress for New Urbanism.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

Figure 9. Buffalo Niagara Demographic Trends 1970-2010

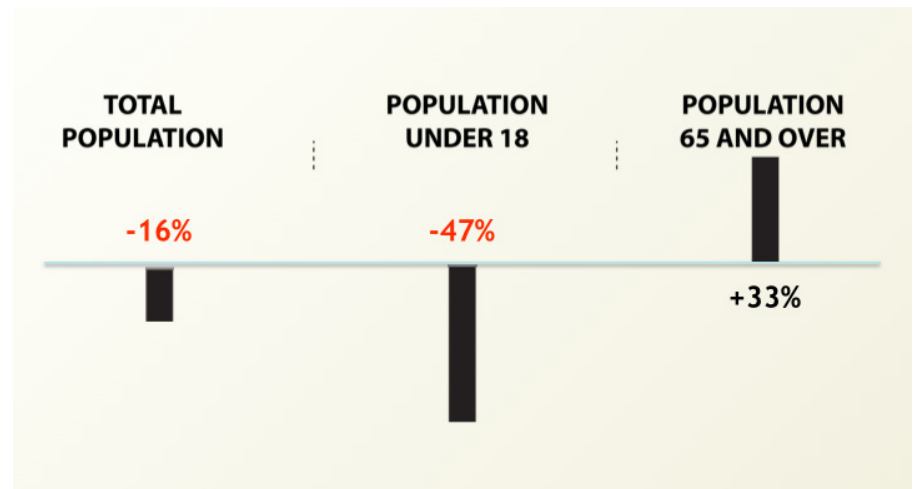


Figure 10. The Buffalo Green Code sets a new regional standard with an urban-focused form-based zoning code



Source: [www.buffalogreencode.com](http://www.buffalogreencode.com)

**C. Relieve regulatory roadblocks to housing innovation.** In many cases zoning codes or other housing regulations may need to be amended to allow some new types of housing or forms of tenure. This is particularly true of suburban communities that grew up around a model of single-family households with children – a demographic segment that has decreased dramatically in recent decades. To lead the effort, partners involved with One Region Forward could establish technical assistance for zoning and planning regulation reform to work with the coalition of municipalities, CDCs, and developers engaged in this effort.

The region has seen its population drop by 16% since 1970, while the population under 18 has fallen 47%. Over the same stretch, the population over age 65 has increased 33%.<sup>68</sup> And though only 28% of single-family homes in Buffalo-Niagara are now occupied by families with children, 75% of all building permits issued in the region from 2000-2010 were for single-family homes.<sup>69</sup> This proliferation of a housing stock not necessarily reflective of the current or future population's needs may have profound implications for the housing market and for communities that do not have diversified residences for new household types and for shifting resident needs across their lifespan.

This may be driven, in part, by restrictive and outdated zoning codes in many municipalities marked by segregated land uses that permit limited forms of development. Anecdotal evidence from developers suggests a willingness to break the single-family mold, however, these 20th century zoning codes will need to be amended to allow greater flexibility of unit types and other housing options and configurations.

The One Region Forward Land Use and Development Working Team acknowledged these challenges and created a series of recommendations in order to overcome them. In seeking to promote a more compact pattern of development, which would also decrease costs in energy consumption, land use, transportation demand and protect natural and agricultural lands, the Working Team suggested that the One Region Forward implementation

partners work to provide capacity for municipalities to revise zoning codes. Cities, villages and towns are individually responsible for these land use and zoning decisions, but due to low internal planning capacity and constrained municipal budgets, updates are seldom undertaken with any regularity. All municipalities should be encouraged to update their zoning codes in keeping with the collective vision outlined in One Region Forward to promote mixed uses, allow more intensive development in hubs and corridors, and protect valuable natural and agricultural lands from development.

One emergent approach to zoning rewrites is to focus on the control of the built form as much as land use. Through the Green Code, the City of Buffalo has pioneered the adoption of form-based code in Western New York – a new ordinance that will promote the redevelopment of the city as walkable, mixed use and dense while retaining the prevailing character of its great neighborhoods. Best practices in the One Region Forward “tool-kit” – including those from Buffalo – should encourage other municipalities to develop and adopt their own form-based codes.

### **C. Strategy Set 3: Pursue neighborhood-specific asset-based strategies for redevelopment.**

Public and private resources for housing and neighborhood redevelopment need to be strategically targeted where new investments can build on strong neighborhoods nearby, leverage existing assets, engage active residents and help neighborhood-scale housing markets work again. Municipal leadership and collaboration with community based organizations and residents is key to set strategy, conduct participatory planning, and align capital investments with neighborhood plans.

Just as there is no one-size-fits all neighborhood, there is no single solution to creating quality communities. Each neighborhood has intrinsic assets and faces a different set of challenges. Though, as highlighted in the first strategy set, it is important to bring additional expertise, analysis and hyper-local data to bear in communities, the local knowledge of residents is a crucial and indispensable component of planning and implementing community development. In short, this regional strategy document supports a vision of participatory community based planning. But, to be successful, true community based planning requires resources dedicated to the process, and a support system needs to be in place to build this capacity across the region.

All residents need to have options and feel empowered to make decisions that are best for them and their families. Though this is true in all communities, it is particularly important to put front and center in those neighborhoods that are heavily impacted by population loss, vacancy, blight, and decline. Though these neighborhoods may not be prime for conventional revitalization efforts, the trajectory of these places must be based on a realistic vision with demonstrable buy-in from community members.

Part of empowering communities, means showing progress and building confidence by implementing plans as they are developed. The region has suffered from what has been called “planning fatigue”, a condition caused by grand plans that seek input and commitment from communities and then fail to change conditions on the ground. Planning needs to be tied to implementation with flexible funding for early action steps. One method for

<sup>68</sup> Social Explorer Tables (SE), Census 1970, Census 2010, Census Bureau; Social Explorer

<sup>69</sup> Social Explorer Tables (SE), Census 2010, Census Bureau; Social Explorer U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2012. State of the Cities Data Systems (SOCDS). Retrieved from <http://socds.huduser.org/index.html>

### Strategy Step 3. Action Steps for the One Region Forward Partners

**Perform a market analysis for individual neighborhoods**  
**Build a support system for community based planning efforts**  
**Help institute participatory budgeting practices**  
**Provide ongoing training for municipal planning staff and planning boards**

ensuring this that is gaining popularity is a participatory budget process where residents have a direct say in public funding. In New York City, for instance, this is evolving at the level of city council districts, but no matter the format in which it is accomplished, municipal and county capital budgets – ideally linked with state and federal investments – need to be aligned to create high impact investments that spur confidence and trigger private investment.

But government funding alone will not be the answer to community revitalization – especially in light of shrinking Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) resources and local budgets. Individual and collective action is also an important component of initiating neighborhood regeneration. New and innovative ways to revitalize communities, crowd-sourced from the communities themselves, need to be piloted. Various projects, from new types of businesses to infrastructure interventions, and forms of ownership, such as cooperatives and collectives, for instance, should be considered and encouraged.

**A. Emphasize community based planning** with residents and stakeholders to maximize participation, leverage diffuse resources and focus on quality of life improvements. Working closely with residents and stakeholders is essential because so much of the knowledge, energy and money that is needed to regenerate neighborhoods exists at that local scale. Success will depend as much on investments by homeowners and small scale entrepreneurs as it does on municipal government, developers, or banks. The active engagement of all is needed to produce plans that work for specific neighborhoods and have the active support of those who stand to benefit. But neighborhood

planning can be resource intensive. A strong commitment from local government, philanthropy and business will be needed to provide the support structure for local planning that lasts.

In order to be eligible for HUD funding, participating jurisdictions must complete a 5-year consolidated plan strategy document based on a needs analysis as well as an annual action plan which examines the jurisdiction's needs and outlines programmatic uses for the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), HOME Investment Partnership, Emergency Solutions Grant, and Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS (HOPWA). HUD largely defines the parameters and content requirements of the documents. Though these plans consider a broad range of community needs and the department mandates public participation in this process, in most instances the public participation is of the review-and-comment variety. These documents are also generally long, technical and burdensome and as such are not geared toward resident interpretation or toward specific block-level prioritization or localized knowledge that gets addressed and valued in community based and participatory planning processes.

Participatory Budgeting, on the other hand, is an open public process by which community members have a direct role in idea creation, project development and the prioritization and allocation of resources to address local needs. Participatory Budgeting has proven a successful tool for identifying critical and catalytic projects, expanding public participation, building civic capacity and creating political support in diverse communities.

Participatory Budgeting began in Brazil in the late 1980s and has spread to communities worldwide, helping to determine allocation of municipal and agency capital budgets, special funds,

and legislative discretionary funds. In New York City, several Council Members have disbursed millions of dollars in discretionary spending through a broad based process – gaining notoriety from the White House as a leading Open Government “Champions of Change” initiative. The White House has also included Participatory Budgeting in the 2014 Open Government National Action Plan, specifically citing HUD Community Development funds as a potential funding source. Locally the process has been explored by the City of Buffalo Common Council and has been used to gauge community support for the distribution of funds from the Tonawanda Coke environmental violations settlement. The Participatory Budgeting Project, a New York city based 501(c)(3), has provided assistance to these efforts and to various projects throughout the continent.

Though Participatory Budgeting follows a general framework and protocol of rule setting; public ideation; project refinement and evaluation; public prioritization; and award allocation, the process can be modified to fit local situations. In a pure Participatory Budgeting process, the amount of funding available is established and communicated at the outset and projects are funded in the order of priority assigned by the community through the voting process until the funding is exhausted. Timelines for these processes vary, but many are on an annual schedule.

In several Participatory Budgeting instances, projects that have been identified as important but are not funded through the process itself have been funded through outside sources. The process of surfacing community concerns in a directly democratic way has the potential to garner support from other funders, such as foundations and institutions, as well as focus additional, comprehensive investment and impact in the target communities.

Forms of participatory budgeting are emerging throughout the Americas as a direct input tool for committing public resources to public priorities. Some communities have revamped their official planning processes to make an immediate and tangible investment in the priorities that neighborhood residents self-define as most important to improving their communities. Rochester's Neighbors Building Neighborhoods program, for example, tied the planning process directly to budget expenditures.



Figure 11. PUSH Buffalo Health Neighborhood Concept Plan, developed through an intensive process with community members and now driving change on the west side of Buffalo



Source: People United for Sustainable Housing.

Rochester Mayor Bill Johnson launched Neighbors Building Neighborhoods (NBN) in the mid-1990s early in his first term. The program was a new participatory-based approach to neighborhood and comprehensive planning that ultimately directly tied community priorities to City Hall activities.

The results of the initial round of NBN planning teams informed the City's 1999 master plan *Rochester 2010: The Renaissance Plan*. By 2003, the NBN boasted 78% of the 895 activities listed among the 36 distinct neighborhoods had been completed. Though the results were impressive, the NBN process was not proscriptive. In order to avoid many of the pitfalls often associated with requisite public outreach, Rochester "defused the explosive us-versus-them controversies by allowing neighborhoods to create and design the NBN".<sup>70</sup>

Instructive to the success of the program was providing professional staff support to each of the neighborhoods, but respecting residents' local knowledge and vesting the real decision making power with them. Second, was the commitment of the City to use the

neighborhood plans to make tangible investment decisions with the City's operating and capital budgets. Neighborhoods planning was not, then, merely an academic exercise or a wish list, but an actual participatory process in which residents prioritized expenditures of public funds.

Skill building and technical assistance were also provided to NBN participants through a free Neighbors Building Neighborhoods Institute that provided leadership, community organizing, and planning skills training.<sup>71</sup> The plans were also kept on a short (18-month) timeline, and nothing made it into the plan that did not have a project partner or responsible party.<sup>72</sup> This is a strong correlation to the LISC Building Sustainable Communities initiative described later in this report. Plans need to be realistic and there must be an accountable party. It is simply not enough to say that "someone" should carry an initiative forward.

<sup>71</sup> Rochester gives its citizens the power to shape their city. City Mayors. Tony Favro. [http://www.citymayors.com/government/rochester\\_nbn.html](http://www.citymayors.com/government/rochester_nbn.html)

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*

## B. Focus and coordinate public investments in neighborhoods with strategic assets

and coordinate public policy and capital investment priorities with local plans to create complete neighborhoods. Even mundane capital projects like street paving, curbs, sidewalks and street lighting can buoy resident efforts at regeneration. Larger investments in parks, transit, schools, community centers, business districts and the like can have an even greater impact – but only if all of these are coordinated with local planning initiatives. Participatory budgeting and crowd-sourced project financing can support these strategic investments. But alignment of local, county, state and federal investments with local plans is the key. Also important is treating neighborhoods holistically where "complete streets," local services and neighborhood retail are part of the mixed-use environment that supports diverse, accessible, quality housing. For some communities, this means repairing or restoring existing fabric. For other communities, this may mean retrofitting or repurposing dated and underutilized commercial stock, or creating town centers where none currently exist.

Though One Region Forward employed a robust and broad community engagement process, it is ultimately a plan the forms a regional vision within which to chart a course for bi-county and local action. However, the planning process was not designed to develop in-depth solutions for individual neighborhoods. The Housing and Neighborhoods Working Team examined national best practices in neighborhoods planning and development and has outlined them below as potential methods to employ as planning processes develop. Community plans and investment need to both be cognizant of market and resource capacities and respect the knowledge, needs and aspirations of those who live. Investments need to be comprehensive, they cannot simply focus on one aspect of a neighborhood, and they must be strategic, not attempting to solve all problems in all neighborhoods simultaneously.

The resources available throughout the region are inadequate to address the extent and severity of investment needs in all communities. However, historically, public investment has been scattered or piecemeal, failing to create demonstrable or visible signs of progress or improvement. While

<sup>70</sup> Partners for Livable Communities. *The Livable City: Revitalizing Urban Communities*. McGraw-Hill, Inc. Washington DC, 2000. P.35.

large-scale silver-bullet projects have also proven to be largely ineffective in revitalizing towns and cities, a certain threshold of investment that exhibits both promise and commitment can create the conditions for private investment, whether that takes the form of long time owners gaining the confidence to invest in their properties or first-time purchasers locating in the neighborhood.

The Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) has long been a national expert in providing organizational, technical and financial support for Community Development Corporations (CDCs) to invest capital into challenged neighborhoods. However in the mid-2000s several local programs and partners acknowledged the limitations of broad based capital investment alone to reinvigorate a city or a specific neighborhood. In Chicago, for example, some of the first LISC investments in large-scale housing developments that were created to replace dilapidated ones, were beginning to show signs of wear and stress themselves. Though providing decent, safe and affordable housing helped to stabilize residents' well being, it was not impacting the fundamental nature of the community. Without improved education opportunities, access to employment, safe recreational areas and multiple other factors that make neighborhoods whole and desirable, these investments were ultimately not sustainable and not having the desired impacts for families in challenged communities.

The Chicago program was among those local program offices to broaden, deepen and target their efforts to focus not just on physical redevelopment but also on making simultaneous social, civic and economic progress in specific neighborhoods. This strategy, which LISC now calls Building Sustainable Communities (but is also generally referred to as comprehensive community development) also germinated in the South Bronx. Buffalo, likewise, branched out in to a more holistic view of partners, projects and community engagement within a targeted neighborhood in the early 2000s.

The PUSH Green Development Zone (GDZ) on the West Side of Buffalo exemplifies the kind of targeted, market conscious revitalization activity envisioned by Building Sustainable Communities and as outlined in Legacy

Figure 12. Richmond, Virginia. Supporting Mixed-Income Neighborhoods. A rendering of the 32-unit senior building, across the street from the historic Beckstoffer's Mill building (courtesy of Better Housing Coalition)



Source: [http://www.huduser.org/portal/casestudies/study\\_08302013\\_1.html](http://www.huduser.org/portal/casestudies/study_08302013_1.html)

Cities (see below). Building on the work of the West Side Community Collaborative, PUSH and several local partners created a targeted neighborhood plan for a discrete area west of Richmond Avenue. The roughly 25-block area benefits from close proximity to the Elmwood Village just to the east as well as a high population density, a historic street grid and a variety of housing stock with few gaps in the urban fabric from demolitions. However, it has long been plagued by a poor public perception, population and capital flight, low housing values, increasing vacancy and a lack of economic activity.

With support from LISC, the West Side neighborhood underwent a planning process in 2001-2002 and has seen success in implementing many aspects of that resulting plan through cooperative efforts structured around the partners involved in the West Side Community Collaborative. PUSH emerged in the mid-2000s and would grow into a powerful and convening organization that intentionally brought new voices into the planning and implementation of community change. The multi-partner, multi-faceted approach took participatory and measured steps to revitalizing the neighborhood. PUSH employs a collaborative effort involving non-profit investment and public sector investment in infrastructure and amenities, as well as direct action campaigns to hold institutional influences accountable for

their effects on the community.

While PUSH emerged with a core strength in organizing, and is developing larger capacity in rental housing development and green jobs creation, other non-profit partners bring complimentary aspects to the project area. Homefront, Inc. and Habitat for Humanity, for example, bring homeownership opportunities for low-moderate- and first time homebuyers. The Massachusetts Avenue Project has a focus on youth development and local food production. Others bring recreation, education, and more to the table. However, the initiatives that are implemented are derived from a ground-up process that identifies community concerns around the mantra of "we know what we need where we live".

This metered, inclusive and comprehensive approach is showing impressive results in the target neighborhood. Neighborhood vacancy levels are decreasing and property values have risen consistently in the ensuing years, with new private and public investment in the community and the work of PUSH Buffalo and its partners now a common sight. The Green Development Zone is also drawing national attention, including an international Changemakers award sponsored by HUD, the American Institute of Architects and a major national foundation.

In Richmond, Virginia, the Neighborhoods in Bloom policy followed a similar targeted strategy, aligning



the City's Community Development Block Grant and HOME funds to a limited number of tightly defined areas. Based on the goals of the City's 1999 comprehensive plan of crime and blight reduction and economic development aimed at bolstering tax revenues, *Neighborhoods in Bloom* was developed after an inclusive process seeking to take the plan to implementation.

The City Administration embraced the concept of targeted neighborhood revitalization and encouraged City staff to work across departmental disciplines, streamlining processes and coordinating resources. Yet at the time Richmond had nine district Council Members and no mayor (the city had a manager form of administration) or at large seats, so the lack of an overarching, objective citywide voice could have presented problem for selecting strategic target areas. However, from the start of the process it was determined that focus neighborhoods would be selected by data, not politics. Criteria were selected through a lengthy consensus-building process that ultimately received broad grassroots support to include an assessment of neighborhood conditions and neighborhood potential.

Neighborhood conditions were defined by data pertaining to occupancy and condition status of structures, criminal activity, demographics including poverty level and percent of owner occupied housing. Neighborhood potential included some less-quantitative factors, but no less important considerations, of local capacity for revitalization such as civic associations, neighborhood plans and the presence of active revitalization partners; market factors such as employment and commercial potential, existing and planned investments, availability of land and proximity to public housing as well as major traffic corridors; and neighborhood trends.

The summary of all of these factors led to a scoring process that pointed to four neighborhood typologies: redevelop, revitalize, stabilize, and protect. Far from choosing easy targets, however, the City only focused on those communities scoring at the lower end of the conditions analysis (redevelop and revitalize) for inclusion in *Neighborhoods in Bloom*.

The *Neighborhoods in Bloom* program extended far beyond City government to include the cooperation and support of Community Development Corporations (CDCs) and resident leaders, Housing

*Rebuilding America's Legacy Cities* makes clear distinctions between the approaches to investing in areas with – or bordering – relative market strength and those where market forces are not as strong. While acknowledging that even in these areas subsidies may initially be required to spur investment, in neighborhoods with stronger markets, *Legacy Cities* suggests:

#### ***“Build from strength***

Areas with relatively strong market activity should be targeted for investment, with the goal of increasing demand, strengthening property values, and rebuilding confidence in the community...

#### ***Change the investment climate***

Public investments need to change the climate so as to leverage private financing. Approaches include making strategic infrastructure investments, eliminating deterrents to investment, creating an entrepreneurial environment that builds on existing businesses, focusing on clusters that leverage the city's economic assets, and growing export-oriented firms...

#### ***Invest in human capital***

Racial and poverty concentrations are a distressing by-product of sustained population loss in legacy cities. Improving schooling at all levels and connecting workforce training to regional job growth can help integrate the city's human capital with surrounding economic opportunities. Advancing public policies that promote equity is essential for overcoming these cities' histories of race and class disparities...

#### ***Promote density***

Evidence is growing that demand for city living is greater when there are dense, walkable neighborhoods. Even in legacy cities with a surplus of land, growing nodes of density can be an effective strategy to strengthen the city's residential and commercial areas..."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The 110th American Assembly. *Reinventing America's Legacy Cities: Strategies for Cities Losing Population*. 2011.

Opportunities Made Easy, Richmond LISC and the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority. Neighborhoods in Bloom employed seven strategies and required sustained commitment by partners in:

- 1) partnership development
- 2) housing rehabilitation as well as new construction
- 3) existing homeowner repairs
- 4) proactive code enforcement
- 5) resident empowerment
- 6) public safety initiatives
- 7) leveraging of private investment.

The targeted, collaborative approach yielded tangible and dramatic results. The Richmond branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond commissioned a study that demonstrated:

- Housing prices in targeted Neighborhoods in Bloom areas

appreciated at a rate of 9.9 percent per year faster than the citywide average.

- Prices in non-targeted blocks, but within 5,000 feet of the impact areas, increased annually at a rate of 5.3 percent faster than the citywide average. This suggests that the effects of *Neighborhoods in Bloom* investments reach beyond the impact areas, although to a lesser degree.
- The most significant home price impacts occurred after a threshold investment of \$20,100 in the same block had been reached.
- As investments in a given block increased beyond the level of this threshold, a significant boost in prices of initially 50 percent with continued 9.6 percent annual increases thereafter was experienced.
- Even blocks in the target area that had no investment experienced substantial increases in value

suggesting a spillover effect in the entire target area.<sup>73</sup>

In another report, *Reinventing America's Legacy Cities: Strategies for Cities Losing Population*, the American Assembly, a national non-profit public affairs forum affiliated with Columbia University, sounded similar themes. The report was compiled by a cross section of practitioners and researchers focused on reviving cities that have yet to reverse the decades-long population trends of de-industrialization and suburbanization. Though this report is primarily focused on core cities, the implication for regions losing population, such as Buffalo-Niagara, are clear. The first set of recommendations from the report – develop an informed vision through a broad inclusive process – was one of the fundamental objectives the One Region Forward project. The second set of recommendations – develop strategies based on market realities – is reflected within the strategies of the Housing and Neighborhoods Working Team and this regional strategy document regarding informed and data-driven decision making:

*"If legacy cities are to build sound and healthy futures, they must base their decisions on a clear, objective understanding of the realities of their market conditions, with deep knowledge of the city's assets and liabilities and where it fits within the broader regional economy.*

*While some parts of these cities retain varying degrees of market strength, other areas may be extensively abandoned and no longer capable of generating market activity. Cities must recognize this bifurcation, making investments that are reality-based, and that ultimately link spatial development plans with regional and local economic development strategies."*<sup>74</sup>

Legacy Cities also makes the case that neighborhood reinvestment should tie into regional strategies and developing economic activity and should intentionally foster collaboration and shared interest with institutions as well

<sup>73</sup> Virginia LISC. The Ripple Effect: Economic Impacts of Targeted Community Investments; An overview of the City of Richmond's Neighborhoods in Bloom initiative and the quantifiable results found in the study The Impacts of Targeted Public and Nonprofit Investment on Neighborhood Development commissioned by The Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond. 08/01/2005. <http://www.lisc.org/content/publications/detail/762>

<sup>74</sup> The 110th American Assembly. *Reinventing America's Legacy Cities: Strategies for Cities Losing Population*. 2011. P 9.

Figure 13. The ArtSpace Lofts in Main St. Buffalo, NY



Source: [http://www.belmonthousingwny.org/artspace\\_buffalo\\_lofts](http://www.belmonthousingwny.org/artspace_buffalo_lofts)

as linking city and suburbs. For those neighborhoods which are not currently ripe for market-based reinvestment strategies, additional insights from the American Assembly are summarized in a later section of this regional strategy document on "better, not bigger" strategies.

### C. Leverage the energy of new demographic groups.

Urban neighborhoods have long been identified with specific ethnic groups, industrial specializations or cultural tendencies. Neighborhood planning should embrace the potential for immigrant communities, artists, or other groups to lead regeneration efforts and use unique ethnic, cultural or occupational identities to leverage investment and customer traffic. Changes already underway throughout the region can be leveraged to enhance these opportunities. These approaches can help create stronger neighborhoods if the initiatives are authentic, are supported by neighborhood input, and backed by reliable market information.

Differentiating communities, gearing the feel or culture of place to an affinity group is a good opportunity to create stronger neighborhoods, but it must be authentic. This cannot happen in

the absence of neighborhood input or realistic market data. Local communities need access to technical assistance and support to find the best strategies and tools to design and implement a plan.

Though it was not initially targeted as a neighborhood-specific redevelopment project, local government and local legislative representatives played a large role in working with ArtSpace to bring targeted housing targeted to artists to Buffalo. This assistance included location scouting and facilitation as well as partial financial support. With this and funding from tax credit programs and local foundations, the organization ultimately partnered with Belmont Housing Resources to redevelop the Buffalo Electric Vehicle Co. building on Main Street. The "ArtSpace Lofts" were completed in 2007, and immediately brought new attention and investment to its surroundings.

ArtSpace is a non-profit real estate developer that provides living spaces for low to moderate income artists nationwide.<sup>75</sup> They began redeveloping properties in Minnesota in the early-1990's and quickly expanded. The organization defines itself as having three broad categories: Property Development, Asset Management,

<sup>75</sup> FAQ, ArtSpace Retrieved from <http://www.artspace.org/about/frequently-asked-questions>



Figure 14. West Side Bazaar. Buffalo, NY



Source: [http://www.wedibuffalo.org/west\\_side\\_bazaar](http://www.wedibuffalo.org/west_side_bazaar)

and Consulting Services.<sup>76</sup> As of 2013, ArtSpace had built or redeveloped 33 properties across the United States. Twenty-six of these projects contain apartments with specific studio space for artists to work from.<sup>77</sup> Rents in ArtSpace developments are determined based upon HUD guidelines.<sup>78</sup>

The organization also provides consulting services to communities looking to provide affordable housing options for artists.<sup>79</sup> Consulting fees range from \$1,000 for access to their online toolkit and a 2 hour consulting

session, to \$42,500 for an Arts Market survey.<sup>80</sup> Major funders include: Ford Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, The McKnight Foundation & the State of Minnesota.<sup>81</sup>

Although Buffalo already has an ArtSpace development in the city, the ArtSpace model nonetheless provides another creative strategy for neighborhood and community development.

Another example, Project Row Houses, provides a similar blend of housing and the arts. Project Row Houses is a

diverse project that invokes both art and housing services. This provides a creative and non-traditional community development model to accomplish this strategy area of this document. The art component of Project Row Houses blends art and artists with the community it serves, as well as actively engaging members of the community in the project.

Project Row Houses began in 1993, with the conversion of 22 shotgun row houses in Houston's Third Ward. The founders of Project Row Houses had the desire to create a community art project that would have a meaningful impact on the community. The project seeks to blend art and culture with community development. The Third Ward is a lower income and predominantly African-American community. The project was initially funded through seed money from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation. Volunteers also greatly aided the renovation of the homes. The project has grown from 22 houses on one block to 40 properties on six blocks.<sup>82</sup> The properties consist of a mix of "artist exhibition/residency spaces, seven homes for single mothers, artist residencies, office spaces, a community gallery, a park, and low-income residential and commercial spaces."<sup>83</sup>

To address housing and community development issues more directly, a spinoff organization, the Row House Community Development Corporation was established.<sup>84</sup> The organization also offers year-long housing, childcare and support services for single mothers through the Young Mother Residential Program.<sup>85</sup> The project has received funding from a variety of foundations, private organizations and public sources including the City of Houston, Chevron, The Ford Foundation, Bank of America, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and many more. Project Row Houses has partnered with a number of organizations including the Rice University School of Architecture. The school's partnership began in 1997 and has provided design, building and planning assistance to the project.<sup>86</sup>

A different approach to targeted resident attraction can be found in

76 Mission & History, ArtSpace. Retrieved from <http://www.artspace.org/about/mission-history>

77 FAQ, ArtSpace.

78 Ibid.

79 ArtSpace, Mission & History.

80 ArtSpace Fee Structure, ArtSpace, <http://www.artspace.org/sites/default/files/public/downloads/artspacefeestructure.pdf>

81 Funders, ArtSpace <http://www.artspace.org/about/funders>

82 Project Row Houses, About. Retrieved from <http://projectrowhouses.org/about/>

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Kimmelman, Michael. December 17, 2006.

86 Collaboration with Project Row Houses. Retrieved from <http://arch.rice.edu/Academics/Rice-Building-Workshop/Project-Row-Houses/>



Upstate New York where, in the past two and a half decades, Utica has seen a significant influx of refugees and immigrants. Between 1989 and 2004 alone, 10,000 refugees came to Utica.<sup>87</sup> The refugee population has been credited with reversing the city's population loss as Utica saw a 2.6 percent increase in its population between 2000 and 2010 stopping a six-decade long streak. Utica's refugee influx took off in the 1990's with many Bosnians and Russians migrating to the city.<sup>88</sup> In the early 2000's, Vietnamese, Burmese and African refugees became the most frequent arrivals.<sup>89</sup>

The Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees plays the dominant role in refugee resettlement in Utica.<sup>90</sup> The MVRRC is a part of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service Network.<sup>91</sup> The center provides many services to recently placed refugees including assistance with housing, employment, cultural orientation, case management, education and health care. The MVRRC also provides many immigration related services in-house and is authorized to represent clients before US Citizenship and Immigration Services.<sup>92</sup>

In *The Case of a City Where 1 in 6 Residents is a Refugee: Ecological Factors and Host Community Adaptation in Successful Resettlement*, R. Scott Smith examines Utica's success as a refugee community. Through interviews, Scott identified factors that contributed to this success.<sup>93</sup> Among the factors was an understanding of the refugee or immigrant experience by many in the community who were either recent arrivals themselves or had a parent or grandparent who was an immigrant.<sup>94</sup> Scott noted that housing affordability helped greatly, with some refugees

moving into or purchasing homes unwanted by the general populous.<sup>95</sup> In addition, some refugees have become landlords themselves, with an estimated 30 percent of recent arrivals renting from refugees.<sup>96</sup> Scott also states that refugees have employment opportunities in the form of "low-paying entry level jobs" not coveted American born workers, noting that the businesses he interviewed "would like to hire as many refugees as possible".<sup>97</sup>

Utica provides a success story for the attraction and retention of refugees in a post-industrial city. Erie and Niagara counties can take a great deal from Utica's story. The city is home to a strong support system both through formal institutions such as MVRRC and fellow refugees.

In Buffalo-Niagara, Buffalo's neighborhoods are becoming home to many refugees and new immigrant groups and these populations continue to grow throughout the region.<sup>98</sup> The adaptation successes of Utica provide a model for Buffalo-Niagara to learn from.

**D. Design alternative long-term strategies** for areas where disinvestment has left few of the assets, anchors and actors that are needed to power successful neighborhood revitalization. For such neighborhoods the time for conventional neighborhood redevelopment may be decades away. Where housing stock and commercial fabric have mostly been eroded and anchor institutions have departed, scarce public resources in conventional approaches cannot be expected to overcome immense private disinvestment. Both interim and long-term strategies are needed to support the redevelopment process and provide options for those who call those neighborhoods home. Far from the "benign neglect" of decades past, however, these neighborhoods need active management of community change, driven by local residents and a firm understanding of the existing market potential.

Though the region has lost population throughout the course of the past half-century, the population loss is far from uniform. Even as the population decreases have slowed, there are

neighborhoods that continue to lose population at an alarming rate. The Broadway-Fillmore neighborhood in Buffalo, for instance, lost 50% of its population from 2000-2010. While there are many positive activities and initiatives in this neighborhood and in other communities that are struggling, immediately or quickly returning these neighborhoods to their peak vibrancy and vitality is not likely given the current regional and market dynamics.

Community plans and investment need to reflect realistic development prospects and must consider non-conventional neighborhood revitalization. These challenging dynamics call for a continuation and expansion of innovative practices that are emerging in communities across the region while learning lessons from the national and international best practices at many scales.

In 2006, with a host of local partners, the National Vacant Properties Campaign Published Blueprint Buffalo: Regional Strategies And Local Tools for Reclaiming Vacant Properties in the City and Suburbs of Buffalo. This report provided a thorough examination of vacant property conditions in the region with a detailed set of policy and practice recommendations. Among these recommendations was turning the region into a Living Laboratory for vacant property reclamation. Part regulatory reform, part think-tank, part project hub, the Living Laboratory concept proposed a radical re-envisioning of distressed communities that moved beyond the outdated policies but still painful memories of large scale neighborhood clearance of the Urban Renewal era to a dynamic and inclusive process of innovation and collective action.

The best practices in this section represent this spirit. They represent a broad array of approaches and reflect the important acknowledgement that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for challenged neighborhoods, or for families living in distressed communities. While a go-slow approach is necessary to ensure neighborhood self-determination and careful planning, this cannot be an excuse for inaction.

Rebuilding America's Legacy Cities lays out several principles for getting started in areas where normal market forces are not functioning. Several neighborhoods within Buffalo-Niagara have slipped into this category, represented by large-

87 Scott, R. Smith (2008). *The Case of a City Where 1 in 6 Residents is a Refugee: Ecological Factors and Host Community Adaptation in Successful Resettlement*. American Journal of Community Psychology, Vol. 42, P. 326.

88 Wilkinson, Ray (2005). A marriage 'made in heaven': A small American town, Asian freedom fighters, Somali slaves and survivors of the 'Killing Fields'. Refugees. Vol. 1, No. 138. PP. 6-25.

89 Ibid.

90 Tracey, Sara. (2013, June 17) "Study details Utica, its new populations" Utica Observer-Dispatch <http://www.uticaod.com/news/x1484775595/Study-details-Utica-its-new-populations>

91 Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees. <http://www.mvrcc.org/history>. Retrieved October 2, 2014

92 Community Integration, Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees <http://www.mvrcc.org/community-integration/>

93 Scott. P.333.

94 Ibid.

95 Scott P.335.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 Reilly, Ed. New Immigrants & Refugees Coming to Buffalo, WKBW-TV <http://www.wkbw.com/news/local/New-Immigrants--Refugees-Coming-to-Buffalo-180251221.html>. November 21, 2012.

scale population decline and real estate vacancy and abandonment. Because of how much disinvestment has taken place in these communities, traditional community development strategies will not be enough to reverse the long-standing trends.

Going from this conceptual framework, there are tangible actions in place within Buffalo-Niagara that can provide a base for increasingly proactive approaches to rebuilding and re-envisioning challenged neighborhoods. For example, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo signed land bank enabling legislation for New York State in 2011. The legislation permitted 10 land banks across the state through a competitive process managed by Empire State Development. Buffalo and Erie County submitted a joint application with the Cities of Tonawanda and Lackawanna and was granted one of the initial five land banks. Known as the Buffalo Erie Niagara Land Improvement Corp (BENLIC), this countywide land bank has also shown interest in collaborating with the City of Niagara Falls based on initial conversations with Mayor Paul Dyster. BENLIC received a commitment of operating resources from Erie County, and has recently been awarded a grant from the New York State Attorney General's office as a portion of mortgage settlement proceeds. However, at this early stage in its development, BENLIC has limited capacity to impact vacant property revitalization at scale.

Other communities, however, have provided a road map to a robust land bank operation with a broad collaborative approach to managing and mitigating the effects of vacant and abandoned property. Michigan is often cited as the state with the most advanced regulatory structure and practice, and Genesee County has arguably the largest and most established of the state's land banks.

Genesee County is home to Flint, Michigan – once an automotive capital, but more recently a city that has suffered severe job, population and tax base losses. The Genesee County Land Bank was established after a statewide reform in tax foreclosure. From 2002 to 2012, the land bank foreclosed on more than 16,000 properties. The land bank returned more than 3,691 (\$16.4 million valuation) of these properties to the tax rolls, 908 of those in 2012 alone.<sup>99</sup> Another 2,918 properties have

99 Genesee County Land Bank 2012 Annual Report, pg 2 <http://thelandbank.org/downloads/lbanewsletterannualreportwinter2013final.pdf>

Legacy Cities offers a number of strategies that take a patient long-term approach aimed at stabilization and re-assessment. Though this report was written through the lens of cities, there are strong lessons to be learned for all of Buffalo-Niagara's communities experiencing population loss and property abandonment.

### ***"Get land under public control"***

Cities should build their capacity to assemble, hold, and maintain vacant land, clear title, and dispose of property for non-market uses. Cities—enabled by their states— should employ land assembly tools including the aggressive use of tax foreclosure.

### ***Incentivize responsible property stewardship***

Property owners have responsibilities as well as rights. States should enact measures such as vacant property registration fees and aggressive code enforcement that press owners to restore vacant properties to productive use, maintain them responsibly, or relinquish them to others. At the same time, cities should provide incentives for owners willing to restore properties to use.

### ***Encourage alternative land uses***

Strategies for non-market areas should be designed to ensure that surplus land enhances the city's stronger neighborhoods and economic development strategies. Vacant land can be used for a wide range of both interim and permanent uses, including productive landscapes for environmental remediation, storm water management, habitat and wetland restoration, community gardening, recreational and cultural activities, and contemporary forms of homesteading.

### ***Encourage relocation where necessary***

In implementing their land use strategies, cities may seek to encourage residents and businesses left in largely vacant areas to relocate to more populated neighborhoods with better amenities and services. This raises difficult issues, as many people, particularly older individuals, may be reluctant or unable to afford to move. Rather than forcing people to leave their homes and businesses, cities should provide sensitive, thoughtful incentives and support that enable them to relocate to communities that may offer a better quality of life or more viable business location. The critical goal is to offer residents and businesses choices, rather than impose "solutions" on them."<sup>1</sup>

1 The 110th American Assembly. Reinventing America's Legacy Cities: Strategies for Cities Losing Population. 2011. PP. 11-12.

been sold at public auction. Another 2,040 unsalvageable properties have been demolished. The land bank also maintains a rental and sale program to promote affordable housing. For vacant lots, the land bank contracts with community organizations to maintain roughly 1,300 vacant lots throughout the county as well as creating lease arrangements and sales for community gardening, residential side lots and more.<sup>100</sup> In all, the land bank's activities have spurred \$60 million in private investment.<sup>101</sup>

100 *Ibid.* P.3.

101 Land Banks and Land Banking, Frank Alexander. Center for Community Progress. June 2011. P. 9

The Genesee County Land Bank has a staff of 18 and is supported financially by 1) acquiring all tax delinquent property and benefiting from the sale of relatively high value properties, 2) state brownfield redevelopment incentives ("land bank properties are eligible for a scattered-site, cross-collateralized, multi-jurisdictional TIF [Tax Increment Financing] plan."<sup>102</sup>), 3) direct allocations from the County, and 4) philanthropic support.

Though the New York State land bank legislation allows for a variety of funding mechanisms, with low existing capacity there is to date a limited picture

102 *Ibid* P.50.

of which mechanisms can or will be activated. One potential mechanism is a pledge of 50% of the property taxes being committed to the land bank for 10 years for properties that it returns to the tax rolls. However, this will require the agreement of the home municipalities for the properties.

While Genesee County was among the first to ramp up land bank activities, Youngstown, Ohio, was among the first cities to predicate its redevelopment strategies on the fact that the city had been and was likely to continue Shrinking. Youngstown, like many other Great Lakes cities, grew up on heavy industry. When the city's steel plant shut down, the local economy collapsed and with it tens of thousands of residents began to move away. Though the process of determining a strategy that reflected the current and projected trends and acknowledged realistic economic and municipal revenue prospects, the community developed the following principles within the comprehensive plan, Youngstown 2010: A Plan for a Smaller City:

1. Accepting that Youngstown is a smaller city: Youngstown should strive to be a model mid-sized city.
2. Defining Youngstown's role in the new regional economy: Youngstown must align itself with the realities of the new regional economy.
3. Improving Youngstown's image and enhancing quality of life: Making Youngstown a healthier and better place to live and work.
4. A call to action: An achievable and practical plan to make things happen.<sup>103</sup>

Embedded within these actions was the notion that not all neighborhoods were currently appropriate for conventional commercial, industrial or residential redevelopment. Different strategies are needed, including greening initiatives. In fact, greening communities has been a major and growing component of vacant property revitalization not just in Youngstown but nationally in recent years. However, the spectrum of greening is broad and even nebulous. At times greening is a temporary solution, at other times it is seen as a permanent resolution to vacancy problems, and many times it is somewhere in between. Whether it is for stormwater management, ecological restoration

and natural regeneration areas, side lot transfers to neighbors, enhanced park or playground space, pop-up markets or events, or many other interventions, the notion that reuse does not necessarily mean brick-and-mortar redevelopment is a viable and practical response to challenging economic conditions and a surplus of available land.

Community gardens and urban agriculture represent one theme of this greening activity taking place throughout the nation. Though there are ongoing debates about the line between community gardens and larger scale agriculture and the regulations that should apply to either or both, in cities and suburban communities that are suffering long-term vacancy – and even in areas that were first afflicted with vacancy issues during the sub-prime foreclosure crisis – reusing vacant land for growing has demonstrated multiple benefits.

As noted in the Queen City Gardens Plan, community gardens reduce blight and contribute to beautification increasing property values and spurring investment. They can also reduce stormwater run off, improve urban air quality and provide spaces for outdoor physical activity. In addition, they create opportunity for interaction among neighbors and increase community cohesion. Particularly in low-income communities and in food deserts, community gardens can provide a source of nutritious and affordable food.<sup>104</sup>

Since 1992 Grassroots Gardens has been the main facilitator of community garden activities in Buffalo, now supporting 70 gardens throughout the city. According to their website:

*"Grassroots Gardens functions largely as the liaison organization between the City of Buffalo administration and our city's enthusiastic community gardeners. Primarily, Grassroots Gardens establishes leases with the city and indemnifies the properties, enabling gardeners to take on the challenges of establishing and maintaining the gardens without the added burden of liability for gardeners and visitors. In addition, whenever possible, Grassroots Gardens assists gardeners' efforts through modest material and financial support, including the distribution of soil, mulch, plants,*

*seeds, bulbs, tools and other supplies."*<sup>105</sup>

In Niagara Falls, ReNU Niagara has helped to play a convening role with the Vacant Lot Coalition which first began to develop a formal process to access publicly owned vacant land with the City in 2011. As of 2012 the coalition incorporated Greenprint Niagara, Inc. that has formalized a lease process with the City of Niagara Falls. Like Grassroots Gardens in Buffalo, Greenprint Niagara has developed an application for those interested in gardening on city owned land and will provide liability insurance and support for gardens established under their lease.<sup>106</sup>

Suburban and rural communities in Buffalo-Niagara largely lack the policy and organizational infrastructure to implement community garden programs. Grassroots Gardens of Buffalo, for example, has indicated fielding many requests for assistance outside of the city's borders. In municipalities with a preponderance of single-family homes on moderate or large lots, however, community gardens may only be appropriate in certain areas with a relatively higher density of residents, such as a village or town center.

Debates about the economic viability of small scale urban or suburban farming have not been resolved. Some regions and cities are placing large investments in converting abandoned tracts of land into farms. Others are experimenting with more contained closed-system farming, and even others are refining vertical farming practices. Detractors, however, question the economics of these start-up farms, particularly in light of the plight of smaller farmers throughout the country who struggle to compete with larger and corporate farms generally favored by federal agriculture subsidies.

What is emerging, however, with some greater certainty is the ability for hyper-locally grown produce to combat the lack of food security and food access in communities designated as food deserts and to supplement the diets of those who struggle to afford nutritious food. These topics are covered in greater depth in the Food Access and Justice portion of the One Region Forward Plan.

Nationally and locally, organizations

103 Youngstown, Ohio. Youngstown 2010 Vision. [http://www.cityofyoungstownoh.com/about\\_youngstown/youngstown\\_2010/vision\\_files/vision.aspx](http://www.cityofyoungstownoh.com/about_youngstown/youngstown_2010/vision_files/vision.aspx) Retrieved July 21, 2014.

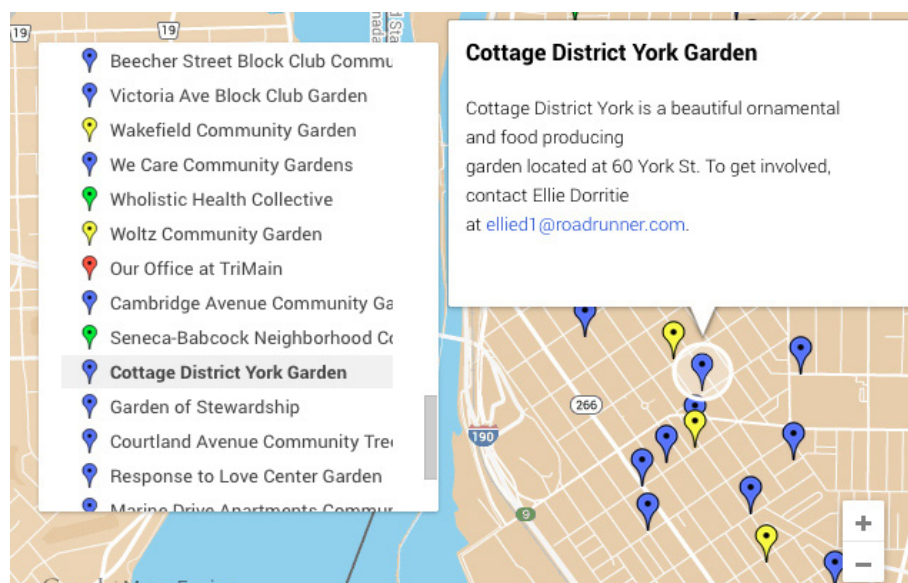
104 Queen City Gardens Plan: Planning for Community Gardens in the City of Buffalo. Department of Urban and Regional Planning, State University of New York at Buffalo. Dr. Samina Raja., et I. 2009.

105 <http://www.grassrootsgardens.org/why-we-grow>. Retrieved August 28, 2013.

106 <http://www.niagara.edu/reNU-projects/>. Retrieved August 28, 2013.



Figure 15. Grassroots Gardens Online Map to find the community gardens in the neighborhood.



Source: <http://www.grassrootsgardens.org/our-gardens.html>

Figure 16. Grassroots Gardens. BlackRock Heritage Garden. Before and After.



Source: <http://www.grassrootsgardens.org/black-rock-and-riverside-gardens.html>

have emerged to facilitate the interim stewardship of vacant and abandoned lots in various other ways. Though demolition is often required for houses that have lost viability within communities, a vacant lot in place of a vacant house does not serve necessarily as a revitalizing influence. PhiladelphiaGreen was among the first programs to develop a "clean and green" methodology for these troublesome parcels and now maintains more than 8,000 parcels throughout Philadelphia in conjunction with both neighborhood groups and organizations that facilitate jobs for the hard-to-employ. Other models, such as Groundwork Trusts, take a youth education and employment approach, tied to environmentally restorative projects. While Groundwork Buffalo is still an emerging organization, Groundwork Hudson Valley has grown from small scale projects to larger scale efforts such restoring a channelized and buried waterway through Yonkers, in a process known as daylighting.

Environmentally restorative projects are an emerging set of initiatives within cities suffering from large-scale vacancy. In this regard, however, Buffalo was initially a pioneer with the establishment of Tift Nature Preserve on a landfill site. The Buffalo Sewer Authority is now embarking on another emerging practice of stormwater management through green infrastructure rather than strictly through conventional underground storage tanks and pipes. This opens up several enticing possibilities for the reuse of vacant land as constructed wetlands and stormwater parks that would provide aesthetic and recreational amenities in troubled neighborhoods in addition to their ecological benefits and cost-effective construction.

Northeast Ohio is another region exploring best practice innovations in vacant property transformation, and the Kent State Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative has been a leading thinker and innovator on property reuse and reinterpretation not just in Northeast Ohio, but nationally. While the broader vision of the CUDC is to "create livable, sustainable communities, enhance the public realm, protect natural and cultural resources, and stimulate economic prosperity"<sup>107</sup>, in 2005 the organization launched a Shrinking Cities Institute to deal directly with issues of population decline and

<sup>107</sup> Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative. Mission & Vision. [http://www.cudc.kent.edu/about\\_us/mission\\_vision/index.html](http://www.cudc.kent.edu/about_us/mission_vision/index.html). Retrieved July 21, 2014.

property abandonment. CUDC has completed long range visioning for transforming Cleveland to a right-sized footprint while reclaiming and respected environmentally sensitive land and has created a pattern book for vacant property reuse complete with materials and budget sheets that reflect the practical costs and considerations of each of the suggested interventions.

The Collaborative also launched Pop Up City to re-enliven vacant spaces on a temporary basis to “demonstrate how vacancy can be an opportunity and an adventure, not just a liability”.<sup>108</sup> Several books have been produced examining the issues of vacancy and short-term use, but CUDC’s engagement is not just a theoretical exercise. Many installations and events have been planned and hosted to demonstrate this approach to the public. Further, the Collaborative produced the “Temporary Use Handbook” – a practical guide with advice, recommendations and must-haves for producing a pop-up event.

With a combination of envelope-pushing reflections and practical on-the-ground projects and resources Kent State University’s CUDC has advanced the conversations about the possibilities for vacant properties. In this way, CUDC has functioned in some of the ways envisioned for the Living Laboratory for vacant property revitalization as outlined in the Blueprint Buffalo report.

Figure 17. Pop-UP Foodism in San Francisco.



Source: <http://popupcity.net/pop-up-foodism-in-san-francisco/>

#### D. Strategy Set 4: Improve the housing support delivery system.

The network of community-based organizations providing services for housing and neighborhood revitalization needs to achieve significantly greater productivity while retaining its responsiveness to local conditions and contexts. Partners involved with One Region Forward should identify a trusted institutional funder and trusted convener to lead a patient and broad-based collaborative effort to reform the system.

In the early years of the community development, Buffalo was praised as a model for neighborhood participation in planning activities and project development. At the onset of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding in the 1970s, a disbursed system of intensely neighborhood-based organizations arose. However, as organizations grew stronger and developed substantial membership bases, they grew inherent political power that at times threatened the status quo within the operations of the City. Drastic changes to how funding was prioritized ensued, followed later by massive reductions in community development funding in general.

#### Strategy Set 4. Action Steps for the One Region Forward Partners

**Identify** a trusted institutional funder to take the lead on housing support systems reform

**Develop** a region-wide marketing and education strategy for housing families can afford

**Support** distressed property prevention and reclamation systems enhancement

<sup>108</sup> Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative. Leap Night: An Outdoor Spectacular. [http://www.cudc.kent.edu/pop\\_up\\_city/leap\\_night/index.html](http://www.cudc.kent.edu/pop_up_city/leap_night/index.html). Retrieved July 21, 2014.



Currently Buffalo Niagara has a generally low capacity Community Development system that, with some notable exceptions, has not produced sustained or targeted housing production in keeping with a broader plan for individual neighborhood improvement. Peer cities such as Rochester and Syracuse have had success in implementing backbone or support organizations which are able to assist smaller neighborhood based Community Development Corporations (CDCs) implement housing redevelopment at a larger scale than would be possible if these smaller organizations were working in isolation. The Greater Rochester Housing Partnership and Syracuse Home Headquarters, for instance, are able to provide in house expertise and technical assistance, while the cities' other CDCs provide direct connection to communities necessary for need and asset evaluation as well as project identification and prioritization.

The issue has been studied in depth in the region. In November 2005, the Housing Service Agency Structural Definition Report for Buffalo was completed by Kelly L. Patterson, Ph.D. and Robert M. Silverman, Ph.D. from the Center for Urban Studies at the University at Buffalo with support by the Buffalo Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York in partnership with the Margaret L. Wendt Foundation and the City of Buffalo, Office of Strategic Planning. The report evaluated the current community development landscape in Buffalo and made recommendations to transform the system into a higher-production model through the lens of best practices in other similarly positioned cities and it emphasized the roles of intermediary organizations. The findings and recommendations of this report are summarized below and are in agreement with the major sentiments revealed through the Housing and Neighborhoods Working Team.

Perhaps the highest capacity non-profit developer in Buffalo-Niagara is Belmont Housing Services. In some ways the development capacity that Belmont brings to the community means they can be considered a regional service and support agency. The organization manages the county-wide Section 8 program and also partners to develop affordable housing with municipalities and non-profits throughout Erie and Niagara Counties, in urban, suburban and rural settings. Belmont also provides

construction evaluation and monitoring as well as rental management services that smaller organizations can contract with for their own properties.

Though Belmont provides some centralized services, local knowledge and local relationships, are still vitally important. Neighborhood based organizations, though usually smaller in scale, can be invaluable conduits for these services for their communities – particularly in traditionally marginalized communities (low-income, minority, seniors, non-native English speakers, etc.) – and can help identify needs and formulate plans for additional neighborhood investment.

There are a variety of best practices nationally that suggest different models and methods for getting to scale, but getting to a locally applicable solution will require broad-based input and will be time and resource intensive. A major funder (or a collaborations of funders) will likely need to be the driving agent to bring all organizations to the table in a collaborative manner, providing an incentive for organizations and stakeholders that have been discussing these notions for decades to resolve lingering issues and concerns and move an enhanced system from concept to reality.

Even with an enhanced housing delivery system, though, there needs to be a collective effort to remove the barriers that all organizations face – specifically public opposition to affordable housing development. This should involve an intensive outreach effort to identify key roadblocks, influencers and officials to develop a marketing and advocacy plan. The education, messaging, branding relating to the provision of stable, quality housing for all needs to be carefully considered and advanced throughout the region.

New policies and tools are also needed to address existing problem properties proactively and as problems arise. There are common problems with absentee landlords and vacant properties throughout the region, but rather than just wielding a stick for punishment, people in need of assistance should be able to access it through the housing code enforcement system.

**A. Reconsider the scope and scale of the system.** It should be possible to increase region-wide capacity and share expertise across the system while remaining responsive to local constituencies. Small neighborhood-based organizations can serve as a conduit for high quality regional services for their communities even as they provide local knowledge and community needs to a high-capacity support organization or network. This model allows for opportunities to enhance services to traditionally underserved communities in cities, suburbs and rural areas alike. But redesigning long-term arrangements will not be easy. It will require skilled facilitation supported with patient resources and encouraged by state and federal-level funders of housing services to bring such a process to a successful conclusion.

Ultimately, no revitalization effort can be executed without adequate capacity at the community level to identify and implement projects in a professional and timely manner. Unfortunately Buffalo-Niagara is lacking a region-wide umbrella organization, of which all community based development groups can be a part, that will supply technical support in order to bring revitalization efforts to scale.

Support for the existing system comes from private and public sources, including the Neighborhood and Rural Preservation Program as operated by New York State's Homes and Community Renewal (HCR). According to HCR these programs "promote and preserve housing for low-and moderate-income individuals by providing funds to community-based not-for-profit corporations known as Neighborhood and Rural Preservation Companies (NPCs and RPCs)."<sup>109</sup> NPCs have been in existence since 1977 and RPCs since 1980. Since the programs began, roughly \$490 million has been committed to supporting slightly more than 200 certified organizations.<sup>110</sup>

However, some criticisms of the program include the inability of new high-performing organizations to enter the NPC/ RPC system and the inability or unwillingness of HCR to remove low-performing organizations from the program. The boundaries established for these NPCs decades ago do not reflect current conditions within the neighborhoods that have faced significant change and, often,

109 2012 Annual Report New York State Neighborhood and Rural Preservation Programs. P.7.

110 *Ibid.* PP.13,17.



serious decline. The fixed geography has also created issues with service delivery, perpetuating a “small box” system where only certain types of assistance are available in any given neighborhood, rather than a suite of programs being available across a wider geography. Any potential mergers between organizations and territories, though potentially providing operating efficiencies and leading to a higher degree of specialized skill sets, are actually discouraged by the funding mechanism which would see the newly consolidated entity losing a significant portion of their State operating funds.

While the notion to expand the geography at which services are offered may appear to run counter to the need to target resources strategically described earlier in this strategy document, the ability to offer multiple programs within a targeted area actually increases the ability to provide flexible assistance and meet the needs of a particular homeowner that may otherwise be excluded.

Additional support comes through the HUD HOME program, where participating jurisdictions must reserve “not less than 15 percent of their HOME allocations for investment in housing to be developed, sponsored, or owned by Community Housing Development Organizations”<sup>111</sup>(CHDOs) and each participating jurisdiction must certify the organizations that qualify as CHDOs.

HUD requires that all CHDOs meet the following baseline criteria, and further recommends CDHOs be recertified by Participation Jurisdictions annually, requiring recertification with each new allocation of set aside funding:<sup>112</sup>

- Has a governing board consisting of not less than one-third low-income persons and not more than one-third public officials.
- Has a 503(c)(3) or (c)(4) ruling from the IRS.
- Has demonstrated a capacity for carrying out activities assisted with HOME funds.
- Has a history of serving the community in which the HOME assisted housing is to be located for a minimum of one year.
- Has among its purposes the provision

of decent housing that is affordable to low-income and moderate-income persons, as evidenced in its charter, articles of incorporation, resolutions or by-laws.

In November 2005, a report evaluated the current community development landscape in Buffalo and made recommendations to transform the system into a higher-production model through the lens of best practices in other similarly positioned cities and it emphasized the roles of intermediary organizations. The Housing Service Agency Structural Definition Report for Buffalo was completed by Kelly L. Patterson, Ph.D. and Robert M. Silverman, Ph.D. from the Center for Urban Studies at the University at Buffalo with support by the Buffalo Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York in partnership with the Margaret L. Wendt Foundation and the City of Buffalo, Office of Strategic Planning.

The report recommended the development of a Buffalo Housing Fund to be administered by an intermediary staff that would provide a consistent and reliable stream of community investment dollars. These recommendations were made in light of the best practices of cities like Cleveland, Rochester, and Syracuse. Though specific to the city of Buffalo, national best practices also consider region-wide collaborative efforts tailored to local conditions.

That said, the Housing Service Agency Structural Definition Report developed a set of recommendations for establishing funding priorities for community-based housing organizations in Buffalo. Ultimately this report called for the incremental implementation of:

- a public/private housing fund,
- an intermediary organization to manage that fund,
- increased monitoring and capacity building among community based housing organizations.

Without implementing these recommendations, the report suggests “efforts to increase the scale of affordable housing production will be hampered, and Buffalo’s affordable housing crisis will become more acute.”<sup>113</sup>

In the course of their study, the authors

examined multiple best practices in coordinated housing redevelopment. They included the Greater Rochester Housing Partnership, Syracuse Home Headquarters, and the Cleveland Housing Network and Neighborhood Progress, Inc., also in Cleveland. Among them, common themes for success included: a high capacity intermediary to facilitate funding, certification, monitoring, and organizational development for local CDCs; investment decisions based on project feasibility, standardized performance measures, and professional standards; funds pooled from local foundations, local and state government, NeighborWorks, and private donors; and a small number of Community Based Housing Organizations carrying out development work, while others focus on property management, housing court and code enforcement, landlord training, community-organizing, fair housing enforcement, and social service delivery. In addition to the organizations studied by the Housing Service Agency Structural Definition Report, there are several other model collaborations between housing agencies and funding entities geared toward increasing quality affordable housing and neighborhood redevelopment such as the Hartford Funders Collaborative described below.



### A. Greater Rochester Housing Partnership

The Greater Rochester Housing Partnership, established in 1992, is a non-profit organization whose mission is to support the development and rehabilitation of affordable housing for low- and moderate-income residents in the Rochester area. GRHP, in partnership with for-profit, non-profit, and government organizations, provides professionally managed access to public and private funds and technical assistance for affordable housing development. Specifically, GRHP packages financing from private and public sources. The Partnership uses this funding to offer direct construction

<sup>111</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Community Planning and Development, Notice: CPD-97-11.

<sup>112</sup> [http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program\\_offices/comm\\_planning/affordablehousing/library/homefires/volumes/vol4no1](http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/comm_planning/affordablehousing/library/homefires/volumes/vol4no1)

<sup>113</sup> Kelly L. Patterson, Ph.D. and Robert M. Silverman, Ph.D. Housing Service Agency Structural Definition Report. University at Buffalo Center for Urban Studies. November 2005.

and bridge loans to non-profit and for-profit developers of affordable housing, make secured construction loans to developers of affordable rental housing, and provide lines of credit to developers of new affordable single family housing.

GRHP also provides technical assistance to developers by reviewing and participating in the design, funding, and implementation of projects. In addition, the Partnership capitalizes and manages a tax credit fund (purchasing low income housing tax credits) and manages a large acquisition/rehabilitation program.

The Partnership's primary role is as a direct lender and as of 2008 had provided over \$34,000,000 in construction financing for rental development for over 700 units. It had provided construction financing for another 600 single-family homes through the same time period.



### B. Syracuse Home Headquarters

Home HeadQuarters (HHQ) is a non-profit housing organization that is a chartered member of the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation's (NRC) NeighborWorks® Network. NRC is a federally chartered non-profit organization whose primary mission is revitalizing declining communities through homeownership, repairs, and educational programs. HHQ is a designated Homeownership Center of NeighborWorks®, and it serves Central New York State in Syracuse and Onondaga County.

As a certified homeownership center, HHQ offers an expansive menu of housing products and services that are designed to promote sustainable homeownership and affordable housing maintenance and repair to individuals of all income levels. The services that HHQ provides include: certified Homebuyer Education Courses, Home Value Protection Program, the Home Improvement Loan Program including the FlexFund Loan, homeownership and credit counseling, down payment and closing cost assistance, the Foreclosure Prevention Program, Syracuse Weed and Seed Community Partnership, the Landlord Training Program, and the NYSEDA Home Energy Loan Program. The FlexFund Loan Pool is a pool of loan

capital to HHQ for home improvements. The loan pool is funded by 10 area funding institutions and will provide loans of up to \$10,000 for Syracuse residents for necessary home repairs.

Much of the work of HHQ is funded through the Syracuse Neighborhood Initiative (SNI) whose funding is derived primarily from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). SNI is a public/private non-profit organization started through the office of former Congressman James T. Walsh of the 25th district. It serves as an umbrella effort working together with the City of Syracuse, Syracuse Department of Community Development, NRC, the Enterprise Foundation and other local community based organizations. The mission of SNI is to expand available housing resources to residents in targeted neighborhoods in the City of Syracuse in order to revitalize the City's neighborhoods.

In addition, HHQ provides other non-profit housing organizations with interim construction financing. Currently, ten non-profit housing organizations are receiving interim financing for housing construction through HHQ.



### C. Cleveland Housing Network

The Cleveland Housing Network is a non-profit that was formed in 1981 by the directors of six low-capacity Community Development Corporations (CDCs). These housing directors wanted to have a greater impact on the Cleveland housing market by developing larger scale projects. Today CHN is a \$90 million operation with 105 full-time employees. It is also the largest landowner in Cleveland and manages over 2000 scattered site homes.

As a full-scale, non-profit housing developer, CHN specializes in scattered site housing development and acquisition rehabilitation. CHN also offers an unusually vast array of affordable and market rate housing products and housing services to Cleveland residents. This comprehensive approach to community development couples affordable homes with family

support services for Cleveland's residents.

CHN's highly successful Lease Purchase Program is a national model that started in 1987 & 1988 with 52 homes for rent. Using Federal low-income housing tax credits, CHN has developed 2100 Lease Purchase homes in a way that assists low-income families progress to homeownership. In 2003, the original 52 Lease Purchase homes were sold with 90% of the original residents taking title. The Homeward Homes Program has also been successful at helping low- to moderate-income families buy their first homes at below market first mortgage and deferred second mortgage rates. This program has yielded 1200 new and substantially rehabilitated homes.

CHN has completed almost 5,000 units to date representing over \$600 million in capital investment, but in addition CHN is a major service provider. It has a significant Weatherization and Energy Conservation Program, homebuyer education for low-income, high-risk buyers, and a variety of classes ranging from technology education to financial literacy to homebuyer preparation free of charge to Cleveland area residents.



### D. Neighborhood Progress, Inc.

Neighborhood Progress Inc. is a non-profit, local intermediary that was incorporated in 1988. NPI was formed to be a facilitating agent for the revitalization of Cleveland's distressed neighborhoods, and is funded by a combination of foundations, banks, and corporate and municipal support including: Community Development Partnership Network, Charter One Bank, Lee & Katherine Chilcote Foundation, City of Cleveland, Department of Community Development, The Cleveland Foundation, Enterprise Community Partners, The Ford Foundation, George Gund Foundation, Local Initiatives Support Corporation, Mandel Supporting Foundations, Raymond Wean Foundation, Sisters of Charity, and St. Luke's Foundation (for approximately \$6.2 million in grant support in 2006). NPI accomplishes its

mission by strategically investing in community development corporations (CDCs) and their development agendas. In this way, NPI increases the capacity of CDCs to plan and undertake physical development projects in their respective neighborhoods.

To advance its goals NPI provides investment capital through a subsidiary, Village Capital Corporation. NPI also provides core operating support to local CDCs, as well as technical assistance and leadership training, and provides development services through New Village Corporation.

### **E. Hartford Funders Collaborative Fund and Fairfield County Collaborative Fund for Affordable Housing**

In cities like Hartford and New Haven, market conditions are similar to those in Buffalo, where a vacancy and abandonment crisis depresses housing values and rent levels in many neighborhoods that cannot sustain even moderate-income housing stock, where quality not price is a major factor preventing families from accessing decent housing. On the other hand, in Fairfield County, Connecticut, escalating housing prices created a growing shortage of affordable housing that threatened quality of life and resident and business attraction and retention. In both instances collaborative funding programs were established to address the problems.

Connecticut LISC formed and manages the Hartford Collaborative to address the community development challenges in the weak-market cities and then, using the Hartford model as an example, was instrumental in bringing about the Fairfield County Collaborative Fund for Affordable Housing to address affordability challenges in the stronger markets of Fairfield County. Both initiatives help non-profit housing developers increase housing production and develop community partnerships in support of affordable housing throughout the county by providing general operating support grants, technical assistance and organizational development services.

By pooling and coordinating the resources of community development funders, Collaboratives work for both funders and non-profit developers. For non-profits, there is a predictable supply of working capital and operating support, through a streamlined, performance-based process, through

a single point of contact minimizing both administrative overhead and uncertainty. For funders, pooled resources maximize the impact of their individual contributions and allow efforts to be brought to scale. Funders participate in the grantmaking process by guiding the program design, sharing progress reports and information, and by participating actively in the grant decision process. Through the Collaborative, funders take part in a coordinated program in which common grantmaking standards are implemented and shared. Connecticut LISC provides the staff support to manage the grants, insure accountability and provide capacity-building services to grantees. This collaborative approach to funding provides grantmakers with specialized expertise that enables them to better assess and communicate the impact of their community development investments.

The process of establishing a Collaborative Fund started when a Working Group of local funders sought to find ways to provide the expected benefits of:

- access to organizational development and technical assistance for grantees;
- shared knowledge for program staff/trustees of participating funders;
- leveraging grant size for bigger impact;
- greater ability to impact nonprofit culture/production;
- ability to create a pool of patient working capital, needed by nonprofit developers who are working in a very difficult and time-consuming field where development timelines can be long and arduous;
- nonprofit grantees will be more accountable to a group of funders; and grantmaking results will be clearer to see via a Collaborative Fund.

The Fund's advisory board is composed of all contributors to the fund, who have each agreed to a long-term commitment to its operation. The governance structure of the Collaborative Fund is designed to maximize the funders' opportunity to engage in the grantmaking process; insure the accountability of their investments; and understand and engage in public policy issues that relate to the fields of housing and community development. Together this group decides on approaches to development as well as a strategic and capacity-minded evaluation of

neighborhoods and non-profits.

Connecticut LISC supports the participation of the funders by providing high quality technical resources to analyze and measure the effectiveness of philanthropic investments. Connecticut LISC also provides technical support to Collaborative grantees, helping them increase their capacity to develop affordable housing on a larger scale.

**B. Better protect renters and home buyers.** Develop better opportunities, supports and protections for renters and home buyers, particularly from traditionally vulnerable groups. Persons of color, those of low-income, seniors, immigrants, limited-English proficiency speakers and non-traditional families are among the groups that have been traditionally marginalized by the mainstream conventional housing and finance industries. The current housing support system attempts to break down barriers to quality housing for these – and all – demographic groups, but housing discrimination, public opposition and individual and institutional discrimination present tremendous challenges. Increased resources, focus and options need to be direct toward providing quality affordable housing near transit as a precursor and support for broader opportunity for these populations.

An example of targeted and collaborative support was developed by multiple housing organizations serving the west side of Buffalo. These groups began to meet regularly in the late 2000s to coordinate their efforts given the changes occurring in the local population. In addition to new outside investment on the west side, an influx of New Americans also provided new vibrancy and possibility for the neighborhood. Although many obstacles needed to be overcome, many of these new residents were forming a community and had interest in setting down roots in Buffalo.

Language and cultural barriers were chief among the issues faced by immigrants and refugees as well as the housing organizations that had keen interest in helping these communities become established. These barriers meant that potentially interested homebuyers were not in a position to begin the traditional homeownership classes and counseling offered by the agencies. Collaboratively, the West Side



Figure 18. City Roots Program Participants.



Source: <http://popcity.net/pop-up-foodism-in-san-francisco/>

Housing Partnership established peer-to-peer homebuyers clubs facilitated by the agencies but presented in an informal setting and leveraging trusted leaders within the community as the conduit for increasing interest and participation.

However, the program has gone through several iterations at a variety of agencies, in large part due to a lack of consistent funding for staff and operations. Americorps Volunteers have generally led the charge, and though there has been good work done on the program, it is difficult to create a sustainable program with staff that are on a one or two year assignment.

The most recent iteration of the West Side Housing Partnership Home Buyers Clubs program is managed by Jericho Road who has named it the City Roots program and describes it on their website:

*“City Roots provides homebuyer support, creating collaborative access to existing home ownership services. In the past year, [Jericho Road] restructured the program and now have a monthly First Time Homebuyers Club. City Roots provides access and interpretation for homebuyer education classes and one-on-one counseling sessions, as well as assistance in navigating the banking and inspection processes.*

*This format enables clients to become homeowners and establish deeper roots as they start life anew here in Buffalo.*

*In 2010: 18 families attended the FirstTime Homebuyers Club; 12 families are in the process of buying a home; 6 families applied to Habitat for Humanity.”<sup>114</sup>*

Though United States housing policy has long idealized and promoted homeownership, the bursting of the 2000s-era subprime-fueled housing bubble has proven that homeownership is not a one-size-fits-all policy. Though New York State has a variety of programs that can be used for rental apartments, the design of these programs is more reflective of New York City’s large multi-family apartment buildings than it is of Buffalo-Niagara’s prevailing typology of single-family and two-unit housing stock.

There is a strong need for affordable rental housing in Buffalo Niagara, and the final chapter of this document examines the current state of public housing in the region. However, both anecdotal and statistical evidence surrounding Section 8 Rental Housing Vouchers in the region shows that affordable rental housing is in very high demand, with long waiting lists far exceeding the local allocation at both the County and City levels.

<sup>114</sup> <http://www.jrm-buffalo.org/Services/Adult-Empowerment/City-Roots.aspx>

Housing voucher programs are administered throughout the region by Belmont Housing Resources (Belmont), the Rental Assistance Corporation of Buffalo (RACB), the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority (BMHA), Niagara Falls Leased Housing and the Lockport Housing Authority.

In Erie County, Belmont administers the largest voucher program in the region on behalf of the Erie County Public Housing Authority Consortium. There are roughly 5,500 vouchers allocated, however, there are 21,000 families on the waiting list to receive a voucher. Given the usage rate in excess of 99%, the current waiting period is approaching 10 years.<sup>115</sup> Belmont also administers a voucher program for Niagara County on behalf of the City of North Tonawanda. To obtain one of the roughly 600 vouchers through that program, the wait is approximately 3 years.

RACB administers approximately 5,100 vouchers through a contract with the City of Buffalo as the Public Housing Authority which has been in effect since 1989. RACB is not currently accepting new applications and has an extensive waiting list, which has now exceeded a five year waiting period.<sup>116</sup> BMHA administers 400 Section 8 vouchers<sup>117</sup> and has also closed it’s waiting list application as of June 30, 2014, citing an abundance of wait-listed applicants that exceeds a 24-month period.<sup>118</sup>

Though the Niagara Falls Housing Authority oversees 836 public housing units, the City of Niagara Falls administers 820 Section 8 housing vouchers through Niagara Falls Leased Housing,<sup>119</sup> however, the waiting list is currently closed for that program as well.<sup>120</sup> Also in Niagara County, in addition to 352 public housing units spread across three project sites, the

<sup>115</sup> Personal correspondence with Kathy O’Brien, Vice President of Housing Operations, Belmont Housing Resources, May 19, 2014.

<sup>116</sup> Rental Assistance Corporation of Buffalo website. <http://www.racbn.org>. Retrieved July 23, 2014.

<sup>117</sup> Affordable Housing Online. “Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority.” <http://affordablehousingonline.com/housing-authority/New-York/Buffalo-Municipal-Housing-Authority/NY002/>. Retrieved July 23, 2014.

<sup>118</sup> Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority. [http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/CityServices/Buffalo\\_Municipal\\_Housing\\_Authority](http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/CityServices/Buffalo_Municipal_Housing_Authority). Retrieved July 23, 2014.

<sup>119</sup> <http://affordablehousingonline.com/housing-authority/New-York/City-of-Niagara-Falls/NY404/>. Retrieved August 6, 2014.

<sup>120</sup> City of Niagara Falls. “Community Development Department”. <http://www.niagarafallsusa.org/CommDev.cfm>. Retrieved August 6, 2014.

Lockport Housing Authority administers 188 Section-8 housing vouchers.<sup>121</sup>

Throughout all of Buffalo-Niagara, 33% of occupied housing units are rental properties<sup>122</sup> representing housing for 29% of the population.<sup>123</sup> Again, unlike the housing unit make up of New York City, 87% of all occupied units in Buffalo-Niagara are in buildings of four or fewer units. For rental units, 52% are in buildings with one or two total units and 68% are in buildings of four or fewer units.<sup>124</sup> When owner occupied, these structures fall outside of some legal protections against discrimination. New York State, for instance, exempts one- and two-family owner-occupied structures from compliance with the New York State Human Rights Law. Owners and managers of these houses, then, are not subject to penalties for exclusionary practices regarding protected classes. Buffalo's Fair Housing Law similarly exempts owner-occupied one- two- and three-family properties. Further, as described in the One Region Forward Fair Housing Equity Assessment, the local resources dedicated to enforcement of Fair Housing policies are not equal to the scope and scale of the problems of discrimination.

Though the City of Buffalo implemented and refined a rental registry in the last half-decade, the region does not have a strong history of tenant movements or tenant protection in the way that New York City or other major cities do. Washington D.C., for instance, established the Office of the Tenant Advocate in 2006. Though Washington D.C. had lost a significant amount of population in the later half of the 20th Century and many neighborhoods had fallen into decline, the city has been increasing population and drawing higher-income households in the last decade. While this provides opportunity and revitalization, it also presents major challenges of gentrification-driven displacement.

#### The Office of the Tenant Advocate

121 Affordable Housing Online. "Lockport Housing Authority". <http://affordablehousingonline.com/housing-authority/New-York/Lockport-Housing-Authority/NY070/> Retrieved August 6, 2014.

122 factfinder2.census.gov. B25003 TENURE Universe: Occupied housing units. 2007-2011 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

123 factfinder2.census.gov. B25008 - TOTAL POPULATION IN OCCUPIED HOUSING UNITS BY TENURE Universe: Total population in occupied housing units. 2007-2011 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

124 factfinder2.census.gov. B25032 TENURE BY UNITS IN STRUCTURE. Universe: Occupied housing units. 2007-2011 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

Table 2. Distribution of Mortgage Interest Deduction by Economic Strata

Income	Benefit of Mortgage Interest Deduction in Billions of Dollars	Homeowners with Severe Housing Cost Burdens, In Millions
Less than \$10,000	0.0	3.2
\$10,000 - \$20,000	0.1	2.4
\$20,000 - \$30,000	0.2	2.0
\$30,000 - \$40,000	0.6	1.1
\$40,000 - \$50,000	1.2	0.6
\$50,000 - \$75,000	5.9	0.7
\$75,000 - \$100,000	7.6	0.3
\$100,000 - \$200,000	29.0	0.1
More than \$200,000	23.6	0.0

Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Joint Committee on Taxation, Estimates of Federal Tax Expenditures for Fiscal Years 2012-2017 (2012), and CBPP tabulations of data from the American Housing Survey (2011)

Households are considered severely cost burdened if they pay more than half of their income for housing. Incomes for mortgage interest deduction and benefits are for tax filing units, and incomes for homeowners with severe housing cost burdens are for households.

provides a variety of direct services and system enhancements. Among its functions are:

- An Educational Institute providing classes on tenant rights, tenants associations, and Elderly / Disabled Tenant Rent Control Registration Workshop, and an introduction to understanding leases
- Emergency housing for tenants displaced by fire, flood or government closure
- Case management including dispute resolution, legal advice and technical assistance
- Policy advocacy on behalf of tenant interests at the City level
- An annual tenant summit for "tenants, tenant associations, housing attorneys and advocates, policy experts, community leaders".<sup>125</sup>

Earlier in this strategy document, the need to accommodate an aging population was highlighted as a major piece of work ahead for the region. As part of the goal of providing a way for seniors to age in place, the New York State Weatherization and Minor Home Repair programs offered through New York State Housing and Community Renewal, local jurisdictions and neighborhood based housing

organizations are crucial elements to keeping low- and moderate-income seniors in their homes. Nationally, both the housing field and the health field are increasingly seeing the importance of linking services to improve joint outcomes.

In 2010, American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging presented the National Summit on Affordable Senior Housing and Services in conjunction with Enterprise Community Partners. The summit's findings, concisely summarized the challenges facing seniors and those working to provide adequate housing and services for the aging:

*"For a variety of reasons, many low income older adults are faced with the dilemma of having to move from the home or apartment in which they have been residing. This may be due to the home's excessive cost burden, poor physical quality or limited accessibility, the loss of family supports (i.e., the death of a spouse) or the individual's need for additional support and assistance. As they age, these individuals also need a variety of health related and supportive services to maintain their independence and quality of life. Currently, there are few viable alternatives for the low income segment of America's elderly population that address the dual*

125 Washington DC Office of the Tenant Advocate. <http://ota.dc.gov/services>. Retrieved September 10, 2013.



needs for affordable quality housing and services.”<sup>126</sup>

The summit focused on an emerging practice of linking housing and services to seniors. This has happened through various models, whether in seniors’ existing housing or in new senior or mixed-age facilities that provide some level of service provision or coordination. In either case, these methods are geared toward keeping aging populations independent and delaying the need for 24/7 nursing home care.

Federal representatives presenting at the Summit pointed to their goal of helping seniors live in their homes and communities as long as possible, and sited the Affordable Care Act implementation as a potential source of funding for bringing together housing and service provision for seniors.<sup>127</sup> However, the Community Living Assistance Services and Support (CLASS) Act, which was a component of Affordable Care Act providing for a voluntary, federally administered, consumer-financed insurance plan, was later repealed. Growing out of the repeal, the Long-Term Care Commission was to report long term care reforms recommendations to Congress.<sup>128</sup>

Though the Summit did not detail best practice community-based approaches to housing and service provision, included in the Summit’s report were affordable senior housing projects and complexes that management introduced or incorporated services into. This model is in keeping with the congregate housing service programs administered by HUD and several state governments, including New Jersey, Maryland and Connecticut.<sup>129</sup>

Pennsylvania has begun to shift senior care away from nursing homes and to home and community-based care. That state is pioneering an approach to provide a “tenant-based rental assistance program as a bridge to

support residents moving out of nursing homes into independent housing until they can get a rental assistance voucher” from traditional sources.<sup>130</sup>

An alternate model of providing services and support to seniors is the Village model, which has been gaining traction as a hybrid non-profit volunteer and fee-for-service model of direct in-home support. Villages are defined as “self-governing, grassroots, community-based organizations developed with the sole purpose of enabling people to remain in their homes and communities as they age.” The first of these models was developed in Beacon Hill, Boston, MA over a decade ago. There are now nearly 200 Village organizations in operation or in development across the country.<sup>131</sup> Locally, the Canopy of Neighbors organization has begun to deploy this model in the Delaware District and Elmwood Village.

New York State also operates the Expanded In-home Services for the Elderly Program (EISEP) for non-Medicaid eligible seniors. The program is designed to help keep seniors in their homes by providing assistance with non-medical daily needs. EISEP provides case management services, but allows for Consumer Directed In-Home Care to provide flexibility to comfortably meet Senior’s needs. The program operates on an income-based sliding scale and 18% of recipients had some cost share contribution. EISEP is not currently available in either Erie or Niagara Counties as the program only operates in 10 counties but is expected to expand in the coming budget year.<sup>132</sup>

**C. Cultivate a positive image of housing aid to improve participation.** A stigma often attaches to programs designed to provide assistance to households struggling to get or keep affordable housing. In some cases, the stigma is perceived by residents of neighborhoods where officials seek to locate affordable housing resources. In other cases, those who need and qualify for such assistance see the stigma in accepting help. Housing providers should launch a broad-based effort to rebrand affordable housing and educate the public on its benefits. This should include an extensive outreach effort

to identify barriers to participation and to involve civic leaders and officials in a marketing and advocacy program.

Affordable housing is often opposed in communities throughout Buffalo-Niagara. There are fundamental issues to be addressed throughout the region to move from an exclusionary, class-based settlement pattern to one in which all people regardless of means or ability have quality choices for housing and neighborhoods.

While it is addressed in greater depth in the Fair Housing Equity Assessment that accompanies the One Region Forward project, families of limited means have faced barriers to living within areas of opportunity. This is and has been caused by a host of factors, some overt and some hidden, some *de facto* and some *de jure*. However, it is clear that housing discrimination takes many forms, including regulatory and community. From Wheatfield and Orchard Park to the lower west side of Buffalo, recent developments for low- to moderate-income families and seniors have been met with resistance, opposition and protest from community residents and local officials alike. Unfortunately misperceptions of affordable housing, its recipients and its impact on communities persist. “Contrary to these common assumptions, several studies have consistently found that, if affordable housing is well designed, fits in with the surrounding neighborhood, and is well managed, there appear to be no negative impacts of that housing on the property values of neighboring houses.”<sup>133</sup>

Commonly known as NIMBYism, opposition to these developments is often driven by “fears that the presence of low-income households (and people of color) will increase crime rates, drive down property values, and fundamentally change the neighborhood’s character.”<sup>134</sup> In this context, housing assistance programs that are viewed as attracting ‘undesirable’ elements in to a community are often poorly understood.

These programs and projects are often attacked on the grounds that they are an unfair hand-out of government money,

126 Affordable Senior Housing: The Case for Developing Effective Linkages with Health Related and Supportive Services, American Association of Homes & Services for the Aging. Prepared for the National Summit on Affordable Senior Housing with Services Washington, DC. May 25, 2010.

127 National Summit on Affordable Senior Housing and Services, et al. PP.5-6.

128 Long-Term Care Commission Holds First Meeting. Marsha R. Greenfield, Leading Age. Published On: Jul 01, 2013. [http://www.leadingage.org/Long\\_Term\\_Care\\_Commission\\_Meets\\_for\\_First\\_Time.aspx](http://www.leadingage.org/Long_Term_Care_Commission_Meets_for_First_Time.aspx)

129 Affordable Senior Housing with Services Programs and Models. American Association of Homes & Services for the Aging. Prepared for the National Summit on Affordable Senior Housing with Services Washington, DC, May 25, 2010.

130 *Ibid.* P.8.

131 Greenfield, Emily A. et. al. A National Overview of Villages: Results from a 2012 Organizational Survey. Rutgers School of Social Work. Rutgers. December 1, 2012.

132 New York State Office for the Aging. <http://www.aging.ny.gov/NYSOFA/Programs/CommunityBased/EISEP.cfm>

133 Rachel G. Bratt, Alexandra DeGenova, Brendan Goodwin, Shannon Moriarty, and Jeremy Robitaille. Fear of Affordable Housing: Perception vs. Reality. Shelterforce Summer 2012. [http://www.shelterforce.org/article/2891/fear\\_of\\_affordable\\_housing\\_perception\\_vs\\_reality/](http://www.shelterforce.org/article/2891/fear_of_affordable_housing_perception_vs_reality/)

134 A New Way to Diffuse NIMBYism? Posted by Laurie Goldman on July 3, 2013. Rooflines: the Shelterforce blog. [http://www.rooflines.org/3301/a\\_new\\_way\\_to\\_diffuse\\_nimbyism/](http://www.rooflines.org/3301/a_new_way_to_diffuse_nimbyism/)



incentivizing residents to live in poverty. However, the federal home-mortgage interest tax deduction subsidizes housing for middle and upper-income homeowners to the tune of \$70 billion per year. The bulk of these benefits (77%) accrue to upper income earners – those making \$100,000 per year or more, with 35% going to those earning more than \$200,000. Homeowners earning less than \$50,000 per year only received 3% of the total tax benefit.<sup>135</sup> Yet there is little public opposition to this form of subsidy, even though it represents well over \$20 Billion more than HUD's entire annual budget.<sup>136</sup>

The Housing and Neighborhoods Working Team determined that changing the understanding and perception of housing assistance programs may be a more effective means to reaching a broader base of eligible recipients and securing a broader base of community support than finding funds to further expand eligibility.

For instance, New York's Housing Finance Agency will fund projects that support a family of four in Buffalo-Niagara with an income of \$38,100 at a monthly rental payment of \$990 for a three-bedroom unit<sup>137</sup>. New York's Affordable Housing Corporation has 2012 eligibility requirements for Erie and Niagara Counties as high as 166% of Area Median Income, or \$87,781 for a family of 4 or \$61,486 for an individual<sup>138</sup>. HUD's Section 8 income limits for a family of four are set at \$50,800 to qualify as low income.<sup>139</sup> These programs are often seen as negative influences in

neighborhoods, however, eligibility requirements actually cover a large segment of working-families, often times exceeding the median income for the neighborhoods in which they are located.

Within the community development field, language changes have been used to attempt to overcome perception issues and loaded terms. "Workforce-housing", for instance, is a term that has been used primarily in high-expense markets to avoid using the term "affordable". "Housing that families can afford" has also been used. The term "cost-effective" housing has also been floated. Regardless of the specific terminology, however, the clear acknowledgement that affordable housing suffers from a negative 'brand' is something that multiple agencies and organizations are attempting to overcome.

The struggle to overcome this perception is not new. In fact, the collaborative HousingMinnesota partnership took on a three-year statewide effort in the early 2000s to try to combat negative public opinion of affordable housing. They employed a three-pronged approach of advertising, public relations, and grassroots outreach moving from public education to policy advocacy, and had three basic messages:

- "people who need affordable housing are varied in their backgrounds and circumstances;
- housing is fundamental to people becoming successful community members; and
- the availability of housing, in various configurations and price levels, is important to strong communities."<sup>140</sup>

Even though there have been multiple steps taken to win support for individual housing developments, Buffalo-Niagara appears to lack a dedicated or coordinated strategy to change public perceptions about the community development and housing field.

**D. Improve the code enforcement system** and link it to education and support programs. Municipalities and housing providers should work together to develop new policies and tools to address slumlords and vacant properties more effectively. Better use of information technology and focused prosecution through a dedicated housing court are both possibilities. But homeowners in violation of housing codes and in need of assistance should be able to get help through the enforcement system. Therefore, work to integrate financial and technical assistance programs for homeowners with the code enforcement mechanism.

*Blueprint Buffalo*, a comprehensive and regional assessment of vacant property challenges, was completed by the National Vacant Properties Campaign in 2006. It contained a suite of specific recommendations for program and systems changes to combat the accelerating spread of vacant property in local cities, suburbs and rural communities. Among the recommendations the report made, was the notion of regional cooperation between the many and disparate agencies which have local jurisdiction over (and varying level of capacity for) building issues and blight. *Blueprint Buffalo* readily and clearly acknowledged the complicated nature of combining enforcement services due to the difference in municipal laws and codes, however, it offered a number of suggestions on regional coordination of those working in the field.

The report suggests a regional network of code enforcement officials, and potentially connecting with other regions in New York to form a statewide organization – a format that is mirrored in many states throughout the country. The local network was envisioned as a place to share and coordinate strategies and approaches, find common types of problems or identify specific problem property owners with land holdings across municipal borders. It would also serve as a hub for distributing model ordinances and developing a reform agenda for regional and statewide policies.<sup>141</sup>

The report also acknowledges the need for a convening entity, probably at the regional level, to create and manage this network. But even in the absence of a regional coordinating entity, there are several tools that localities can implement in the short

135 Mortgage Interest Deduction Is Ripe for Reform: Conversion to Tax Credit Could Raise Revenue and Make Subsidy More Effective and Fairer. Will Fischer and Chye-Ching Huang. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Revised June 25, 2013.

136 HUD's fiscal year 2012 represented "\$47.8 billion in gross budget authority... offset by \$6 billion in projected FHA and Ginnie Mae receipts credited to HUD's appropriations accounts, leaving net budget authority of \$41.7 billion." HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan. Fiscal Year 2012 Budget Summary Message from Secretary Donovan. p.1. <http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/fy2012budget>

137 Statewide And Area Income Limits For Families Earning At 50% And At 60% Of The Area Median Income By Number Of Persons, In The Metropolitan Area And Non-Metropolitan Counties Of New York State. NYS Homes and Community Renewal. <http://www.nyshcr.org/Topics/Home/2013DistributedAMIRentsIncome.pdf>

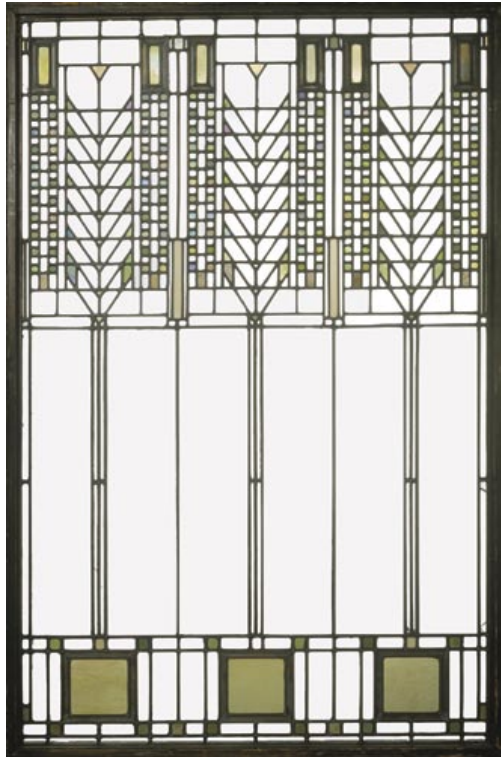
138 AHC Statewide And Area Income Limits For Low Income Families, Earning At 166% Of The Low Income Limit, By Number Of Persons, In The Metropolitan Areas And Non-Metropolitan Counties Of New York State 2013. NYS Homes and Community Renewal. <http://www.nyshcr.org/Topics/Home/AHCIncomeLimits.pdf>

139 [http://www.huduser.org/portal/datasets/il/il13/IncomeLimits\\_Section8.pdf](http://www.huduser.org/portal/datasets/il/il13/IncomeLimits_Section8.pdf)

140 Halbach, Chip. Affordable Housing... on Billboards? A grassroots coalition shapes a media campaign on the value of affordable housing. Shelterforce Online. Issue #122, Mar/Apr 2002. <http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/122/organize.html>.

141 *Blueprint Buffalo Action Plan*, P.62.

Figure 19. Blueprint Buffalo Action Plan Cover



# BLUEPRINT BUFFALO

## ACTION PLAN

REGIONAL STRATEGIES AND LOCAL TOOLS FOR RECLAIMING  
VACANT PROPERTIES IN THE CITY AND SUBURBS OF BUFFALO

Source: <http://www.oneregionforward.org/plan/blueprint-buffalo/>

term. Vacant Property Registration Ordinances (VRPOs), for instance, are being instituted by a growing number of communities as one tool in addressing an increasing amount of derelict or abandoned housing and commercial buildings. VRPOs serve a number of purposes, but fundamentally they attempt to remove the incentives for property owners to disinvest or neglect property, provide a mechanism for cataloguing and tracking vacant property and provide a dedicated revenue stream for monitoring these properties.

The costs of vacant properties to municipalities are large, but often difficult to quantify as they are spread across multiple departments and divisions. For instance, increased fire and police response, rodent baiting, clean and seal, housing court,

complaint handling, unpaid taxes and decreased property values, etc. are all borne by local government. In addition, neighbors also suffer through lost property value, but also in higher expenses for homeowners insurance or may risk cancellation of their policies altogether.

While not recouping all of these costs, Vacant Property Registration Ordinances can alleviate some of these expenses while charging back the previously externalized costs of decline to the property owner in the form of escalating fees for every year their property remains vacant. Cities in New York that have implemented VRPOs include Albany and Binghamton, which national best practices often point to Chula Vista, California and Cincinnati, Ohio as models.

Cincinnati's VRPO has a thirteen point maintenance code, an escalating fee schedule, and the threat of criminal prosecution for failing to register or to comply. Owners must register the property and pay a fee (\$900 in year one) and are assessed a substantial penalty if the payment is late (to defray legal and collection costs) and all unpaid fees are attached to the property tax bill but can also be pursued through civil action. For each year the property is vacant, the fee increases an additional \$900 in year two, to \$2700 after that, and after year five fixes at \$3500. If a building is reoccupied, the fee for that year will be refunded. Properties that are undergoing active redevelopment may apply for a fee waiver provided the maintenance code is met. The maintenance code includes items such as structural soundness, adequate drainage protection from the elements, barricaded entrances, premises conditions and safe entry for emergency responders. Owners are also required to provide proof of liability insurance. Fees collected through the ordinance have allowed the City of Cincinnati to hire five property inspectors dedicated to vacant property enforcement.<sup>142</sup>

Locally, VRPOs have been considered in Cheektowaga and in the City of Buffalo, but to date none have been implemented. Planning for the Buffalo Erie Niagara Land Improvement Corp., the local land bank, included the possibility of the land bank administering such a program within Erie County. The funds secured through the collection of the fee would thereby go to the administration of the program and the reclamation of vacant properties throughout the county.

<sup>142</sup> Model Vacant Building Licensing & Registration Programs: Vacated Building Maintenance License Cincinnati; Ed Cunningham, Supervisor of Inspections, City of Cincinnati. National Vacant Properties Conference, 2007.





3.

# PUBLIC HOUSING AND PUBLIC HOUSING AUTHORITIES

Buffalo Niagara is home to a host of public housing authorities and subsidized housing providers. Among the largest are the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority (BMHA) and the Niagara Falls Housing Authority (NFHA). A number of jurisdictions contract their affordable housing programs, particularly housing voucher programs, through Belmont Housing Resources (Belmont), which runs a county-wide Section-8 voucher program and also serves as a property developer and manager throughout the region. The Rental Assistance Corporation of Buffalo (RACB) also runs a large Section-8 voucher program for the City of Buffalo. Other municipalities that are home to independent housing authorities include, Lockport, Lackawanna and Kenmore. Each of the agencies profiled below are contributing in some way, based on their scale, scope and mission to the goals of this Housing Plan: Housing Choice and Accessibility; Vibrant and Connected Communities; and Respect for Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow.

Each of the region's public housing authorities were invited to participate in One Region Forward, either on the One Region Forward Steering Committee, at the working group level or through various other points of input and

reflection. Representatives in many of these organizations have been engaged throughout the development of One Region Forward as well as this Housing Plan. The Housing and Neighborhoods work group, for instance, was chaired by Mike Riegel, Chief Operating Officer at Belmont and Mike Clarke, Executive Director of Buffalo LISC and Board Member and past President of RACB, who both also served on the One Region Forward Steering Committee. In addition the General Counsel of BMHA was on the committee, and the NFHA's Service Coordinator served on the Steering Committee and the Fair Housing Equity Assessment Advisory Committee.

Through the One Region Forward Fair Housing Equity Assessment (FHEA), an analysis of public housing and investment in the region shows that the location of HUD-sponsored housing and community development activities touches most reaches of Buffalo-Niagara, however, a large number of these previous investments have contributed to the concentration of poverty, particularly within the most entrenched and segregated locations of the region. This has left all Public Housing providers in the region with dual challenges of modernization and community integration and revitalization.

Including public housing, housing choice vouchers, Section 8, Section 236, moderate rehab and other multi-family properties, there are 28,837 HUD-supported units of housing in Buffalo Niagara. This represents roughly 6% of the nearly 520,000 units in the region. However, in each of the 15 tracts identified as Racially or Ethnically Concentrated Areas of Poverty,<sup>1</sup> the percentage of HUD supported units is higher than the regional average. The combined average of HUD supported units in these tracts is 28% of total units (6,668 of 23,974). This represents 23% of all HUD supported units in the region even though, these tracts contain less than 5% of all units in the region.<sup>2</sup>

Tract 44.02, Kenfield-Langfield on the eastern edge of the City of Buffalo, represents the highest percentage of subsidized units with 80% of units in the tract (1015 of 1275). 99% of these tracts residents are non-white. Tracts 71.02, 14.02, and 202, are all above 50% of units being subsidized. Each of these tracts has a residential minority rate in excess of 75% (76%, 97% and 89%, respectively).

1 Excluding tract 9401 on the Tonawanda Reservation, which has no supported units among the 10 total units in the tract.

2 Census 2010 & HUD Picture of Subsidized Households, 2012 Based on 2010 Census, <http://www.huduser.org/portal/datasets/picture/yearlydata.html>

Meanwhile, Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) units are a competitive but flexible tool for creating affordable rental housing leveraging public-private partnerships. This type of development mechanism can be an effective tool for dispersing poverty and creating opportunities for low-income residents in high-opportunity neighborhoods. Though LIHTC has been used throughout Buffalo-Niagara, an analysis of the units produced reveals that they are disproportionately concentrated in the central cities. This may be due to the large-scale redevelopment of aging public housing complexes in recent years, many of which have utilized LIHTC as a component of financing these new developments.

Of the 107 developments in the region with a total of 7,618 low-income units (plus 300 unsubsidized units), 46 developments (43%) are located in Buffalo, representing 3,549 units (47%) of low-income housing, and 117 units of unsubsidized units. Of these, 23 developments are in R/ECAPs, comprising 2,175 low-income units.

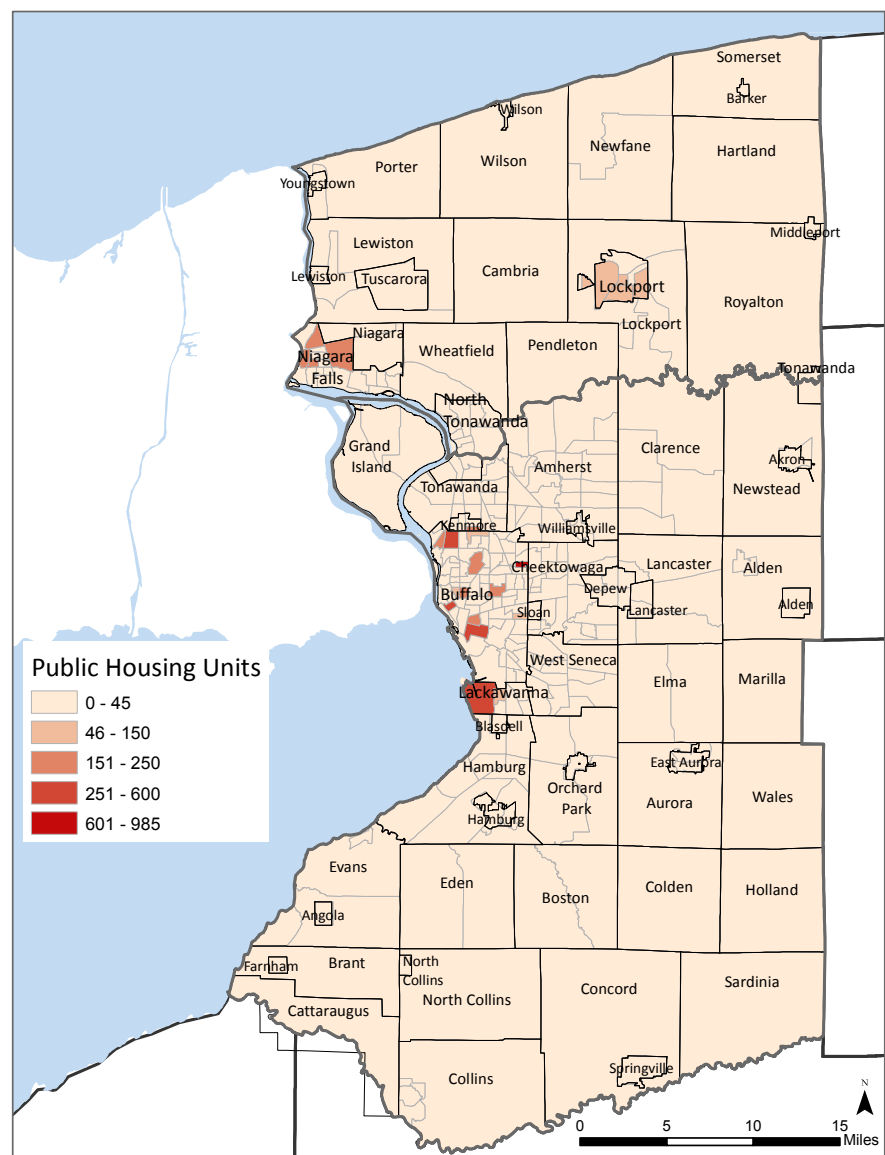
13 developments (12%) are in Niagara Falls for 874 low-income units (11.4%) plus 2 unsubsidized units. 4 of these developments are in R/ECAPs, comprising 450 low-income units.

In Lackawanna, 2 developments with 7 low-income units are in the city's R/ECAP tract, while a third development containing 67 low-income and 7 non-subsidized units, the Victory Ridge senior apartments in a former catholic hospital are located in tract 162 – a non-R/ECAP.

In total, 2,632 LIHTC subsidized units are located in R/ECAPs throughout the region. This represents 35% of all LIHTC subsidized units even though only 4% of all regional housing units are in R/ECAPs.

The Fair Housing Equity Assessment recommends an emphasis on ensuring equitable distribution of and access to public resources and service delivery, which is directly applicable to investments in public and assisted housing. While recent years have brought improvements to the way public resource allocation is vetted and evaluated, there are systemic inequities that cannot be addressed by annual allocations within the current decision making framework. The small-box delivery system for public services has evolved little in the well more than 100 years since its inception, creating illogical and arbitrary divisions

Figure 20. HUD Public Housing Units by Census Tract



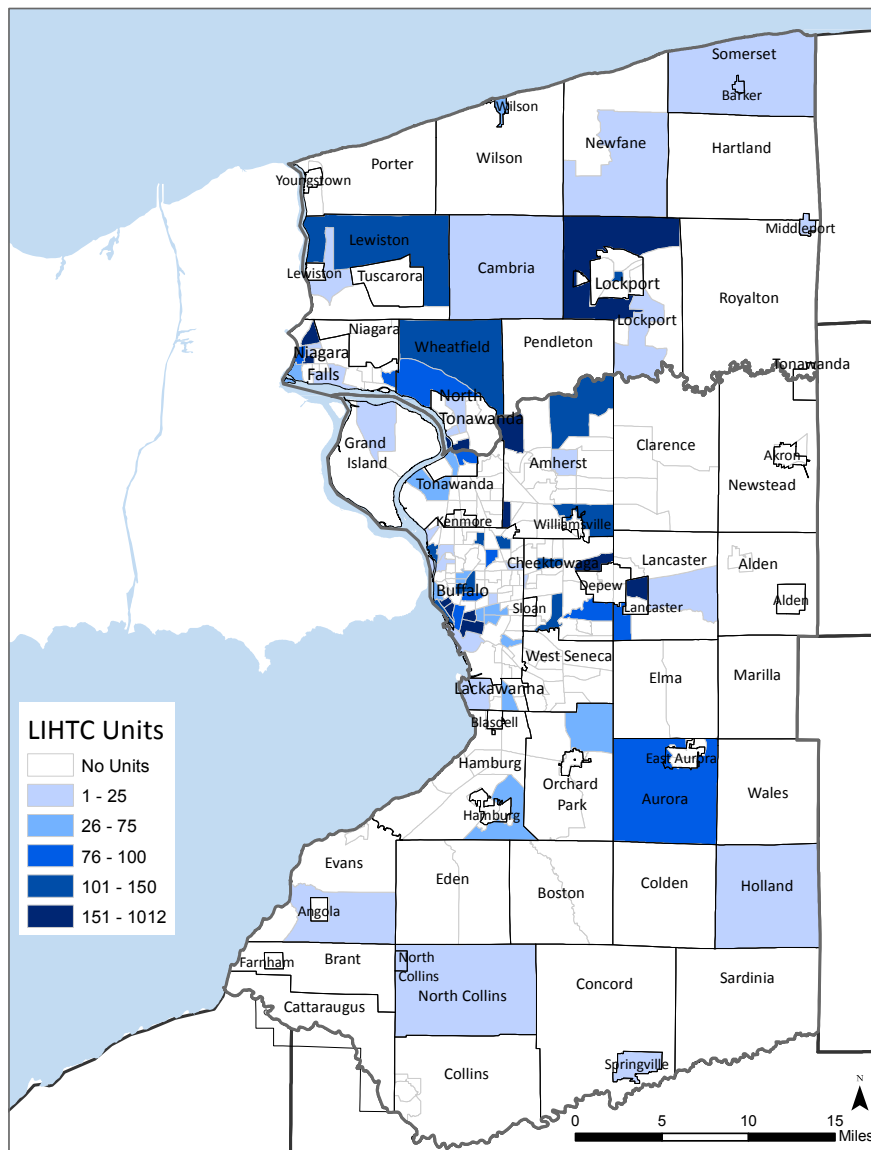
Source: UBRI; HUD Picture of Subsidized households, 2012

Table 3. Number of Public Housing Units

Agency	Number of Public Housing Units
<b>Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority</b>	<b>4155</b>
<b>Niagara Falls Housing Authority</b>	<b>836</b>
<b>Lockport Housing Authority</b>	<b>352</b>
<b>Kenmore Housing Authority</b>	<b>194</b>

Source: Affordable Housing Online.

Figure 21. HUD Low Income Housing Tax Credit Project (LIHTC) Housing Units by Census Tract



Source: UBRI; HUD Picture of Subsidized households, 2012

of responsibility that permit the persistence of gross inequities within a region that has simultaneously created more infrastructure and lost the means to maintain it.

The One Region Forward Land Use and Development Working Team acknowledges the challenges looming for this method of service delivery, with water, sewer and transportation, as well as police, fire and parks all as major and expanding cost centers throughout the region. The state of the education system is particularly alarming due to both the gross racial inequities in access and the increasing costs as enrollment declines in nearly every district. In

addition to limiting the expansion of costly infrastructure into previously undeveloped areas, the potential impact of shared service agreements, partnerships, or consolidation need to be evaluated to begin to mitigate the disparities that are rife in Buffalo-Niagara.

The FHEA recommends that agencies should develop policies that target public investment to traditionally underserved populations such as, for instance, ensuring that new affordable housing is not solely located in high poverty neighborhoods, but rather provides residents access to areas of opportunity,

balanced against need for accessible services, transportation options, etc.

A seeming paradox in Buffalo Niagara's housing stock in the low average cost of housing alongside the need for many more units of affordable housing. However, often times low rents or sale prices are indicative of poorly maintained units or of the hidden costs of high utility bills. A logical response to the dearth of high-quality affordable housing in the region is the desire to fill this need by building new units of subsidized housing in low-income neighborhoods where the issue is particularly acute.

However, focusing new low- and moderate-income housing primarily in underserved communities can have the effect of further concentrating poverty and disallowing access to areas of opportunity throughout the region. Buffalo Niagara must take a regional approach to affordable housing production – one that considers communities' fair share of affordable housing provision while simultaneously creating access and linkages between low- and moderate-income families and job and opportunity centers and nodes throughout the region.

While this speaks to the need to deconcentrate poverty through future development, the issue of transforming neighborhoods with a high concentration of low-income housing is also a pressing concern.

It is within this challenging context that the local housing authorities and voucher program administrators perform their work and develop plans for future investment. Major current plans for re-investment and reimagining public housing include the Perry Choice Neighborhoods project, funded through a major planning grant from HUD. This initiative also builds on successful conversions or redevelopment throughout the region, including several successful HOPE VI projects and those funded by LIHTC. The Choice Neighborhoods plan envisions, however, going beyond housing and neighborhood centers, to the development of a fully-integrated mixed-use, mixed-income community wherein public housing becomes an anchor of the community providing a permanent assurance of affordability to families of limited means. Additional initiatives underway throughout the region likewise recognize the need for public housing agencies to go beyond housing to provide supportive services, supportive environments and take a



The Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority (BMHA) undertook the BMHA Perry Choice Neighborhoods planning process in partnership with the City of Buffalo, the University at Buffalo Center for Urban Studies and the residents of Commodore Perry Homes and Extension under a first round HUD Choice Neighborhood Planning Grant. The plan is centered around the framework of Neighborhood, Housing and People, with a vision of a “healthy, walkable neighborhood complete with green spaces, trees, complete streets, a signature neighborhood center, and access to high-quality early learning centers, schools, supportive services, public transit, jobs, and other economic opportunities... energy efficient, mixed-income housing units that are attractive, affordable and sustainable over time... [where the] lives of residents... will be improved, especially outcomes in education, health, financial self-sufficiency, safety and access to opportunities throughout the Buffalo-Niagara region.”<sup>3</sup>

The plan sets goals for “reduc[ing] the Neighborhood Vacancy Rate, increas[ing] the percentage of Accessible and Visitable homes, increas[ing] the number of Green Housing units in Buffalo, and decreas[ing] the average energy consumption of each new housing unit. The Plan also aims to increase the Home Ownership Rate in the Perry Neighborhood.”<sup>4</sup> The plan strives to create a mixed-income community with various income thresholds within each development phase including 20% unsubsidized market rate rentals, while ensuring one-for-one replacement of all existing subsidized units and the relocation and re-occupancy of all existing residents throughout redevelopment.<sup>5</sup> The emphasis in this portion of the plan underscores that no residents should be displaced, but if residents should choose to relocate, they have have access to a support in finding a home in neighborhoods of opportunity.<sup>6</sup>

Though this plan fits clearly within the regional plan described in this document, BMHA was unsuccessful in its initial application to HUD for a Choice Neighborhoods Implementation Grant that were announced in March 2014.

3 Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority Enhanced Executive Summary. BMHA Perry Choice Neighborhood Transformation Plan. June 2013. P.11.

4 *Ibid.* P.29.

5 *Ibid.* P.32.

6 Ibid. P.37.

**Section 8 and HSV Units**

- No units
- Less than 50
- 51 - 150
- 151 - 250
- 251 - 360

0 5 10 15 Miles

Source: UBRI; HUD Picture of Subsidized households, 2012

However, the Choice Neighborhoods partners have committed to reapply for funding to catalyze the initiative.<sup>7</sup>

The Niagara Falls Housing Authority also approached its most recent major redevelopment project with an eye toward a mixed-income and mixed-use community. Funded by a mix of HOPE VI program allocations, Low-Income Housing Tax Credits, American Recovery

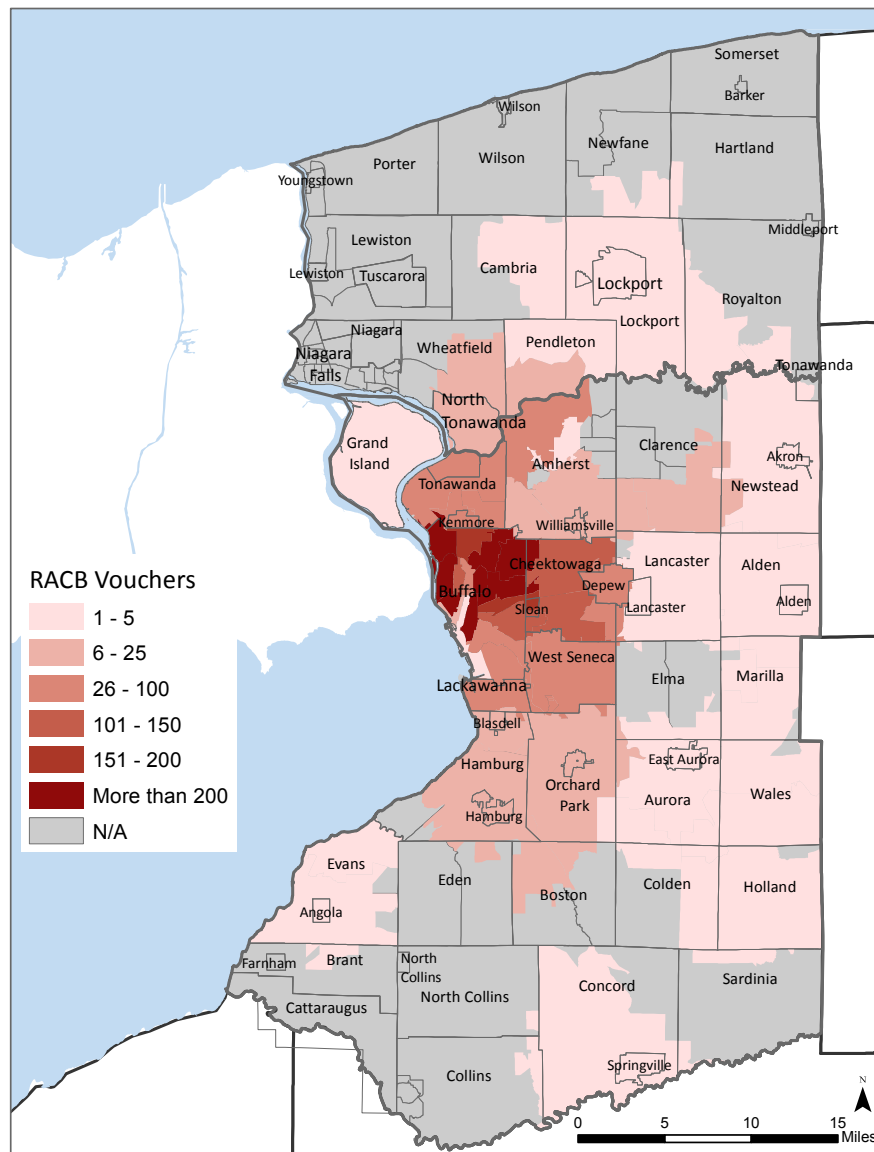
7 Melinda Miller. "HUD awards nearly \$8.4 million to Buffalo; Perry Choice plan will try again for more funding". The Buffalo News. March 24, 2014. <http://www.bmhapcn.com/news/article/featured/2014/03/24/100018/hud-awards-nearly-8.4-million-to-buffalo-perry-choice-plan-will-try-again-for-more-funding>. Retrieved October 1, 2014.

Act dollars, Niagara County Industrial Development Agency Bonds and other sources, the effort to rebuild Center Court as the Beloved Community took on the task of creating more than 200 units of new and replacement housing.

The vision for the Beloved Community involved demolishing and replacing 134 units of public housing and adding 106 affordable rental units, and 42 homes for sale – 30 of them at price and income restricted levels. The plan also envisioned a community center for both programming and unstructured access for the neighborhood.<sup>8</sup> Though

8 Niagara Falls Housing Authority. "Building the Beloved

Figure 23. Rental Assistance Corp. of Buffalo Distribution Vouchers by Zip Code



Source: UBRI; Rental Assistance Corporation of Buffalo

complications with the site and the financial crisis created some hiccups and other delays, the first phase of the project was completed in 2010 containing 115 units. Next, Phase Two brought 100 additional units, but a planned set of 31 single family homes has not been built due to both financing and market challenges.

Community: A Story of Overcoming Obstacles with Dedication and HUD Support". Niagara Falls Housing Authority website. Retrieved October 1, 2014. <http://nfha.org/2014/07/building-the-beloved-community-a-story-of-overcoming-obstacles-with-dedication-and-hud-support/>

As described in Section 2-4, Section 8 administrators in the region oversee approximately 13,000 vouchers. BMHA administers 400 Section 8 vouchers<sup>9</sup> and has closed it's waiting list application as of June 30, 2014, citing an abundance of wait-listed applicants that exceeds a 24-month period.<sup>10</sup> The City of Niagara Falls administers 820 Section 8 housing vouchers through Niagara Falls Leased

9 Affordable Housing Online. "Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority." <http://affordablehousingonline.com/housing-authority/New-York/Buffalo-Municipal-Housing-Authority/NY002/>. Retrieved July 23, 2014.

10 Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority. [http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/CityServices/Buffalo\\_Municipal\\_Housing\\_Authority](http://www.ci.buffalo.ny.us/Home/CityServices/Buffalo_Municipal_Housing_Authority). Retrieved July 23, 2014.

Housing,<sup>11</sup> however, the waiting list is currently closed for that program as well.<sup>12</sup> Also in Niagara County the Lockport Housing Authority administers 188 Section-8 housing vouchers.<sup>13</sup> But the two largest programs are run by Rental Assistance Corporation of Buffalo (RACB) and Belmont Housing Resources.

In the late 1990s, the Comer vs. Kemp case found various flaws and violations within the local landscape of federal housing assistance providers and the oversight of the agencies that funded the programs, including HUD, the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority, and the Erie County consortium. A 1996 federal consent decree resolved the class-action lawsuit that alleged that the publicly assisted housing in Buffalo was being carried out in a segregated and discriminatory manner. The settlement created a new set of Section 8 vouchers in an effort to promote choice and opportunity for recipients of public housing assistance, some of which went on to be administered by BMHA and some by RACB.

Though RACB operates the voucher program on behalf of the City of Buffalo using the City's allocation, voucher recipients are not required to rent within the city. In keeping with the spirit of the Comer settlement, and in alignment with the Housing Choice and Accessibility tenet of this Housing Plan, RACB also does not issue project based vouchers, instead adhering to a policy of choice for all voucher recipients. Roughly 85% of recipients rent within Buffalo, which can be attributed both to personal preference and landlord willingness (or lack thereof) to participate in the program. There are RACB administered vouchers in use throughout the county, but RACB actively promotes recipients location options and works closely with HOME – the region's main Fair Housing organization – to provide support for those who would like to explore alternative neighborhoods. Administered by HOME, the Community Housing Center was established as part of the Comer case to help voucher recipients evaluate their housing and location options to determine what

11 <http://affordablehousingonline.com/housing-authority/New-York/City-of-Niagara-Falls/NY404/>. Retrieved August 6, 2014.

12 City of Niagara Falls. "Community Development Department". <http://www.niagarafallsusa.org/CommDev.cfm>. Retrieved August 6, 2014.

13 Affordable Housing Online. "Lockport Housing Authority". <http://affordablehousingonline.com/housing-authority/New-York/Lockport-Housing-Authority/NY070/>. Retrieved August 06, 2014.

neighborhood(s) will provide them with the best housing options for them. RACB works closely with HOME through this process, as HOME attends briefings for all new voucher recipients to inform them of the program and their eligibility for assistance.

However, there are multiple and increasing barriers to providing voucher recipients and applicants both choice and stability in housing options. RACB is beset by the challenge of a continued decrease in administrative funds to operate their program of more than 5,000 vouchers. HUD has notified the agency of cuts ranging between 20-30% of the HUD-prescribed per voucher value of their services. Lesser cuts have also happened on the program side, but the program is in high demand with the number of requested vouchers highly over subscribed. Though roughly 99% of vouchers are issued at any time, there is still a waiting list of 5 years for qualified applicants (roughly 10,000 applicants) even though the wait list has been closed since July of 2013. An average of only 30-40 vouchers turn over in any given month.

The demand and supply are not simply unbalanced between the need and the availability of vouchers. Locating quality housing, for families in particular, is often challenging even with a voucher. For families with children under the age of six, the challenge is heightened because of HUD lead-free unit requirements. As examined in the Fair Housing Equity Assessment, this problem is particularly acute in Buffalo Niagara region, which has the highest percentage pre-war housing stock in the nation, and a large percentage of residences built of wood as opposed to masonry meaning the threat of flaking paint is present both inside and outside. “[E]ight of the highest risk zip codes for lead poisoning in New York” State are in the region,<sup>14</sup> and, “the four [local] zip codes with the highest rates of lead poisoning coincide with the predominantly African-American neighborhoods of Buffalo, with incidence rates between three and five times higher than Erie County’s average.”<sup>15</sup> 95% of all cases of

hazardously elevated blood levels and 23 of the highest 25 high-risk tracts are in Buffalo.<sup>16</sup> But it’s not just the presence of lead paint that is a challenge, but the need to test units to ensure there is no lead paint. Many landlords are not willing to pay for this test and therefore, the units are unable to meet Housing Quality Standards. This is among the factors changing the make up of the program, as the demographics are skewing to single residents, which now comprise 43% of all voucher recipients.

Frequently changing unit ownership is an additional challenge to choice and stability, particularly in some of the most distressed neighborhoods of the city, which also have among the lowest real estate values. Increases in house flipping, especially an increase in out-of-town owners, creates an additional administrative burden on RACB, but also threatens tenant stability as the process of verifying and certification of owners must be re-completed to maintain unit eligibility. Unresponsiveness of absentee owners sometimes forces voucher recipients to find a new apartment. Though the City of Buffalo has instituted some policies to combat the issue, such as the rental registry requirement and some anti-fraudulent flipping measures, the problem persists in many neighborhoods.

Meanwhile, Belmont Housing Resources administers roughly 5,500 vouchers throughout Erie County on behalf of the Erie County Public Housing Authority Consortium and about 600 in Niagara County on behalf of North Tonawanda. In Erie County there are 21,000 families on the waiting list to receive a voucher. Given the usage rate in excess of 99%, the current waiting period is approaching 10 years. Through the program they administer for North Tonawanda in Niagara County, the wait is approximately 3 years. Belmont, too, has a large portion of recipients (roughly 50% in Erie and 65% in Niagara County) receiving vouchers for individuals that are elderly or disabled.<sup>17</sup>

Here, too, is more evidence, then, that the available resources for rent assistance in the region are far below the need. The inability for qualified individuals and families to receive the assistance for which they qualify severely limits choice for these populations who are forced into taking on a housing cost burden, occupying

over-crowded units or accepting substandard housing conditions.

However, Belmont Housing Resources also administers additional programs and projects to expand choice and to contribute to all of the main themes of this housing plan: Housing Choice and Accessibility; Vibrant and Connected Communities; and Respect for Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow.

Belmont has a multi-pronged approach to housing support, from programming to development and support for lower capacity Community Development Corporations (CDCs). In addition to the regional voucher programs, Belmont Housing Resources also has a housing counseling unit which offers direct services for clients in pre-purchase and mortgage default.

Belmont also maintains a property management divisions that oversees rental properties that the organization owns, as well as providing a reliable and tested partner for small organizations with affordable rental housing in their portfolio but lacking internal capacity or scale to manage the units on an on-going basis.

Similarly, Belmont’s New Opportunities CDC subsidiary, provides development services to a host of organizations and municipalities, leveraging capacity and increasing affordable housing throughout the region. Among the services they provide “project feasibility, work write-ups and specifications, construction bid process and construction management services” and more – often for place-based neighborhood organizations, often in partnership with supportive housing providers and often in suburban communities.

In this way Belmont is not just administering a choice focused housing voucher program, but also expanding choice through both new development and rehabilitating dilapidated properties. Their commitment to green building practices and their engagement in Green and Healthy Homes, helps to foster environmental sustainability while also decreasing the utility burden in affordable housing and improving indoor environmental quality.

Neighborhood preservation efforts undertaken, such as the Promise Neighborhood Initiative which has the organization completing targeted acquisition rehab in a low- to moderate-income neighborhood that is also the focus of educational and commercial corridor initiatives, or the 1490 Jefferson

14 Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, Green and Healthy Homes Initiative. <http://www.cfgb.org/leadership/green-and-healthy-homes-initiative/>. Retrieved February 10, 2014.

15 Environmental Health and Racial Disparities in Buffalo, excerpted from Missing the Target, How Economic Development Programs Have Failed to Revive Buffalo’s Most Challenged Neighborhoods, by Sam Magavern et al, Partnership for the Public Good (2009). P.2.

16 *Ibid.* P.1.

17 Personal correspondence with Kathy O’Brien, Vice President of Housing Operations, Belmont Housing Resources, May 19, 2014.



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project which adds residential vibrancy in a former community center to a revitalizing commercial strip, speak also to their contribution to creating vibrant and connected communities with walkable services and amenities.

For example, Belmont's latest single site development, that at 1490 Jefferson Avenue (also known as Bellamy Commons), will be comprised of 30 affordable rental units and commercial space, which is anticipated to be occupied by the local chapter of the NAACP. Several units will be move-in ready for persons with mobility impairments in addition to units which will be accessible to those who are vision or hearing impaired, speaking to the need raised in this housing plan to accommodate users across the lifespan. In addition, this location is located in a concentrated area of redevelopment along Jefferson Avenue, which is create clusters of activity and accessibility including community uses, faith hubs, the newest library in the county system, a full-service supermarket, health care providers and additional retail options.



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