Civic Best Practices Grant Proposal
Submitted by City of Milwaukee

The idea

This proposal seeks funds to explore approaches used by two cities, Cleveland, OH and Baltimore, MD, to re-use City-owned vacant lots for purposes other than development. Such exploration will focus on two key questions:

1) What cost-effective vacant lot re-use strategies add the most value to urban neighborhoods?
2) What strategies encourage local stakeholders (residents, Business Improvement Districts, neighborhood associations, etc.) to become involved in determining the future of City-owned vacant lots, and assuming stewardship for them?

The challenge

There are approximately 3,000 vacant City-owned vacant lots within Milwaukee's city limits, most concentrated in central city neighborhoods. Traditionally, City government has disposed of them by selling them to adjacent owners, selling them for construction of in-fill housing, leasing them for community gardens, or assembling them into sites for larger development projects, such as new central city subdivisions. These strategies have generally succeeded when prospective buyers were plentiful and expectations that home buying was a sure-fire strategy for building wealth were realistic.

Several factors call for a new approach to the City's vacant lot disposition strategy.

1) The number of vacant lots is growing, and resources to manage them are shrinking. The home foreclosure crisis has severely dampened the residential real estate market, and increased demolition of foreclosed property is creating more vacant lots at a faster pace. Previously manageable challenges relating to City-owned vacant lots have escalated. The costs incurred for simple maintenance and ongoing litter pick-up are significant, and rise dramatically when illegal dumping of construction debris and large objects occurs.

2) Growing interest in "greening" Milwaukee has caused City officials to look at its vacant lot inventory in a new light. We are beginning to understand that vacant lots could be valuable tools in the City's efforts to manage stormwater, prevent flooding in residential neighborhoods, and improve the city's environmental quality. Lots planted with prairie grasses or other water retaining plants, converted to tree nurseries, or developed as rain gardens would add attractive natural elements to neighborhoods that also reduce stormwater run-off.

3) A burgeoning urban agriculture movement in Milwaukee has called attention to the potential of vacant lots as spaces to grow food locally, educate the community about nutrition and food choices, and create small-scale economic development projects linked to the sale of produce at local farmers markets. While the City has made lots available as garden spaces for many years, the demand for garden re-use is growing significantly.

The model being proposed/examples of success

Both Cleveland, OH and Baltimore, MD have undertaken systematic programs to involve community stakeholders in re-using vacant lots and assuming stewardship for them. In both cases, agencies have

developed a series of tools to inspire, guide and assist community groups and individuals to create productive benefit from vacant land in their neighborhoods. Their models include the following steps:

1) Assist local stakeholders to identify vacant land and create a community vision for its reuse. Baltimore's program identifies five categories of vacant lot re-use for community benefit: aesthetic, educational, recreational, productive, and environmentally beneficial. Cleveland's program emphasizes four strategies: developing neighborhood connections, creating parks and green space, environmental re-use, and new development.

2) Provide assistance to plan a vacant lot re-use vision. Cleveland has published a "Vacant Land Re-Use Pattern Book." Baltimore has developed "A Guide to Greening Neighborhoods." These guides provide step-by-step advice.

3) Provide resources to assist neighborhood stakeholders to implement their vision. Cleveland has a grant program called CityWorks, and also has assembled a guide to resources as varied as tools to borrow, wood chips, and recycled bricks for landscaping. Baltimore's Parks and People Foundation provides professional planning assistance and grants for vacant lot projects.

Milwaukee's strategy will be tailored to the specific conditions of its vacant lots and neighborhood organizations. The well-researched and proven Baltimore and Cleveland models will provide an excellent foundation for local adoptions.

Why the proposed model for study will help to address the challenges of vacant City-owned lots

The model will be valuable for several reasons.

1) The involvement of neighborhood stakeholders in implementing vacant lot re-use strategies has the potential to reduce the amount of money spent by City taxpayers on the management and maintenance of vacant lots.

2) Lots landscaped in a manner that reduces stormwater runoff will help to prevent flooding and add green space to neighborhoods, providing both aesthetic and environmental improvement.

3) Ideas gathered from other cities will help Milwaukee to become more pro-active and efficient in making vacant lots available for urban agriculture use.

4) In cities across the country, creative re-use of vacant lots has been enthusiastically welcomed by residents, urban planners, entrepreneurs, and civic leaders. Vacant lots are being transformed from liabilities into assets that generate social interactions and promote neighborhoods as viable, livable locations for home ownership and economic investment. Re-purposing vacant lots will bring a spark to neighborhoods and help counter the malaise inflicted on neighborhoods by the foreclosure crisis.

Who will be involved in the effort

The project will involve the City of Milwaukee Department of City Development, City of Milwaukee Office of Sustainability, Neighborhood Improvement Development Corp., Targeted Investment Neighborhoods, Healthy Neighborhoods, Business Improvement Districts, Department of Public Works forestry division, the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, non-profit environmental

organizations such as Keep Greater Milwaukee Beautiful and the Urban Ecology Center, the Center for Resilient Cities, and Milwaukee Urban Gardens.

Budget

This proposal seeks a grant of $10,000 from the Civic Best Practices Fund. It will be used to:

1) Send teams from Milwaukee to Cleveland and Baltimore to learn more about vacant lot re-use initiatives in those cities.
2) Undertake initial research to identify existing local resources that can be tapped by neighborhood stakeholders who wish to develop a vision for re-use of vacant lots in their neighborhoods.

Expense	Amount	Comments
Travel to Baltimore (6 people) Round trip airfare: $300/person One night hotel: $150/person Meals: $75/person	$3,150	This amount anticipates travel by up to six individuals to Baltimore to meet with representatives of the Parks and People Foundation, the Baltimore City Dept. of Housing and Community Development, Baltimore Green Space, Baltimore City Office of Sustainability, and several local groups that have undertaken vacant lot re-use projects.
Travel to Cleveland (6 people) Round trip airfare: $250/person One night hotel: $150/person Meals: $75/person	$2,850	This amount anticipates travel by up to six individuals to Cleveland to meet with representatives of Neighborhood Progress, Inc. , the City of Cleveland Land Bank, the City of Cleveland Office of Sustainability, the Cleveland Dept. of Community Development, and several local groups that have undertaken vacant lot re-use projects.
Trip report and resource scan 80 hours @ $50/hour	$4,000	A consultant will be engaged to work with those who travel to Baltimore and Cleveland. The consultant will be responsible for planning the information gathering that must occur during these trips, and for compiling a report of findings following the trips. The consultant also will complete a resource scan to identify the resources currently available locally to groups that wish to re-use vacant lots in their neighborhoods, and compile a document listing these resources.

Implementation budget

The cost of implementing vacant lot re-use strategies varies widely, depending on the number of lots selected for re-use, the location and condition of the lots, and the new uses to which they are put. The following cost estimates are taken from Cleveland's "Vacant Land Re-Use Pattern Book," published in 2009.

Re-use strategy	Cost per lot	Comments
Street edge beautification	$22,835	This strategy plants trees and other plant materials to beautify several contiguous vacant lots and discourage illegal dumping on the property. The estimate assumes a parcel area of 24,000 SF.
Split lot greening	$5,250	This strategy provides basic landscaping for a vacant lot that is split between two adjacent homeowners.
Native planting plan	$4,850	This strategy plants a small number of trees and a variety of native plants that are hardy and require little maintenance. The estimate assumes a parcel area of 4,000 SF.
Community garden	$18,000	This strategy prepares a multi-lot site for community gardening by improving the soil, and installing rain barrels, irrigation and fencing. The estimate assumes a parcel area of 6,000 SF.
Rain garden	$8,470	The estimate, which includes plant materials, fencing and rain barrels, assumes a parcel area of 4,000 SF.
Bioretention	$26,044	This strategy would create a bio-retention area to manage stormwater run-off from an adjacent parking lot. The estimate assumes a parcel area of 8,000 SF.
Geothermal wells	$42,000	This strategy uses a vacant lot to install geothermal wells that generate energy for two adjacent houses.