A Vacant Building Management Plan

For the City of Richmond, Virginia

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May 2008

Planning Studio II/URSP 762

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Vacant and abandoned properties are a common burden on many neighborhoods, particularly those with an aging building stock. The City of Richmond has several tools, programs, and policies in place to manage vacant buildings, yet at any given time it is difficult to identify vacant buildings and to encourage owners to rehabilitate and reoccupy their properties. In the east end of Richmond, vacancy rates can exceed 18 percent of total housing stock, and nearly 20 percent of the parcels can be vacant land with no primary building or land use such as parking.

The study area for this plan is bounded on the west by 25th Street, on the north by T Street, east to approximately 36th Street, and south to the alley between Broad and Marshall Streets. All data on vacant buildings are from the December 2007 Vacant Buildings Registry maintained by the City of Richmond. Within the study area there are 2009 buildings, 375 of which are vacant. This is a vacancy rate of 18.67 percent. Vacancy rates have hovered around 20% since at least the 1980’s. Vacancy levels above five percent are generally found to be detrimental to an area’s viability and property values.

Vacant buildings and lots pose direct health and safety threats to residents of the neighborhood. They also have a negative impact on the city as a whole.

Vacant buildings represent lost opportunities to combat sprawl and provide affordable housing with access to jobs and services.

In this document is a discussion of the existing conditions and policies in the neighborhood, followed by analysis of the data within the December 2007 Vacant Building Database. Using
this information, a plan with historic preservation, repopulation, infrastructure, and vacant building management aspects was created to provide a roadmap for the City of Richmond to mitigate the problems created by vacant buildings.

These improvements are expected to have effects on other issues such as population, tax revenues, provision of city services, and neighborhood safety and vitality.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like express my appreciation for each of the faculty members I have had the pleasure to study under during my academic career here at Virginia Commonwealth University. In particular, I’d like to thank Kim Chen and Dr. Morton Gulak for their sage advice in the preparatory stages of this document. In addition I am also grateful for the excellent GIS skills I learned from Dr. Ivan Suen, the data analysis expertise of Dr. Michaela Zonta and Dr. Weiping Wu, and the community development knowledge of Dr. John Accordino.

During the preparation of this plan I received invaluable information from many employees of the City of Richmond Department of Community Development, including panel members Tyler Potterfield and Mark Bridgman, as well as Mark Flanary, Bill Martin, and Tarisa Griffith.

I would finally like to thank my partner, Robert Sobecke, for his love, support, and copy-editing proficiency.
INTRODUCTION

Within the City of Richmond, there are thousands of vacant buildings and vacant lots at any given time. Tracking the status and condition of these buildings has been a city effort for many decades. After World War II, neighborhoods began to decline and populations dwindled as city residents left for newly constructed houses in other city neighborhoods and outside the city limits. Populations in central neighborhoods are often half or less what they were at the peak of neighborhood prominence.

City government has many resources at its disposal - Geographic Information System (GIS) solutions, city data collected as part of accepted workflows and business practices, and daily efforts by Code Enforcement. Nonetheless, many areas still have large percentages of vacant buildings and vacant lots.

Purpose

The purpose of this plan is to detail a method for the City of Richmond to improve the management of vacant buildings and thereby decrease the total number of vacant buildings, as well as mitigate the effects caused by high levels of vacancy. It will include a discussion of the reasons why and how vacant buildings affect the surrounding neighborhood, an existing conditions analysis of a chosen study area, and data analysis. The final portion of this document contains goals, objectives, and implementation strategies designed to address the conditions and findings in the study area. Improvements in vacant building management will
have effects on other issues such as population, tax revenues, provision of city services, and neighborhood safety and vitality.

This plan is prepared to fulfill the requirements of the Master of Urban and Regional Planning program at Virginia Commonwealth University, as the product of the Graduate Planning Studio II.

**Study Area**

The study area for this plan was defined by Tyler Potterfield of the City of Richmond Department of Community Development. It is bounded on the west by 25th Street, on the north by T Street, east to approximately 36th Street, and south to the alley between Broad and Marshall Streets. The study area is roughly 382 acres in size. It contains 2,567 parcels including 2,009 parcels with buildings. The remaining 558 parcels are vacant lots that no longer have buildings, although 52 of these parcels are used for off-street parking. This area was chosen because it has historically had a high rate of vacancy compared to the city at large.

Approximately 20 percent of the vacant buildings in the city are in this study area, yet it represents just less than one percent of the total area of the city. Much of the historically significant building stock is threatened by neglect and disrepair.
Study Area
City of Richmond, VA
Geographic Information Systems

Legend
- Study Area

Carriageways
- Freeway
- Freeway Interchange
- Primary Road
- Secondary Road
- Ramp
- Private Road

Map printed by georeave on 2008-03-03.
Document Path: C:\Documents and Settings\georeave\Desktop\VacantBuildings.mxd
**Impact of Vacant Buildings**

Vacant Buildings pose a threat to neighborhood safety. Unauthorized occupation (squatting) often occurs in improperly boarded and abandoned buildings. Squatters pose perhaps the largest accidental fire threat, as they are likely to start an open fire in a building during cold weather. In addition, low-income tenants may not be able to afford electric or natural gas utility bills and these services may be disconnected. This leaves the occupants very few safe ways to stay warm. Electric or kerosene space heaters can provide warmth in buildings where some or all utilities have been disconnected. This makeshift heating puts the buildings at a high risk for fire, endangering not only the squatters or tenants but residents of adjacent properties as well. Vacant buildings may be used as a location to commit illegal acts such as prostitution, drug sales and/or use. The buildings themselves can also be targets for property crimes ranging from graffiti to arson. Buildings often contain valuable copper metals, claw foot tubs, ironwork, and other materials that may be stolen and sold into the salvage market, often for money to purchase drugs and alcohol.

However, the largest disadvantage to a neighborhood is the missed opportunity a vacant lot or building represents. Unimproved lots generate only a fraction of the property tax even a modest building would produce, and tax delinquent buildings or properties generate no tax income at all. Vacant buildings are a drain on city resources, while occupied buildings allow for the efficient delivery of city services.

To mitigate the public health and safety risks, and to start working towards healthy, occupied neighborhoods, city agencies need to know the vacancy status and building conditions.
**Indications of Vacancy**

It is often difficult to say with certainty that a building is vacant at any given time.

Visible indicators of vacancy include: no visible furnishings, disconnected or removed power meters, boarded windows and doors, notices posted by city agencies, uncollected mail, overgrown vegetation, and the accumulation of refuse. Generally several of these indicators strongly suggest that a building is not legally occupied. These indicators require a field visit to verify.

Statistical indicators of vacancy can be verified without a field visit. These include utility cutoff status, tax delinquent status, crime data, and building permit data. However, even with none of this data suggesting vacancy, a building may still be vacant.

**Causes of Building Vacancy**

There are several reasons a building might become vacant. A common cause is an owner dying intestate (without a will). Often low-income persons do not create a will. The lack of a will creates a high cost of obtaining clear title and conveying property. This can cut into profitable renovation and outweigh market value. (Accino, 1998)

Another common reason for vacancy is that the cost of code abatement or renovation is more than owner believes he or she can afford, or is interested in spending.
History of Vacant Building Management in the City of Richmond

In 1989, the City of Richmond contracted with Virginia Commonwealth University to prepare a survey of vacant residential units in neighborhoods with significant housing defects and high levels of vacancy. This survey included 30 census tracts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Tract</th>
<th>Total Housing Units</th>
<th>Vacant Buildings</th>
<th>Percent Vacant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>206</td>
<td>907</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>18.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>207</td>
<td>794</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>18.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>208</td>
<td>1,146</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>6.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>209</td>
<td>1,629</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>6.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>203</td>
<td>1,063</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>11.95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In January 2005, Richmond, Virginia was selected to participate in the National Vacant Properties Campaign (NVPC). The final report for this campaign was issued July 8, 2006. The scope of the report was much wider than the scope for this document and included vacant properties in a continuum with substandard occupied housing, absentee landlords, underperforming or abandoned commercial buildings, brownfields, and vacant lots.

The National Vacant Properties Campaign defines a blighted vacant building as an uninhabitable vacant building with exterior code violations, where any of the following have occurred:
• Utilities have been terminated for more than one year.
• Permits have gone inactive for more than six months.
• The property has been tax delinquent for more than one year.
• The building is totally or partially boarded.
• The openings and/or roof of the building are open to the elements.
• Work requiring permits has taken or is taking place without permits.

During the summer of 2005, a survey of 688 properties suspected to be vacant was conducted to prepare for the NVPC. These properties include 99 properties in the study area for this plan. Currently, 35 of the 99 survey properties correspond with buildings identified as vacant on the December 2008 Vacant Buildings Data. These include five buildings that were found to be occupied in summer 2005 and three buildings with indeterminate occupancy status.

One property identified as vacant in 2005, 916 N 26th Street, has since had a new house built and occupied. Twelve properties that were surveyed in 2005 and found to be vacant have since been demolished.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Results of 2005 Vacant Building Survey (partial)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occupied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demolished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undetermined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Structure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Citizen Efforts to track and renovate vacant properties**

ACORN

The Alliance to Conserve Old Richmond Neighborhoods (ACORN) has a stated goal of “returning neglected or abandoned buildings to productive use and occupancy”. In 1999, the nonprofit organization began surveying vacant properties for code violations, and sending letters to owners offering to assist in selling these properties. If owners agree, the property is placed in the ACORN Option to Buy program, and a portion of the sales price goes to ACORN’s revolving fund.

Approximately 30 buildings were renovated in the past 3 years as a result of the organization’s efforts. The majority were buildings with severe structural problems. ACORN also sponsors informational seminars for property owners to assist in completing tax credit applications and other issues related to renovating and caring for historic buildings.

VacantRichmond.com

In March 2007, Ross Catrow of PharrOut.com created a website that displayed a map of the properties on the city’s vacant building registry. Citizens are allowed to leave comments on the status or condition of the building. Each listing also contains the mailing address for the owner, and contact information for city council and police precincts associated with the property. The site owners estimate there have been approximately 300 active users within the past month.

As of Monday, March 3, 2008, there were 510 properties on VacantRichmond.com listed as vacant within a half mile radius of 823 N 23rd St (the approximate center of the study area).

Eighteen properties have been tagged with comments that range from citizen displeasure with
the condition of the building, congratulations on a well-done revitalization, or further
information about the owner, plans, or status of the property. There is a link for citizens to
post photos of the current state of the building. The owners of the site would like to see
greater data sharing between the city and the public, including regular updates to the vacant
building registry. The data currently used for the site is November 2006. Mr. Catrow states
interest in contracting with the city to create a more robust vacant building tracking program
that would aggregate data from relevant city departments and share it with all city
departments and the public.

It is encouraging that both nonprofit groups and individual citizens understand the implications
of high levels of vacant buildings. ACORN works primarily from a historic preservation
perspective, while VacantRichmond.com has a more holistic approach, concerned with crime,
aesthetics, and quality of life as well as historic preservation. Increased cooperation between
interested groups and public officials can further improve the efficacy of both private efforts
and public policy and expenditures.
EXISTING CONDITIONS

**Neighborhoods**

The study area contains parts of four neighborhoods: Church Hill, Church Hill North, Oakwood, and Chimborazo. No neighborhood is completely within the study area.

**Census Data**

Tracts in the study area include 203, 206, 207, 208, and 209. There are 115 Census Blocks that have their center in the study area. According to Census 2000, the population of the census blocks within the study area was 4,574. The latest American Community Survey data estimates that the population of the City of Richmond declined roughly 2 percent between 2000 and 2006, a decline which can reasonably be extrapolated to the study area population as well. In 1950, the population of the five census tracts that are in some portion of the study area was 23,077. This represents a 59 percent decline.

The demographic makeup of the study area is approximately 87 percent African-American and 12 percent White. Median household incomes for the five census tracts in the study area range between $15,583 and $29,470.
Neighborhoods
City of Richmond, VA
Geographic Information Systems

Legend
- Study Area

Location Reference

Disclaimer:
The City of Richmond assumes no liability either for any errors, omissions, or discoveries in the information provided regardless of the cause of such or for any decisions made, action taken, or action not taken by the user in reliance upon any maps or information provided herein.

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Census Blocks
City of Richmond, VA
Geographic Information Systems

Legend
- Study Area
- Tract
- Block

Location Reference

1 inch equals 750 feet

Discloser:
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**Architectural Styles**

Almost all the historic properties in the study area fall within either the Church Hill North or Oakwood-Chimborazo National Register Historic Districts. Within these historic districts are several architectural styles and forms that correspond to the periods of significance in each Historic District. The Church Hill North National Register District was created in 1997 and expanded in 2000. The Oakwood-Chimborazo Historic District was created in 2005.

Wood frame, two story row houses, double houses, and detached townhouses in the Italianate style are prevalent in the study area. These houses typically date from the 1890s to 1920s. More than two-thirds of the contributing structures in the expanded Church Hill North historic district are in the Italianate Style.

Figure 1 - Italianate Frame Houses, circa 1910
Interspersed throughout the study area are brick houses in the Federal and Greek Revival styles. These tend to be some of the very oldest structures in the study area, dating from the first half of the 19th century. There are twelve Federal style and 207 Greek Revival Style buildings in the Church Hill North Historic District.

Figure 2 - Richardson House: Brick center hall plan, Greek Revival, circa 1850
In the north-eastern portion of the study area, historic houses date from the 1920’s and 1930’s. There are examples of bungalows in the Arts and Crafts or Craftsman style, as well as foursquare and shotgun houses.

![Foursquare Stucco House, 1925](image)

**Figure 3 - Foursquare Stucco House, 1925**

Many houses dating from this time period are more vernacular in style, and often combine elements of several architectural styles, such as Queen Anne style brackets on a 1920’s bungalow. The bungalow form tends to be the smallest in square footage, with some examples at 600-800 square feet of living space. This is significant because many low-income residents and small households of 1-2 persons would find the bungalow affordable and manageable due to its relatively small size.
**Transportation**

The street layout in the study area follows a grid pattern. This maximizes on-street parking while minimizing traffic congestion. Arterial Streets are 25th Street, Oakwood Avenue and Q Street. The remainder of the street network is made up of undivided, two-way secondary streets. Most blocks are bisected by an alley that provides access to off-street parking and city services such as refuse collection.

There are 70 GRTC Bus stops in the area serviced by GRTC bus routes 1, 2, 3, 7, 10, and 13. The end destinations of these routes are west of the study area, and allow good access to Downtown and the Near West End, but connections to job centers like Innsbrook, Chesterfield, Glen Allen, and Mechanicsville are difficult or impossible to make by bus.

There are no active or inactive railroads in the study area.

The neighborhood is within walking distance of many amenities and services; however, the sidewalk network is quite fragmented. The neighborhood most likely never had a complete network of sidewalks on all four sides of every block. In some cases sidewalks have become so deteriorated they have all but disappeared, and in other cases bricks have been removed for sale or use in other projects. This makes pedestrian travel to services difficult, especially for disabled or elderly residents.
Sidewalks and Bus Routes

City of Richmond, VA

Geographic Information Systems

Legend
- Study Area
- GRTC Bus Routes
- Sidewalk

Street Type
- Freeway
- Freeway Interchange
- Primary Road
- Secondary Road
- Ramp
- Private Road

Location Reference

Disclaimer
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1 inch equals 750 feet
**Zoning**

The majority of the study area is zoned for residential use. The specific zoning types include R-53, R-7, R6, R-5, and RO-2. There are five areas zoned for business, including UB, B-1, and B-2. The areas zoned for business are generally along the 25th street commercial corridor in the west of the study area. There are also 35 parcels with special use permits, generally to allow for restaurant or retail use.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zoning Type</th>
<th>Acres in Study Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B-2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M-1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-6</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-53</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-5</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RO-2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-48</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UB</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is an effort by the Department of Community Development to reconcile the current zoning with the master plan. The outcome of this effort will be a rezoning of land currently zoned as R-53 to R-7. This process is still underway and when completed, will only affect new construction. The area of the proposed rezoning is mostly in the southern third of the study area.

Due to the fact that most of the study area is zoned for residential use, most of the vacant buildings in the study area are predictably residential buildings.
Zoning in Study Area

Legend
- Study Area

Zoning
- B-1
- B-2
- M-1
- R-48
- R-5
- R-53
- R-6
- R-7
- RO-2
- UB

Carriageways
- Freeway
- Freeway Interchange
- Primary Road
- Secondary Road
- Ramp
- Private Road

1 inch equals 708 feet

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**Code Violation Inspection Areas**

The Department of Community Development recently reorganized and expanded the Code Enforcement department. There are now 30 Code Inspection Zones throughout the city. Three of these zones – 2, 3, and 10 – are included in the study area. The inspection zone model is similar to sector policing in that each inspector becomes very familiar with the buildings and code enforcement issues in his or her zone. Vacant buildings are tracked at the same time as code violations.

**Landmarks and Parks**

Inside the Study area are several neighborhood resources and social landmarks. These include The Vernon J. Harris Community Center and East District Initiative building, George Mason and Chimborazo Elementary Schools. The former Nathaniel Bacon School is now the Bacon Retirement Community. Public safety buildings include Ambulance Station 10, Fire Station 11, and the First Precinct Police Station. The East End Branch Library and Bon Secours Community Hospital serve the community as well. Religious buildings include Fourth Baptist Church, 31st Street Baptist Church, Mount Olivet Baptist Church, and Holy Rosary Catholic Church.

The study area is adjacent to several parks and landmarks including Chimborazo Museum and Park, Patrick Henry Park, Bill Robinson Playground and Community Center, and the Armstrong High School Soccer Field.
EXISTING POLICY AND PROGRAMS

Vacant Building Registry

The Vacant Building Registry was created in September 2006 based on historical data and updates collected for the National Vacant Properties Campaign. The December 2007 data is the primary data source for this analysis of vacant buildings in the study area. Owners of properties on the registry were contacted and asked to pay a $25 fee to register their vacant building. Of the 3,601 properties listed in the registry as of December 2007, 724 properties’ owners responded to the city’s contact. Based on this, 18 properties were re-inspected and removed from the database, for a total of 544 properties removed from the vacant building database, including one removed due to demolition. The city was contacted by the real estate agents for an additional 24 properties. Only 42 owners contacted the city to pay the $25 vacant building registration fee.

![Vacant Building Registry](image)

Figure 4 - Screenshot of Current Vacant Building Registry
The Vacant Building Registry contains information collected by Code Enforcement officials in the Department of Community Development’s Permits and Inspections division. The City of Richmond is divided into code inspection zones, and each zone is assigned to one code inspector. Three inspection zones – 2, 3, and 10 – are in the study area.

**Spot Blight Program**

Virginia State Statute 36-49.1:1 gives localities the power to acquire or repair any property determined to be blighted. After a property is designated as blight, the owner has 30 days to respond with a blight abatement plan. If the owner fails to present an acceptable blight abatement plan, the locality’s planning commission can prepare and adopt a spot abatement plan for the property. This plan must be in accordance with the adopted comprehensive plan and zoning ordinances. It also must comply with any City Old and Historic District regulations and be approved by the architectural review board, if applicable. An interest bearing lien will be placed on the property to pay for the costs of abating the property.
As a last resort, the locality may invoke the power of eminent domain to acquire the property and convey it in accordance with other laws. Unless the property has been condemned for human habitation for more than one year, eminent domain cannot be used to acquire a property that is inhabited.

**Real Estate Tax Abatement**

City Real Estate Tax Abatements are available to reduce the tax burden created by renovating and rehabilitating historic properties. This is an attractive program, but renovations must conform to the existing zoning, increase the initial value of the primary dwelling unit on the property by at least 40 percent, and not exceed the existing square footage by more than 30 percent. All residential buildings at least 20 years old can qualify for the abatement. The tax
abatement is 100% of the improved value for 7 years, and gradually rises to the full tax rate after 10 years.

**Tax Sale**

The Tax Sale process is initiated when the owner has not paid the appropriate real estate taxes. Properties are prioritized for tax sale according to several factors such as the number of years delinquent, the dollar amount of delinquency, and the condition/location of property. There is a 12 to 14 month process that tax delinquent properties enter before they are acquired by the city and sold through a public bidding process. The properties are sold free of all liens including delinquent taxes. Interested buyers can also initiate a tax sale by Special Request Form. If the property meets the criteria determined by the Tax Sale Review Committee, it will be included in the tax sale process. Interested buyers may also sign up for the tax sale mailing list. The City will not accept bids from a person who owes taxes to the City or has outstanding code violations. The owner is subject to building code requirements, future real estate taxes and other applicable laws. Certain properties are sold with Development Agreements that require purchasers to make improvements within a specific time frame.
City Old & Historic and National Register Historic Districts

The study area contains properties in both City Old & Historic and National Register Historic Districts. A building inside a City Old & Historic district is subject to approval of any exterior changes by the Commission of Architectural Review (CAR). The demolition of historic buildings is strongly discouraged in favor of other feasible alternatives such as renovation, sale to buyer committed to rehabilitation, or as a last resort, relocation. Buildings inside a National Register historic district qualify for federal and state tax credits of 20 percent and 25 percent, respectively. These incentives can make renovation more feasible. There are roughly 1,966 parcels in the study area that fall into a National Register Historic District. In addition, 569 properties are in the City Old and Historic Districts. All but four of these properties are also in a National Register Historic District. The properties excluded from the National Register district are: 814 N 29th Street (George Mason Elementary School), 714 N 30th Street (Department of Public Utilities water storage facility), 2901 M Street and 619 N 29th Street (non-contributing buildings). See map on page 31 for the boundaries of National Register and City Old & Historic Districts.
National Register and City O&H Districts
City of Richmond, VA
Geographic Information Systems

Disclaimer:
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together with or for any decision made, action taken, or action not undertaken,
by user to reliance upon any maps or information provided.

Legend:
- Study Area
- National Register Historic Districts
- City Old & Historic Districts

Location Reference

1 inch equals 766 feet

Document Path: C:\Documents and Settings\georgeae\Desktop\VacantBuildings.mxd
Neighborhoods in Bloom

Neighborhoods in Bloom (NiB) is a program that concentrates the expenditures of community development funding in six targeted areas. Starting in 1999, 80 percent of Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) funds have been spent in six areas identified as in need of intensive revitalization. The Down Payment Assistance program funds from Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME) are also available in these areas. The Neighborhoods in Bloom program is one of the most direct ways the City of Richmond attempts to reduce levels of building vacancy. It encourages new construction in the most blighted neighborhoods by funneling the majority of Community Development Block Grant funds to NiB designated areas.

In 1988, vacant buildings comprised 21 percent of the properties in Neighborhoods in Bloom areas, while another 25 percent of the properties were vacant lots. Only 26 percent of the properties in NiB areas were owner occupied.

In 2005, the Richmond Local Initiatives Support Coalition (LISC) published a report on the effectiveness of the NiB program. It found that:

- Housing prices in targeted Neighborhoods in Bloom areas appreciated at a rate of 9.9 percent per year faster than the citywide average
- Nearly 400 new or renovated houses were sold or under development
- During the first three years of the initiative, crime in the targeted areas decreased by 19 percent as compared to a 6 percent reduction citywide

The NiB Church Hill Central neighborhood is located just to the east of downtown. Roughly half of the NiB Church Hill Central area is within the study area, in the north-western portion. Church Hill Central is bounded by 28th Street on the east to Nine Mile Road. The northern
boundary is Nine Mile Road and Fairmount Avenue, 22nd Street on the west and then down Tulip Street to 23rd Street to Jefferson Avenue. The southern boundary of the neighborhood runs up Jefferson Avenue to M Street and then along M Street to 28th Street. For the most part, this area does not overlap with a City Old & Historic District, but it is in the National Register District. Only two buildings and two vacant lots in the study area are within both the City Old & Historic District and the NiB Impact Area. Due in part to increased demolition and code enforcement in NiB areas, the Church Hill Central NiB area does not correspond with the highest levels of vacant buildings in the study area.
Neighborhoods in Bloom
City of Richmond, VA
Geographic Information Systems

Legend
- Study Area
- Target Area
- Impact Area

Street Type
- Freeway
- Freeway Interchange
- Primary Road
- Secondary Road
- Ramp
- Private Road
- Parcels

Location Reference

Disclaimer:
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1 inch equals 926 feet

Map printed by georoc on 2008-04-18.
**Surplus Property**

The City of Richmond and the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority (RRHA) sell surplus property in a process separate from tax sale properties. These include schools that are no longer operational, public safety buildings like fire stations, and vacant lots. Surplus properties are listed on the City of Richmond website. An offer letter must be submitted to the city’s Real Estate Services department to initiate purchase of surplus city property. The city has worked to diminish the amount of surplus property, and currently there are fewer than 40 surplus properties available for purchase citywide.
DATA ANALYSIS

City of Richmond Vacant Buildings Database, December 2007

For the purposes of this plan, the vacancy data used is from the December 2007 City of Richmond Vacant Building Database. According to City of Richmond GIS data from this same time period, of the 2,567 parcels in the study area, 2,009 contain a primary building. A primary building is any building on the property used as the primary dwelling unit or retail/industrial

Included in the Vacant Building Database are 451 parcels with 501 buildings. Of the properties listed in the vacant building database, 375 parcels are identified as currently containing vacant primary buildings, an additional 17 parcels are on hold because they are thought to be under renovation, and 59 parcels previously identified as vacant have been re-inspected and found to be occupied. In addition, 506 parcels are vacant lots with no primary building or paved parking, leaving 1,632 properties with an occupied primary building.

The majority of the vacant buildings, 281, in the study area are single family dwellings. There are also 26 buildings zoned commercial, 45 buildings zoned 2-family duplex, 3 institutional, 2 industrial, and 14 multi-family.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vacant Building Registry – December 2007</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parcels in Study area</td>
<td>2,567</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parcels with a primary building</td>
<td>2,009</td>
<td>78.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupied</td>
<td>1,632</td>
<td>81.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>18.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant Parcels (demolished primary building)</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>19.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Vacant Parcels with no primary building (such as parking)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>2.03%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vacant Buildings and Vacant Lots

City of Richmond, VA
Geographic Information Systems
**Distribution of Vacant Properties**

The spatial distribution of vacant buildings and vacant lots is not even throughout the study area. Several blocks have all occupied buildings with no vacant lots. Other blocks have nearly all the buildings vacant or a high percentage of vacant lots. The distribution of vacant buildings is generally highest in the north-western portion of the study area. This generally coincides with parcels inside the Neighborhoods in Bloom impact area.

There are 462 parcels in NiB Impact Area, which equal 18 percent of the total parcels in the study area. Of these, 107 parcels, representing 23 percent of the total parcels in the NiB Impact Area, are vacant lots. This compares with 19.7 percent of the parcels in the study area at large. This suggests that code enforcement efforts and other factors have lead to a higher rate of demolition in the NiB Impact area.

In the NiB Impact Area, 236 study area parcels have a primary building. The “primary building” is a GIS data field used by the City Assessor and Department of Community Development to distinguish between primary buildings like residences and stores, and ancillary buildings such as storage or garages.

Of the parcels with primary buildings in the NiB impact area, 60 parcels, or 25.4 percent, are vacant buildings. This compares with 18.7 percent of the parcels with primary buildings in the study area at large. The NiB impact area reflects an area of intensified vacancy and neglect. However, there are blocks outside the study area that have vacancy rates as high or higher than in the NiB impact area.
The mean number of vacant buildings per block is 3.92. Two census blocks – 207.1011 and 206.1011 - have 13 vacant buildings each. This is the highest total for any block in the study area. Census block 207.1011 contains 32 primary buildings, a vacancy rate of 40.6 percent.

Census block 209.3006 contains only 16 buildings, 10 of which are vacant, a vacancy rate of 62.5 percent. These blocks are outside the NiB impact area. According to the December 2007 Vacant Building Registry, 24 census blocks have no vacant buildings. These census blocks are primarily in the central portion of the study area, and appear to have been demolished and redeveloped at a lower density in the 1950s-1960s.

Highest Incidence of Vacant Buildings by Block

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Tract</th>
<th>Block</th>
<th>Vacant Buildings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>206</td>
<td>1011</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>207</td>
<td>1011</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>207</td>
<td>1028</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>209</td>
<td>3005</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>209</td>
<td>3006</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>208</td>
<td>1017</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>207</td>
<td>1029</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>203</td>
<td>1018</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>209</td>
<td>3004</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>209</td>
<td>1008</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>209</td>
<td>1007</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>206</td>
<td>1008</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>207</td>
<td>1006</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>207</td>
<td>1008</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>209</td>
<td>3009</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>209</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>208</td>
<td>1006</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>208</td>
<td>1016</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>209</td>
<td>3011</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>207</td>
<td>1007</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>207</td>
<td>1001</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>207</td>
<td>1016</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>207</td>
<td>1003</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>207</td>
<td>1012</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Legend
- **Vacant Structures per Census Block**
  - **Green**: 1 - 3
  - **Yellow**: 4 - 8
  - **Red**: 9 - 13
- **Study Area**

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Location Reference

1 inch equals 768 feet

Map printed by georgea on 2008-03-28.

Document Path: C:/Documents and Settings/georgea/Desktop/VacantBuildings.mxd
Age of Buildings

The vacant buildings in the study area have a mean Year Built statistic of 1912. The mean Year Built for all buildings in the study area is 1924. City records do not always show the precise date for a building’s age. In most cases if a building was constructed in the 19th century or earlier, the default date is 1900. However, because this default is used consistently, the data still shows that vacant buildings tend to be older than non-vacant buildings. Older buildings are not only more historically significant, they are also at a higher risk of becoming deteriorated due to the older materials used in their construction.

Building Permits

Active building permits can often signal that a house is likely to change its vacancy status. Building permits issued to abate code violations may indicate renovation and re-occupation will soon follow. A demolition permit must be issued for an owner to legally demolish a vacant building.

In the study area, there are 70 vacant buildings with active building permits. Of these active permits, 44 were issued in 2007. As of March 1, 2008, eight permits have been issued. Below is a table showing the type of permits active in the study area vacant buildings.

Building Permits in Study Area 2007-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Permit Type</th>
<th>Count of Permits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>building</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>electrical</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plumbing</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mechanical</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>demolition</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Crime Data

In 2007, there were 950 crimes reported that could be geocoded to an address in the study area. Crime incidents occurred on only 433 parcels, indicating that most (83 percent) of the parcels had no crimes reported.

- 736 crimes were reported in non-vacant buildings on 348 parcels.
- 40 crimes were reported on or in front of 19 vacant parcels
- 174 crimes were reported on or in 66 parcels with vacant buildings.

Overall, 16.9 percent of parcels in the study area were the location for some type of crime in the study area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Crime in study area</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Destruction of Property</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court Documents</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug/Narcotic Viol</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary/B&amp;E Residential</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple Assault</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple Assault Domestic</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft from Bldg</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit &amp; Run</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Other Larceny</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor Vehicle Theft</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Richmond Police Department Crime Incident Information 2007
Vacant Buildings had a very similar incidence of crime as 17.6 percent of parcels with vacant buildings were involved in a crime, compared to 21.3 percent of occupied buildings. Vacant lots experienced a proportionally low crime rate. These lots make up almost 20 percent of the total parcels in the study area but only accounted for 4.2 percent of crimes.

When data on crimes committed on vacant lots are removed from the totals, there are a slightly higher proportion of crimes committed in vacant buildings as non-vacant buildings.

**Assessment Data**

In 2007, mean total (building and land value) assessment values were $119,351. This figure rose slightly to $121,224 in 2008. The sum of all assessed property in the study area was $306,374,100 in 2007 and $311,184,000 in 2008.

The table below illustrates the difference in assessed value between vacant and non-vacant buildings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2007 Assessments for Vacant and Non-Vacant buildings in study area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vacant Buildings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Building Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$83,769</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Vacant Buildings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Building</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vacant Buildings</th>
<th>Occupied Buildings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Crimes</td>
<td>Number of Crimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>174</td>
<td>736</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Parcels</td>
<td>Number of Parcels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>375</td>
<td>1634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total Crimes</td>
<td>Percent of total Crimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.12%</td>
<td>80.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total Parcels</td>
<td>Percent of total Parcels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.67%</td>
<td>81.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.45%</td>
<td>-0.45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vacant buildings had a very similar incidence of crime as 17.6 percent of parcels with vacant buildings were involved in a crime, compared to 21.3 percent of occupied buildings. Vacant lots experienced a proportionally low crime rate. These lots make up almost 20 percent of the total parcels in the study area but only accounted for 4.2 percent of crimes.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vacant Buildings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Building Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$83,769</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Vacant Buildings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unimproved Lots</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Vacant Residential Buildings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Building Value</th>
<th>Land Value</th>
<th>Total Assessment</th>
<th>Mean living area (sq ft)</th>
<th>building value/sq ft</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$82,056</td>
<td>$29,016</td>
<td>$111,073</td>
<td>1561</td>
<td>$52.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Vacant Residential Buildings</th>
<th>Land Value</th>
<th>Total Assessment</th>
<th>Mean living area (sq ft)</th>
<th>building value/sq ft</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$105,864</td>
<td>$30,354</td>
<td>$136,788</td>
<td>1423</td>
<td>$58.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When looking at all buildings in the study area, there is an average difference of $35,638 in the assessed value between vacant and non-vacant buildings. This difference in value diminishes to $23,808 when comparing only properties assessed as residential. This analysis excludes parcels assessed as a residential garage.

**Utility Cutoff Data**

Utility cutoff status is perhaps the most certain statistical indicator of a building’s occupancy or vacancy. It is very unlikely that a building where the gas, water and sewer have been disconnected is inhabited by the owner or an authorized renter. The City of Richmond delivers each of these utilities. Due to tracking for city business processes, it is possible to determine the utility cutoff status of any building.

In the study area, 404 parcels appear on the Vacant Building/Utility Cutoff Data, but 15 of parcels do not have any utility cutoff data entered. A further 198 have information entered and have no utilities disconnected. Gas utilities are cut off at 168 of the addresses. Water is cut off
at 68 buildings. Sewer has been cut off at 37 buildings, all of which also have had water disconnected. Gas and Water have been cut off at 45 buildings.

Utility cutoffs may also indicate a particular danger if buildings are illegally occupied. Especially in colder months, squatters start open fires in or near vacant buildings to keep warm.

Electric service is supplied in the area by Dominion Virginia Power. For the purpose of this study electric cutoff data was unavailable, but for city business processes it could be obtained to provide a more complete picture of utility cutoff status. This data must be reviewed in tandem with other information, as using the data by itself may generate a high number of false-positive vacant buildings. If electrical meters are visible on field visits, it may be possible to discern electrical utility status.
Tax Delinquent Data

According to the National Vacant Properties Campaign, Richmond has a unique situation among cities with high levels of building vacancy. Although there are high levels of both tax delinquency and vacancy, there was not a strong correlation between the two. (Levy et al, 2006) This makes managing vacant properties even more difficult, because one of the simplest means of gaining ownership of a vacant property is via the courts if the taxes and liens on a property exceed the assessed value.

Ownership

The type and location of property owners can indicate a risk for chronic vacancy. Owner-occupied properties are more likely to remain occupied and in good condition. Landlords who live near their rental property also have easier access to their property to maintain it regularly. Upon the death of an owner-occupant, some properties become owned by relatives living outside the neighborhood, who may find it difficult to visit and maintain the property. Owners are also categorized into different types, such as an individual or couple, trustees, investors, non-profit organizations, financial institutions, and the public sector. Many properties in the study area are owned by individuals or companies whose mailing address is in the same zip code as the study area (23223). Below is a summary table of parcels owned in Richmond, Virginia zip codes.
### Study Area Owners by Zip Code

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City, State, Zip</th>
<th>Property Owners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23223</td>
<td>1432</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23220</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23219</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23222</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23231</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23230</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23236</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23227</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23224</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23225</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23234</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23235</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23229</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23228</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23221</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23241</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23226</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23261</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23233</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23238</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23260</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23294</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23232</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23237</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23242</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23250</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHMOND, VA 23255</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>2139</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in the table, 1,432 of the 2,567 parcels in the study area are owned by individuals or entities in zip code 23223. A large majority of property owners in the study area have a Richmond, VA mailing address. This indicates that title searches, wills, and other ownership data will be easier to research for the majority of properties.

Based on the data that can be linked to the December 2007 Vacant Building Database, the distance of an owner’s zip code from the study area zip code tends to predict that it is more
likely to be vacant. Vacant properties have a significantly higher average owner distance when compared with occupied properties.

Comparison of Owner’s Zip code to Vacancy Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Average Owner Distance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occupied</td>
<td>20.65 miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant</td>
<td>31.46 miles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although there are 375 buildings identified as vacant, there are only 292 owners of vacant property in the study area. Several companies and individuals own multiple vacant properties in the area. Below is a table listing the owners of multiple vacant properties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Owner Name</th>
<th>Number of Properties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bayou Properties LLC</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premier Investment Properties LLC</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Hill Properties LLC c/o French Consulting Co</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clayton Investment Group LLC</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cox Elliott Dwight</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Seaboard Investments LLC</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1209 North 28th Street LLC</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bendid Development LLC</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goswami Shashi</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joyner William A &amp; Dorothy B</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scales Larry W</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2903 Q Street LLC</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Edward L</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coons Brian</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duke Matthew E &amp; Rebecca D</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furrow Franklin</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hart James</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hudson Claude W III</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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Building Code Violations

Although it is possible to own a vacant building that is code compliant and keep it free from unauthorized occupation, many vacant buildings in the study area are not code compliant.

These codes are designed to mitigate the health and safety risks posed by vacant buildings, as well as preserve the buildings so they might be re-inhabited.

Common violations include accumulation of refuse, untrimmed vegetation, and abandoned vehicles, or open and vacant.

In the study area, 300 of the 379 parcels with primary buildings identified as vacant in the Vacant Building Database have code violation investigations on file dating back to 2001. Of these parcels, 29 of these were later found to have no violation.
SWOT ANALYSIS

This SWOT analysis identifies the internal Strengths and Weaknesses of the study area, as well as Opportunities and Threats from forces outside of or larger than the study area.

**Strengths**

Unique and irreplaceable historic fabric
Affordable housing stock
Neighborhood is located conveniently to downtown jobs and amenities

**Weaknesses**

High perception of violent crime and illicit activity
Domino effect of vacant buildings (see Accordino 1998)
Many vacant buildings are outside the Neighborhoods in Bloom impact area, making them ineligible for CDBG funds
Opportunities

Tax Credit availability for National Register properties

CDBG/other funds available for Neighborhoods in Bloom

Potential location for workforce housing

Increased ridership and service area for GRTC bus system

Threats

Displacement of lower-income residents (especially renters)

Gentrification/displacement of existing residents

Vacant housing poses a high risk for fire as well as a haven for illicit activities
SECTION II - RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the existing conditions in the neighborhood, and vacant building tracking data, four overarching goals have been created for the study area.

The four goals of the following plan are:

Goal 1: The historic fabric of the neighborhood is preserved.

Goal 2: The study area has a healthy level of building vacancy and vacant lots.

Goal 3: Public Infrastructure is an attractive supplement to the historic fabric of the neighborhood.

Goal 4: The City of Richmond maintains an accurate, informative and up-to date Vacant Building Registry (VBR). It is used to mitigate the effects of vacancy and track renovation efforts in the city, as well as by other city agencies and citizens for research and community involvement.

These goals are supplemented by objectives to measure the achievement of each goal, and implementation strategies to detail the methods of meeting each objective.
**Historic Preservation**

Goal: The historic fabric of the neighborhood is preserved. Owner-occupants and landlords of rental housing maintain and renovate existing buildings in a way that retains the historic character of the neighborhood.

Objective: Create a new historic district to include properties in the north-central portion of the study area.

The Oakwood - Chimborazo and Church Hill North historic districts cover a majority of the properties in the study area. Some blocks with the highest levels of building vacancy are not in historic districts. A new historic district would extend the opportunity for tax credits to additional homeowners who could benefit from them.

Objective: All owners of vacant buildings in the study area should be made aware of tax credits and tax abatements available for qualifying buildings.

Providing information about the tax credit process, and connecting homeowners with the resources to apply for tax credits would increase the number of owners who take advantage of this program. Especially in areas where tax credits or other incentives are newly available, efforts to publicize and increase participation in programs that can spur development without sacrificing historic preservation goals.
New Historic District Area
City of Richmond, VA
Geographic Information Systems

Legend
- Study Area
- Proposed New Historic District
- National Register Historic Districts
- City Old & Historic Districts

Carriageways
- Freeway
- Freeway Interchange
- Primary Road
- Secondary Road
- Ramp
- Private Road

StreetType
- Street Labels, full extent
- Parcels

1 inch equals 708 feet

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Map printed by georgeae on 2008-05-05.
Document Path: C:/Documents and Settings/georgeae/Desktop/VacantBuildings.mxd
Objective: Fifty historic buildings most threatened with demolition due to code violations and structural problems are renovated and brought back to occupied status.

An immediate objective should be to identify the historically buildings most in danger of demolition. The city currently maintains a list of Vacant Historic Buildings, and 56 of these buildings are in the study area. Ensuring that these buildings are reoccupied will provide a benefit to the neighborhood by alleviating problems caused by vacant buildings. Protecting the buildings from demolition and further deterioration will retain the historic fabric. Both of these benefits will help enhance and entice additional renovations and infill development. See Appendix 1 for the addresses of the vacant historic buildings in the study area.

As an ongoing effort, neighborhood groups and non-profit organizations such as ACORN and the Better Housing Corporation can connect potential developers and renovators with available buildings, provide information about financing, or purchase buildings outright for restoration. These organizations can also connect owners with contractors who have experience working on historic buildings. Citizen-run websites such as the Church Hill People’s News and Old House Authority are two resources that can be used to provide information on preserving and appropriately restoring threatened historic structures.

Objective: Reduce percentage of vacant buildings to 5 percent of buildings

Vacancy levels above five percent are generally found to be detrimental to an area’s viability and property values, and historic buildings are most at risk from high levels of vacancy. It is expected that at any given time there will be some unoccupied properties in a neighborhood.
Given the city’s definition of a vacant property as one that has not been occupied for at least 12 months, the number of vacant buildings can and should be much lower than current levels. Overall the study area has a vacancy rate around 18 percent in 2008. This is virtually unchanged from findings in 1989. Vacancy levels around five percent allow for the natural ebb and flow of the real estate transactions, time-consuming renovations, and other acceptable reasons for long-term vacancy, while mitigating the problems associated with high levels of vacancy.

Objective: Expand Neighborhoods in Bloom impact area to the blocks with the highest levels of vacancy.

The Neighborhoods in Bloom program has been successful in many parts of the city. Currently, some neighborhoods such as Carver and Newtowne West have made amazing strides and rehabilitated or abated the stock of vacant buildings. A citywide evaluation of the current state of vacancy and preservation needs would indicate which neighborhoods are ready to graduate from the program, and make room for the areas with the highest levels of neglect and abandonment. Expanding the NiB impact area would allow city sub-recipients of Community Development Block Grant funds to use these funds areas with the highest concentrations of blighted buildings.
Legend:
- Target Area
- Impact Area
- Study Area

Vacant Buildings per Census Block
- 1 - 3
- 4 - 8
- 9 - 13

Street Type
- Freeway
- Freeway Interchange
- Primary Road
- Secondary Road
- Ramp
- Private Road
- Parcels

Location Reference

1 inch equals 926 feet

Disclaimer:
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Map printed by geogae on 2008-04-18.
Document Path: C:\Documents and Settings\geogae\Desktop\VacantBuildings.mxd
Repopulation

Goal: The study area has a healthy level of building vacancy and vacant lots. New households have moved to the area. There is a diverse range of family sizes and income levels. The rehabilitated and reoccupied buildings that were previously vacant are complemented by infill construction that is appropriate and uses similar building density and setbacks.

It is possible for the study area to achieve an acceptable level of vacant buildings by a two pronged approach: encouraging rehabilitation of vacant buildings, and encouraging new construction on vacant lots.

Objective: Restore 200 vacant buildings to non-chronic status and assist their owners in finding a rental tenant, or selling to owner-occupant.

Given that there are 2,009 parcels with primary buildings in the study area, and 1,634 are thought to be occupied, meeting the previously stated goal of 95 percent occupancy would require reoccupation of at least 275 of the current 375 vacant buildings. Clearly this is not a goal to be met without much effort. Targeted efforts on a handful of census blocks within the study area could make a great deal of difference.

This also means that it would take the construction of roughly four houses on previously vacant lots to equal the effect of renovating one existing house. Although demolition of vacant properties is sometimes the only alternative, it should be avoided at all costs.

The city has several tools at its disposal (detailed in Section I – Existing Conditions) that can be used to encourage renovation by private owners. These include both punitive tools such as...
Notices of Violation by Code Enforcement officers, and enticements such as tax abatements and tax credits.

Objective: Increase study area population by at least 1000 persons

Achieving the goal of a 5 percent vacancy rate could reasonably result in an increase of 550 persons in the study area. Construction of an equal amount of infill housing on 275 of 506 vacant lots would provide housing for roughly the same number of persons, and is a feasible way to achieve this goal. To meet this objective, at least 275 single family dwellings must be built on vacant lots within the study area. Nonprofit groups such as Housing Opportunities Made Equal and the Better Housing Coalition can publicize the infill housing to new homeowners and other clients who might be interested in affordable, historic neighborhoods.

Objective: 75 percent of housing created by public/nonprofit development affordable to households earning between 50 percent and 80 percent of the area median income.

According to the Affordable Housing in the Richmond Region Fact Sheet (2005), the City of Richmond has a need for around 2000 units of housing affordable to those households earning between 50 and 80 percent of the Area Median Income (AMI). The AMI is a number calculated by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and represents the median income of the Richmond Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). In 2007, HUD estimated the AMI for the Richmond MSA to be $68,700. Using this data, affordable housing is that which is priced between $104,220 and $192,600.
Much of the housing produced in the Richmond region today is priced at or above the median price for the region, which was $238,800 in the third quarter of 2007, according to the National Association of Realtors.

One perceived barrier to rehabilitation of historic buildings is the cost of renovation and code violation abatement. A 2001 study estimates the cost for rehabilitating a building with severe physical problems is $75,000, while a building with moderate physical problems is $25,000. Given the mean assessment in 2007 for buildings with vacant properties in the study area, historic properties could be re-occupied at sale prices between $130,000 and $180,000. The relatively small size of many historic properties in the area is also favorable to the creation of affordable housing.

Nonprofit Community Development Corporations like the Better Housing Coalition, ElderCare and Southside Community Development Corporation, and agencies such as the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority can all participate in creating additional supplies of affordable housing.
**Neighborhood Infrastructure**

Goal: Public Infrastructure is an attractive supplement to the historic fabric of the neighborhood. It complements the streetscape with attractive and appropriate street trees and furniture such as bus stops and refuse containers. Pedestrians walk on a network of well-maintained sidewalks. The gutters are free from leaves, trash, and weeds, allowing storm water to quickly drain off streets.

The difference in assessments for properties with a primary building not identified as vacant, and properties with buildings identified as vacant is an average of $40,398. Using the 2006 tax rate of $1.29/$100 assessed value; this would mean each rehabilitated building could generate an average of $521 in additional property taxes each year. Through renovation of the 275 buildings necessary to reduce the vacancy rate to five percent, the city could realize an additional $142,754 in revenue yearly. This revenue can and should be used to pay for infrastructure improvements, educational facilities, and other social services in the neighborhood. A similar increase can be realized by meeting the objective of building 275 new infill homes, due to the taxes generated by the improvement value on previously vacant lots.

Objective: Survey sidewalk network for condition and completeness. Repair where necessary and complete fragmented sections, especially where grass wear indicates high existing foot traffic. Install wheelchair-accessible curb cuts where necessary.

Existing GIS data indicates sidewalks are especially fragmented on R, S, and T streets, as well as N. 26th, 27th, 32nd, 33rd, and 34th streets. The Citizens’ Request system may also provide information about where sidewalks are needed.
In this historic neighborhood, the buildings address the streetscape very directly. Unfortunately, the streetscape is often pockmarked with gaps in the sidewalk network, poorly maintained street trees or empty tree wells. Public disinvestment adds to the ill effects of private disinvestment. Poorly maintained houses are less likely to be attractive candidates for renovation if they reside on streets that are just as poorly maintained.

Objective: Complete a survey of trees and shrubs in the right-of-way. Replant empty tree wells with appropriate species.

Figure 6 - Empty tree well

Empty tree wells, much like vacant buildings, represent a lost opportunity to provide shade, air quality, and water quality benefits to a neighborhood. Large trees shade buildings and help reduce air conditioning loads in summer. Photosynthesis in tree leaves absorbs carbon dioxide
and replaces it with oxygen. Trees can also absorb storm water runoff that would otherwise pollute local waterways and harm riparian and marine ecosystems.

Objective: Complete a survey of gutter conditions and refuse in sidewalks and on the street. Install attractive metal trash baskets in locations that have a proliferation of litter.

Figure 7 - Litter Baskets
**Data Management**

Goal: The City of Richmond maintains an accurate, informative and up-to-date Vacant Building Registry. This data is available to interested parties and is used to manage and mitigate problems associated with vacant buildings. Vacant buildings are classified into three categories to allow city agencies to focus on the most at-risk buildings.

Objective: Create a permanent and dynamic link between the Vacant Building Registry and other data sources including code enforcement, building permits, utilities, and tax delinquent data.

The city has data fields such as Parcel ID and Map Reference Number that can be used to link data from many sources. This additional data will provide a more complete understanding of each vacant building’s situation. Currently, this data may be linked manually, but the data view is static and requires creating new links each time any data source is updated. Once the data is linked it should be accessible to all city departments, especially Police, Fire, and social services. Creating a production level system that is capable of linking multiple data sources should be the highest priority for the Department of Community Development, in partnership with the Department of Information Technology.

In addition, citizen input is one of the most up-to-date and detailed sources of information. This plays an important role in VacantRichmond.com, allowing citizens to comment on the status of buildings (e.g. “no longer vacant”) as well as providing a way for interested buyers to
contact the current owners. There have been several incomplete attempts to create a system or central database that links all of the data sources to the vacant building registry.

Objective: Maintain a website where the most recent Vacant Building Registry is always available, and create a mechanism where citizens can interact with the information. Citizens are “eyes on the street” and can often provide significant insight into the issues with a vacant building. This insight can provide a starting point for official investigation and action for a vacant property. Once the linked vacant building database is available to internal clients, it would be a natural and straightforward next step to serve this data on the internet.

Objective: use the following criteria for judging individual properties and determining the tool(s) that are appropriate to use for any given property. These criteria include:

- **Year Constructed**
  
  Buildings built before 1950 are very significant to the historic fabric of the neighborhood. Vacant buildings tend to be older than all buildings in the study area.

- **Years Vacant**

- **Tax Delinquency Status:** more than 2.5 years qualifies for tax sale process
  
  Not Delinquent
  
  Delinquent 0-29 months
  
  Delinquent 30 or more months

- **Code Violations**
Code Violations indicate a high level of danger that the building is not being properly maintained by its owner. Open & Vacant status is especially threatening to the safety of the building and its neighbors.

- Owner Status (absentee, out of town, trust or death without will)
- Block Status – High, medium, or low percentage of vacant buildings
- Building Permit Status

The City of Richmond can classify all buildings into several categories based on the criteria listed above. For all buildings, there are several approaches to prevent vacancy or allow for a new owner-occupant or tenant to live in the building. Code compliant buildings should be maintained and reoccupied in a timely manner. Chronic vacant buildings should be the focus of intensive public, private, and nonprofit efforts to stabilize, abate, and finally restore and reoccupy the building.

Objective: Use existing tools that are appropriate for each category of building, based on the classification system described above.

The subset of properties that are chronically vacant is the most problematic in the study area. Chronic vacant properties include those that have at least two of the following attributes: open & vacant, constructed before 1950, tax delinquent, absentee owner/landlord, or unabated code violations. In the case of the study area, almost all the vacant properties were constructed long before 1950.
For chronically vacant properties that have structural/physical problems, close monitoring is required to monitor the condition of the building. This also provides documentation for legal processes that may occur. Once owners of vacant buildings have been contacted, the Department of Community development should inform them there are several sources of assistance to rehabilitate properties with defects.

In many cases, buildings of all occupancy status types have unclear owner status. Mailings from city agencies come back undeliverable. Tracking of watch list properties as well as chronic and code compliant vacant buildings will be much improved by researching correct mailing addresses and sharing this information with the appropriate departments, such as the Department of Community Development, the Department of Information Technology, and the Office of the Assessor.

Vacant property owners should be strongly encouraged to take advantage of opportunities like:

- Neighborhoods in Bloom. This does not apply to the entire study area, but there are numerous vacant properties in the NiB impact area that are eligible.
- VHDA construction/rehabilitation financing and permanent mortgages: REACH, Federal Housing Administration, Veterans Administration, and other loan programs
- RRHA low interest loans
- City of Richmond Real Estate Tax Abatement Program
- Low Income Housing Tax Credits
- State and Historic Preservation Tax Credits
For owners of chronically vacant property who cannot or do not take advantage of the many opportunities above, the following steps are the continuum of city-initiated actions that can expedite the rehabilitation of a chronic vacant property:

- code enforcement
- Tax Sale process w/development agreement
- spot blight


Demolition is the final stage on the continuum of options for vacant properties. It can be used to abate a property that poses an immediate danger to the health and safety of the neighborhood. In some cases, building neglect may be so severe that it is the only option. Demolished historic properties can never be rebuilt. It is the least ideal solution to a chronic vacant building, and should be used only as a last resort.

Once a property has been demolished, one of the following options should be exercised in an expedient manner:

- New construction by property owner
- Better Housing Coalition/other nonprofit new construction
- Sale to developer for new construction

For all buildings, the following approaches will help reduce the number of buildings that ever become vacant.
• Low-cost or free will preparation for owner-occupants. This is best addressed by non-profit groups such as the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society and the Capital Area Agency on Aging.

• Increase knowledge and participation in Housing Choice Voucher program (HCV) for landlords. The HCV program subsidizes the rent paid by very low-income households to a market rate. This will provide a more reliable source of income, since the subsidy is provided directly to the landlord. This will also increase the available pool of rental units that accept vouchers, making it easier for low-income residents to find quality housing that they can afford. This is best addressed by the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, and its partner agencies such as the Better Housing Coalition and Housing Opportunities made Equal.

For properties that are vacant but code compliant, the ultimate aim is to maintain the building until re-occupation by current owner or authorized tenant. This may require sale on the private market. Some vacant homes may sell without assistance, but many owners and landlords can benefit from private/nonprofit assistance in selling the property, or by finding tenants. This assistance can include information on setting an appropriate sale price or rent, marketing the property to a wide range of potential buyers, and preparing the house for showing.

There are also several financial incentives for buyers such as H.O.M.E., Inc. down payment/closing cost assistance and VHDA loans.
A third category, Watch List, could be created to keep the vacant building registry as up to date as possible. Properties would enter the watch list due to

- Change in ownership from local owner to out-of-town, trustee or corporate ownership
- Power, water, gas utility cutoff
- Citizen reported vacancy-status

A building entering the watch list would trigger a field visit by a code enforcement official. Based on the occupancy status determined by the visit, the property would be added to the vacant building registry and categorized as chronic or code compliant.
IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

Each goal presented above can be worked toward simultaneously, but the time frame will vary based on the difficulty of achieving each objective and the involved parties.

The first objectives related to Historic Preservation should generally be achievable within three years. It does take a considerable amount of time and effort to write a Historic District nomination. Historic houses are often renovated over decades, but can be made structurally sound and livable in a three year time frame. Expanding the Neighborhoods in Bloom Impact Area to line up with areas of high vacancy is an administrative change and should be fairly straightforward.

The longest time frame will involve objectives in the Repopulation goal. Repairing 200 vacant buildings will most likely take a minimum of five years, and perhaps as many as ten years depending on the future of the real estate market and other economic factors. However, given current trends related to gas prices, neighborhood revitalization, and the housing market, this goal should be achievable within ten years.

Public Infrastructure is already scheduled for repairs by geographic area in a multi-year timeframe. The City of the Future program particularly seeks to upgrade infrastructure in dilapidated areas on a seven year cycle. Performing the needed sidewalk repairs could be amortized over a three to five year period. Purchasing and installing trash baskets may be more economical in bulk, but installing the baskets could also be phased in to measure the effectiveness of baskets and guide further infrastructure decisions.
Finally, the GIS-based Vacant Building Registry is the least time-consuming goal to achieve and could be reasonably completed in six to twelve months.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


http://www.huduser.org/datasets/il.html

DATA SOURCES

City of Richmond Vacant Building Registry Data, December 29, 2007.

City of Richmond Geodatabase – Assessor’s data for 2007 and 2008, Building Permit Data

City of Richmond Utility Cutoff Data, February 8, 2008

Richmond Police Department Crime Incident Information, 2007
Appendix 1

Vacant Historic Buildings in Study Area – December 2007

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Source: City of Richmond Department of Community Development