



[www.thrivingcommunitiesinstitute.org](http://www.thrivingcommunitiesinstitute.org)

Summer 2013

### Green lots provide new hope

News stories of crimes being committed in vacant properties here and around the country are regular occurrences these days. It is sad and depressing news for the victims, the families and friends of the victims, and for the neighbors who feel an increasing sense of despair and hopelessness over these events.



**Jim Rokakis**

Contrast that to a scene I witnessed in Warren, Ohio this morning, where I attended a press conference with Mayor Doug Franklin and U.S. Sen. Rob Portman on a bill that would free up federal dollars for the demolition of blighted properties. It made me realize - and in a very personal sense - why what we are doing is changing people's lives in our urban areas.

I was on Washington Avenue this morning in Warren, surrounded by two kinds of properties: attractive, well-maintained houses and vacant and boarded houses. The well-maintained properties outnumbered the vacant properties three to one, but it was obvious to me that these vacant properties were distressed and in need of removal. Because of our efforts and the decision by Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine to use the proceeds of a legal settlement involving foreclosure fraud for demolition, most of these properties awaiting demolition were scheduled to be demolished in the next several months. The neighbors - many of whom probably had given up hope - were thrilled with the attention given to this problem and with the pending action.

### DeWine, top HUD official will be keynote speakers at Columbus conference

Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine and Erika Poethig, Acting Assistant Secretary for Policy Development and Research at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, will be the keynote speakers on Oct. 22-23 when Thriving Communities Institute and Greater Ohio Policy Center present "Revitalizing Ohio's Vacant Properties: Tools and Policies to Transform Communities" at The Westin Columbus. DeWine, who created the Moving Ohio Forward program, will speak on Tuesday, while Poethig will address the conference on Wednesday. This is an interactive training and policy solutions summit that will offer hands-on techniques and strategies to address vacant and abandoned property challenges and generate redevelopment opportunities. It is intended for local and regional leaders, land bank practitioners, nonprofit community development organizations, as well as private sector representatives. You can register for the conference [here](http://www.thrivingcommunitiesinstitute.org) or visit [www.thrivingcommunitiesinstitute.org](http://www.thrivingcommunitiesinstitute.org) for more information. For questions or sponsorship opportunities, please contact Kate Hydock of Thriving Communities at [khydock@wrlandconservancy.org](mailto:khydock@wrlandconservancy.org) or (216) 515-8300 or Christina Burke of Greater Ohio Policy Center at [cburke@greaterohio.org](mailto:cburke@greaterohio.org) or (614) 224-0187.



**Mike DeWine**

### Rokakis discusses demolition on National Public Radio

In July, Thriving Communities Institute Director Jim Rokakis was interviewed on National Public Radio's mid-day show, "Here & Now." Rokakis talked about the problems posed by vacant and abandoned homes in the Midwest's industrial cities, where "we're losing - not gaining - population. We simply do not have the demand. So these houses are not going to be rehabilitated. Nobody's going to repopulate them." And not demolishing the vacant houses is hurting the people still left in the neighborhoods, Rokakis said: "They have no exit strategy. So we owe it to them to try to clean up these neighborhoods." If you missed the interview, you can listen [here](http://www.hereandnow.org).



### VAPAC director, funding move to Thriving Communities Institute

The Land Conservancy is expanding its urban mission through the addition of Frank Ford, chairman of the Vacant and Abandoned Property Action Council to the staff of Thriving Communities Institute. Ford has been recognized both locally and nationally for his expertise in the field of vacant and abandoned properties. VAPAC is a consortium of representatives working on reclamation and redevelopment of vacant property. Ford will serve as senior policy advisor at Thriving Communities and will continue overseeing the VAPAC program

One neighbor I visited on Washington Avenue provided a perfect example of what could happen with this land. The property next to him had already been demolished and had been beautifully landscaped. The yard looked like a small neighborhood park, even though it was an expanded side yard. Imagine how his view had changed - from looking at vacant and vandalized house to green space. He felt safer, no doubt, and he knew that his single most important investment - his house - was now worth more, and could serve as a home for the next generation. I would like to think that within the next year all of the vacant properties around Washington Avenue will be green, providing not only a nicer and less threatening view but perhaps vegetables and flowers. For this neighborhood and others like it, this would be a positive change - one that would bring new hope for residents.

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## Upcoming Events

### Geology hike

10 a.m.  
Sunday, Sept. 8  
Lorain County Metro Parks Schoepfle Gardens  
11106 Market St. (off state Route 113)  
Birmingham

*Bring the family to this moderately difficult hike.*

### Open House

2-4 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 29

with the full ongoing support of its funders group in its new home. Ford reports to Jim Rokakis, a Land Conservancy vice president and director of Thriving Communities. VAPAC is funded by grants from the Cuyahoga Land Bank, Cleveland City Council, Cleveland Housing Court, and The Cleveland Foundation. VAPAC's members include representatives from the city of Cleveland, Cuyahoga County, inner-ring suburbs and nonprofit agencies.



Frank Ford

## Studying how demolition can revive neighborhoods

In 2012, U.S. Department of Treasury officials issued a challenge to those seeking additional funds to raze abandoned and foreclosed properties: Prove that demolition (1) retains value on nearby properties, and (2) decreases the likelihood of future foreclosures. A study headed by researcher Nigel Griswold and the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development at Case Western Reserve University is examining these issues, and, if the results prove definitive, it could make a federal strategic demolition initiative a reality.

The study was initiated by Jim Rokakis of Thriving Communities Institute with additional funding from Cleveland City Council, Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine, the Cuyahoga Land Bank, the Franklin County Land Bank and land banks from Trumbull, Mahoning, Summit, Lucas, Montgomery, Hamilton and Stark counties. In an earlier study done in Flint, Mich., Griswold found that Genesee County's demolition investment was paying off, with \$3.5 million of demolition activity producing \$112 million in improved surrounding property values.



## Ohio demolition funding gets local, national attention

Efforts headed by U.S. Sen. Rob Portman and U.S. Reps. Dave Joyce, Marcy Kaptur and Marcia Fudge to bring additional funding for the demolition of vacant and abandoned properties in Ohio are getting attention from the media both locally and nationally.

Thriving Communities Institute and its director, Jim Rokakis, have been pushing for the reallocation of a portion of foreclosure assistance funds for demolition. Recent stories on these efforts have appeared in [The Lima News](#), [The Plain Dealer](#) and [The San Francisco Chronicle](#).



## More communities seeking studies of housing stock

With funding from the Nord Family Foundation, Thriving Communities Institute has completed its first citywide property study in Lorain. The study gives Lorain a tool to use in assessing the condition of its structures and determining where demolition is advisable. Other communities have inquired about this service, and Thriving Communities is now seeking grants and other funding to do additional surveys in Ohio. Cities interested in doing such a property survey should feel free to discuss the issue with a member of the Thriving Communities Institute staff.



## Land Conservancy holds first virtual fundraiser

You can help make Western Reserve Land Conservancy's important conservation work possible by participating in Imaginature, our first virtual fundraiser. In lieu of holding our wildly popular EverGreen EverBlue gala this year, we are asking friends to take the night off and support us from the comfort of your own home.

Western Reserve Land Conservancy's Conservation Center  
3850 Chagrin River Road  
Moreland Hills

Visit our new environmentally and economically responsible home in Moreland Hills.

**Hoot and Harvest Festival**

5- 8 p.m.  
Saturday, Oct. 12  
Hill 'n Dale Club  
Medina

Popular annual event features live birds of prey, owl calling, hayrides, pumpkin painting and a potluck dinner.

**Revitalizing Ohio's Vacant Properties: Tools and Policies to Transform Communities**

October 22-23  
The Westin Columbus  
310 S. High Street  
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Revitalizing Ohio's Vacant Properties is a two-day interactive training and policy solutions summit that will offer hands-on techniques and strategies to address vacant and abandoned property challenges and generate redevelopment opportunities. You can register for the conference [here](#) or visit [www.thrivingcommunitiesinstitute.org](http://www.thrivingcommunitiesinstitute.org) for more information. For questions or sponsorship opportunities, please contact Kate Hydock of Thriving Communities Institute at [khydock@wrlandconservancy.org](mailto:khydock@wrlandconservancy.org) or (216) 515-8300 or Christina Burke of Greater Ohio Policy Center at [cburke@greaterohio.org](mailto:cburke@greaterohio.org) or (614) 224-0187

**Coalition of Ohio Land Trusts fall statewide meeting**

Thursday, Nov. 7  
Grange Audubon Center  
Columbus  
For more information on Land Conservancy events, visit [www.wrlandconservancy.org](http://www.wrlandconservancy.org)

**Quicklinks**

[Thriving Communities Institute](#)  
[Western Reserve Land Conservancy](#)



Don't get us wrong - we love staging EverGreen EverBlue, and we will do so again in September 2014. We are simply putting the event on hiatus for a year, giving our organization a chance to regroup from our busiest year ever. Hosting a party for 600 people takes a lot of time and resources - energy the Land Conservancy has been channeling toward its mission.

Please watch for our Imaginature mailing or visit [www.wrlandconservancy.org](http://www.wrlandconservancy.org). Instead of spending money on a great party, please make a donation to help us preserve natural areas, farmland and coastlines, and to revitalize our neighborhoods. Every dollar you spend to "attend" Imaginature will be 100 percent tax-deductible. When we hold EverGreen EverBlue in September 2014, attendees can expect a night of great conversation and a few new additions to excite the senses. We can't wait. In the meantime, let your Imaginature wander!



Western Reserve Land Conservancy

OUR LAND. OUR LEGACY.

**How Thriving Communities was formed**

In March 2011, Western Reserve Land Conservancy launched a region-wide effort to help revitalize our urban centers. We named the effort Thriving Communities Institute because of all the connotations the word thriving holds for urban centers: flourishing, prospering, blossoming and successful. Our cities have thrived in the past; and we believe they will thrive again. They will move from vacancy to vitality.

Thriving Communities Institute, led by director Jim Rokakis, is already lending its hand to transform vacant and unproductive properties into new opportunities to attract economic growth, to bring green space to our cities, and to support safe, beautiful neighborhoods. In working with community leaders in our region, we have learned that urban revitalization is a process, one with many steps supported by great partnerships.

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