Oberlin Property Condition Report

Prepared by Western Reserve Land Conservancy’s Thriving Communities Institute
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Western Reserve Land Conservancy’s Thriving Communities Institute: Helping revitalize Ohio’s cities

Western Reserve Land Conservancy is a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to preserving the natural resources of northern Ohio. We work with landowners, communities, government agencies, park systems and other nonprofit organizations to permanently protect natural areas and farmland. In March 2011, Western Reserve Land Conservancy launched Thriving Communities Institute, a region-wide effort to help revitalize our urban centers, and named former Cuyahoga County Treasurer Jim Rokakis as its director.

Today, Thriving Communities is working with communities and organizations throughout the region to transform vacant and unproductive properties into new opportunities to attract economic growth, add green space to our cities and support safe, beautiful neighborhoods. Our cities have thrived in the past, and we believe they will thrive again in the future.

For information regarding Western Reserve Land Conservancy and Thriving Communities Institute, please visit our websites.

www.wrlandconservancy.org
www.thrivingcommunitiesinstitute.org
# Oberlin Property Condition Report

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Executive Summary

As part of its mission, Thriving Communities Institute (TCI), which is the urban program of Western Reserve Land Conservancy, has been asked to establish County Land Reutilization Corporations (CLRC)—commonly referred to as county land banks—throughout Ohio, but especially in more populous counties with larger central cities hit hard by the foreclosure crisis of the last decade. Most of these core cities were already suffering from population losses as a result of deindustrialization and sprawl but the violent upheaval caused by foreclosures created wide-spread abandonment. As a result of these conditions, TCI was also charged to seek demolition monies to help remove the tens of thousands of vacant properties from these communities because of the negative impact these properties had on surrounding properties and the overall health of a community. A number of cities and community groups have also asked TCI to conduct parcel by parcel inventories to assess their housing stocks. In more distressed cities, the survey is undertaken to determine the number of blighted and vacant structures. In more stable communities, the information collected can inform city administrators on a variety of other characteristics to address emerging trends and issues with the housing stock to take steps to prevent blight. This information has proved to be valuable to neighborhood leaders and city officials in Lorain, Akron, East Cleveland and in the Cleveland neighborhoods of Buckeye, Woodland Hills and Mount Pleasant.

Oberlin, Ohio has proved to be the most stable community we have surveyed thus far. This was evidenced by the fact that 1,568 of Oberlin’s 2090 occupied structures were graded as “A” properties by the surveyors, or 63.7%, and another 416 structures were graded “B”, or 19.9% of the city’s total. In some communities we have found that 1 in 5 houses likely need to be demolished as they are empty and in “F” condition. Only one structure in the entire city of Oberlin received such a grading (and this property has since been demolished). This is especially impressive in light of the age of Oberlin’s housing stock. A significant percentage of Oberlin’s housing stock is more than 100 years old. These properties present special challenges to homeowners who must maintain them and to building officials who must be vigilant as to their condition. The pride of Oberlin property owners and residents is evidenced by the condition of its housing stock.
The Oberlin community was established in 1833 by Reverend John J. Shipherd and Philo P. Stewart on 500 acres of donated land. The two men sought to create a community founded in Christian values, along with a school to train missionaries to evangelize on the American frontier. The town and school were both strongholds in the northern abolitionist movement, with an important terminus on the Underground Railroad before passage to Canada. Oberlin College became one of the first to accept both women and students of color and the first African-American student to graduate from the college later went on to found the Law School at Howard University. Oberlin further entrenched its reputation for progressivism through its strong influence on the temperance movement and by being the first American college to establish co-ed dormitories. Today, the College is a leader in environmental sustainability thanks, in part, to renowned professors that continue to advance movements focused around women’s health, gender equality, and various other social justice issues.

Roughly five square miles in area, the City of Oberlin currently contains 3,126 parcels in 8 precincts. The population has slowly increased from its founding, with especially large increases in the 1950's. Currently, Oberlin’s population is approximately 8,290. The population is more diverse than that of the State of Ohio, with higher or equivalent proportions of all non-white groups than Ohio as a whole. Students of color that attend Oberlin College make up 20% of its student body. The Oberlin community values education: 41% of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher; a rate nearly twice the national average.

Lorain County, which includes the City of Oberlin, suffered from the closing of steel mills and factories that similarly damaged other rust belt towns. Over the past twenty years its unemployment rate has followed national trends with a tendency to be higher, notably during recessions. Oberlin has been somewhat insulated from these trends due to the presence of several large employers. The largest is Oberlin College, followed by the Federal Aviation Administration. About 40% of Oberlin's jobs are in fields of education, healthcare, or other social service related sectors, while 16% are in arts, entertainment, recreation, or food service related.
Property Inventory

In order to most effectively target their limited resources, municipalities need accurate and reliable data to inform their decision making. This fact rings especially true in the wake of the 2007 foreclosure crisis, which left communities with vacancy, blight, and the problems they create, all atop a weakening tax base that limits cities’ abilities to address these issues. The property inventory provides a city with multiple levels of data to allow both broad and narrow views of their housing stock. This data can be used to locate, prioritize, and strategize for areas of concern.

While other communities were hit hard by the foreclosure crisis, Oberlin was not as severely impacted, as evidenced in part by an extremely low vacancy rate and very little blight.

Survey Methodology

During early summer of 2014, Western Reserve Land Conservancy’s Thriving Communities Institute, along with Oberlin Community Services, completed a comprehensive citywide property inventory. In partnership with Oberlin officials, and under the supervision of OCS Executive Director Cynthia Andrews, a team of two trained staff surveyed over 3,000 parcels across the city’s eight precincts. The surveyors photographed each parcel using a mobile device, and where a structure was present, determined whether it was vacant or occupied. Determining occupancy versus vacancy required a visual inspection governed by a number of uniform guidelines. Additionally, the surveyors assessed and graded the condition of all vacant or occupied residential structures. The grading ranged from “A”, or “Excellent”, to “F”, or “Unsafe/Hazard”. All of the surveying took place from the sidewalk.

Additional criteria collected included: junk cars, overgrown landscaping, sidewalk condition, trash dumping, off-street parking, presence of street trees, and visible address number on the structure. This information, along with a photograph
of each parcel, will help inform City staff and others of the characteristics that contributed to the decision on grading. The preceding photos are examples of Oberlin properties that were graded as part of the current report.

Results

When a homeowner or financial institution abandons a property, that property begins to deteriorate. It becomes blight to those that stay in the community. Blight defines a structure that is hazardous, is fire damaged, or has significant garbage dumping. Blight lowers property values significantly and brings down civic pride. If a structure is left for many years, it becomes a risk for the community, and is susceptible to fire damage and collapse. Vacant properties also increase crime rates\(^1\). Oberlin has a total of 2,203 structures, with 95.8% of those identified by the survey as occupied. This is noticeably higher compared to other communities that Thriving Communities has surveyed in the past. For example the City of East Cleveland has a 76% occupancy rate (5,831 structures). Closer to Oberlin, the City of Lorain also had a high occupancy rate of 93.8% (24,394 properties).

The total number of vacant structures in the community is 113, with only 9 being open, meaning that they could potentially be entered. Open vacant structures are problematic beyond being unsightly and reducing property values. They pose health hazards to the community\(^1\). Of those 9, only one was graded an “F”, the only “F” in the entire city. Of the 113 vacant structures, 100 structures, or 88% fall into the “A”, “B”, or “C” grade, indicating the housing stock is in strong condition. It is important to be aware that houses that are for sale are considered “Vacant Structures” in the results. Of the 113 vacant structures, 22 were visibly advertised as for sale.

Oberlin is divided into 8 precincts (See p. 12) that vary in size and parcel count. Breaking the data down into smaller geographies helps to understand and see trends. Precinct 7 had the highest percentage of vacant structures (12%) followed by Precinct 2 (9%) and Precinct 5 (7%) and Precinct 8 (7%). Precinct 2 (31%) and Precinct 3 (39%) had the highest percent of vacant lots. Vacant lots could indicate potential for new development opportunities within the city. The precincts with the highest concentration of “C” and “D” structures are Precinct 2 (17% of structures) and Precinct 8 (10% structures), followed then by Precinct 1 and Precinct 6 (8%).

\(^1\) See: [http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/09/24-land-use-demolition-mallach](http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/09/24-land-use-demolition-mallach)
The survey indicated that residents in Oberlin generally care about their property and maintain them well. Only 28 parcels had evidence of trash accumulation. Only 147 parcels needed landscaping, 28 had trash dumping, and 11 had junk vehicles. 85% of all structures had their addresses clearly visible.

One variable that surveyors collected was the apparent number of units in a structure (p. 14). This variable will help to identify the number of multi-unit structures in Oberlin. The surveyors took notice if the structure was a single occupancy, a double unit, or a multi-unit (greater than two). Of the 2,203 structures in Oberlin 88% of them are single units, 6% are double units, and 6% are multi-unit.

Sidewalk condition was also of interest to the City (p. 15). 35% of the parcels in Oberlin did not have sidewalks at the time of the survey. 58% of occupied structures had sidewalks in “good condition.” Of the vacant structures surveyed 56% had sidewalks in “good condition.” Cracked sidewalks seemed to be the most prevalent issue, with a reported 156 parcels reported having sidewalks with cracks. There was only one instance where a sidewalk was missing, with apparently temporary gravel being in place. 109 parcels were reported to have “raised” sidewalks. If a parcel had a sidewalk that was both cracked and raised the surveyors were instructed to choose the more significant problem of the two.

There are benefits of structures having off-street parking. For the car owner security is a major benefit to having a driveway. For municipalities, having off street parking makes street cleaning, garbage pickup, and snow removal easier. Of the 2,203 structures, only 8% do not have a driveway or parking lot to provide off street parking. Only 164 occupied structures did not have off street parking, 90 of those being residential use and the remaining 74 being commercial, tax exempt or agricultural.

### Table 1: Survey Results by Precinct

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### Table 2: Sidewalk Conditions by Survey Category

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<th>Good</th>
<th>Missing</th>
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<td>Vacant Structure Open</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vacant Structure Secure</td>
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<td>61</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>1780</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1079</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>3126</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Survey Results by Precinct

Table 2: Sidewalk Conditions by Survey Category
Surveyors were asked to note if a property had a sign suggesting it was for sale or for rent. A total of 73 properties had for sale or rent signs. 35 occupied structures were noted as “for sale/ for rent” at the time of the survey. 22 of the 113 (19%) vacant structures surveyed were “for sale” or “for rent”. Also, 15 of the 691 vacant lots had signage noting that they were for sale. The Multiple Listing Service, a real estate brokers service, showed 25 properties for sale in Oberlin. Of those 25, the surveyors Identified 16 as having signage advertising for sale, and 8 of those were noted as being vacant.

Presence of at least one street tree was also assessed during the survey (p. 16). The survey results suggest that approximately 35% of all of the parcels have at least one street tree. There are environmental, social and economic benefits associated with trees. Trees provide numerous benefits in urban areas. Environmentally, trees reduce energy consumption and air pollution, provide carbon dioxide exchange and improve water quality. A young, healthy tree has the net cooling effect of 10 room-sized air conditioners\(^1\). Three strategically positioned trees can reduce annual household energy expenses by up to $250\(^2\). Trees enhance our quality of life and reduce stress and anxiety\(^3\). Trees also provide storm water mitigation as well. A typical community forest of 10,000 trees retains approximately 10 million gallons of rainwater annually. While more information is needed to assess the potential to improve the tree canopy in certain areas of the City, there may be an economic and environmental motivation to increase tree canopy in areas that currently do not have street trees.

**Conclusion**

Although Ohio was greatly affected by the foreclosure crisis, the City of Oberlin’s housing stock is exceptionally strong, especially when compared to other older communities in northeast Ohio. The historic value that is present in much of the community’s architecture gives Oberlin pride, culture and charm. This pride of Oberlin homeowners is evident in the way that a majority of the City’s homes have been maintained.

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Appendix

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