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## Coupling Benefits: Strategies for Vacant Land Reuse along Cleveland's Opportunity Corridor

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## **Coupling Benefits: Strategies for Vacant Land Reuse along Cleveland's Opportunity Corridor**

This paper discusses large scale planning efforts pertaining to vacant land reuse, economic development, and public participation along the Opportunity Corridor project in Cleveland, Ohio. The Corridor is a \$331 million roadway project that will span 3.3 miles through some of Cleveland's most blighted neighborhoods. Issues of distributional justice including underperforming public education, poor public health indicators, high rates of vacancy, and aging infrastructure contribute to neighborhood blight throughout the area. Stormwater management, access to multi-modal transportation, brownfield mitigation, and economic development are also prevalent issues throughout the project area. Advocacy work by the Kent State University Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative (CUDC) seeks to integrate planning efforts between multiple jurisdictions, civic actors, and community desires surrounding the project. This paper describes the community planning process in Cleveland surrounding the Corridor project, emphasizing the CUDC's role in advocacy for an integrated planning approach to meet community needs.

### **Keywords**

vacant land, Cleveland, infrastructure, large scale planning

## INTRODUCTION

In 2013, Ohio Governor John Kasich approved allocation of state and Ohio Turnpike dollars, setting in motion the Opportunity Corridor project on the east side of Cleveland. It is a \$331 million roadway project (including the widening of an existing road and the construction of a new roadway) that will span 3.3 miles through some of Cleveland's most blighted neighborhoods while connecting important anchor institutions in the city. This paper discusses the role of the Kent State University Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative's (CUDC) advocacy work in this project involving multiple jurisdictions and civic actors, as well as transportation, infrastructure, and economic development questions.

The CUDC is the combined home of Kent State University's graduate programs in architecture and urban design, and the public service activities of the College of Architecture and Environmental Design. A community design center situated between practice and research, the CUDC undertakes projects relevant to urban design issues prevalent in Northeast Ohio, often tying into a national dialogue of various urban issues. Among the topics with which the CUDC contends are: research on vacant land stabilization tactics, neighborhood and transportation planning, as well as advocacy for neighborhoods and organizations across Northeast Ohio.

The CUDC's interest in vacant land reuse work dates back to the founding of the Shrinking Cities Institute at the CUDC in 2004. The Institute was founded to understand and address the challenges of persistent population decline and large-scale urban vacancy. Since the CUDC is both a research entity and an urban design practice, the work of the Shrinking Cities Institute has included a variety of programs and projects, with a particular focus on Cleveland and its environs. Working in close collaboration with residents, public officials and institutions, the CUDC has helped to craft actionable strategies for the consolidation and redevelopment of vacant properties, and the conversion of surplus land for green space, green infrastructure, and other ecologically productive uses. These ideas were explored in the publication *Cities Growing Smaller*<sup>1</sup>, which looked at the broader phenomenon and framework for vacant land planning, and *Re-Imagining a More Sustainable Cleveland*,<sup>2</sup> which includes an overarching framework plan and site-specific guidance for vacant land reuse.

## FRAMING VACANCY IN A SHRINKING CITY

Cleveland has lost more than half of its population since 1950, currently housing 396,000 residents while the city's poverty rate hovers uncomfortably around 35%, making it the country's second poorest major city.<sup>3</sup> In addition to decades of decline, the 2008 foreclosure crisis devastated the city's urban fabric—now peppered with more than 20,000 vacant lots. Along with high rates of vacancy, underperforming public education, poor public health indicators, and

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<sup>1</sup> Schwarz, Terry, and Steve Rugare, eds. *Cities Growing Smaller*. 1st ed. Cleveland: Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, College of Architecture and Environmental Design, Kent State University, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> "Re-Imagining a More Sustainable Cleveland: Citywide Strategies for Reuse of Vacant Land." *Re-Imagining a More Sustainable Cleveland*. January 1, 2008. Accessed March 2, 2015.  
<http://www.reconnectingamerica.org/assets/Uploads/20090303ReImaginingMoreSustainableCleveland.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> "American FactFinder - Results." American FactFinder. Accessed January 14, 2015.  
[http://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/13\\_5YR/DP03/1600000US3916000](http://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/13_5YR/DP03/1600000US3916000).

aging infrastructure contribute to neighborhood blight. Following its slow industrial decline, the city's most economically impactful anchor institution remains the world renowned Cleveland Clinic hospital system, fostering a "med-ed" based economy.

Decisions regarding neighborhood development are often secondary to developing broader economic interests—resulting in "silver bullet" projects like stadia and convention centers.<sup>4</sup> Within the framework of typical neoliberal planning principles, recent projects such as the Health Tech Corridor provide an alternative strategy for approaching development. Through infrastructure investments such as a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), some of the poorest east side neighborhoods are served, while also connecting two of the largest jobs centers in Northeast Ohio—downtown Cleveland and the University Circle, which is home to anchor institutions such as the Cleveland Clinic and Case Western Reserve University.<sup>5</sup>

### **THE OPPORTUNITY CORRIDOR: CIVIC ACTORS IN LARGE-SCALE PROJECT PLANNING**

In contrast to an integrated approach of the Health Tech Corridor, a similar large-scale project takes shape just to the south. The Opportunity Corridor is a proposed roadway connecting an interstate highway interchange to the University Circle neighborhood, linking many of the same aforementioned anchor institutions. A three-phase project, construction on the corridor began in early 2015, and will be completed sometime in 2019.

Designed as a five lane boulevard, the Opportunity Corridor traverses large swaths of vacant land, multiple rail corridors, and a few remaining neighborhood job centers. The project costs upwards of \$331 million--approximately \$100 million for every mile of roadway built. Governor John Kasich infused money into the project through leveraged bond funding from the state turnpike system. The Greater Cleveland Partnership (GCP), the region's chamber of commerce, is one of the foremost advocates for the project and currently manages the project's logistics and community relations. The Community Development Corporations (CDCs) in the area support the project in varying degrees—arguing broadly for economic inclusion, job creation, and improvements to community nodes, such as the Kenneth Johnson Rec Center. A community benefits agreement arising from the project sets aside 20 percent of contract dollars for minority-owned firms, though the language surrounding the agreement lists these aspirations as simply a "goal."<sup>6</sup>

The neighborhoods along the corridor-- Fairfax, Central, Kinsman, Buckeye, and Slavic Village, are ravaged by decades of neglect. Neighborhood poverty rates exceed 50%, low educational attainment is typical, and many neighborhoods have 50% or higher vacancy rates. The area along the Opportunity Corridor is often referred to as the "Forgotten Triangle" due to

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<sup>4</sup> Hanson, Royce, Hal Wolman, and David Connolly. "Finding a New Voice for Corporate Leaders in a Changed Urban World: The Greater Cleveland Partnership." September 1, 2006. Accessed February 12, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Glanville, Justin. "Cleveland's Greater University Circle Initiative: Building a 21st Century City through the Power of Anchor Institution Collaboration." January 1, 2013. Accessed January 14, 2015.  
<http://www.clevelandfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Cleveland-Foundation-Greater-University-Circle-Initiative-Case-Study-2014.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> "Ohio Department of Transportation, Opportunity Corridor." August 1, 2014. Accessed February 12, 2015.  
[http://fudge.house.gov/uploads/ODOT\\_DBE\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](http://fudge.house.gov/uploads/ODOT_DBE_Fact_Sheet.pdf).

its long term lack of economic vitality. Vacancy around these neighborhoods ranges in scale and type. Vacancy in residential neighborhoods is largely impacted by the foreclosure crisis. Large-scale industrial vacancies occur along the heavy rail line stretching through the corridor, resulting in large brownfield sites. While access to transit is adequate in these neighborhoods, the psychological barriers of high vacancy make access to light rail and bus more difficult. Vacant, poorly lit, and unmaintained streetscapes steer the community's perceptions of safety. Lower ridership numbers in recent years cause the Rapid Transit Authority (RTA) to consider closing or mothballing its E. 79<sup>th</sup> St. stations.

Storm water management issues also occur throughout the proposed corridor. The Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (NEORS) is under a consent decree from the EPA to reduce storm water runoff through a 98% capture rate over the next twenty years.<sup>7</sup> Like many industrial cities with aging combined sewer overflow (CSO) problems, Cleveland and the region are building large-scale infrastructure projects to meet the consent decree. Many runoff issues occur in the area surrounding the Opportunity Corridor site, including along the Kingsbury Run, and the sewer district is considering gray and green storm water infrastructure options in the area.

Broadly, what is at stake are issues of distributional justice, the long term sustainability of these neighborhoods, and equitable access across the city. The combination of these factors — access to multi-modal transit, the possibility for large-scale brownfield remediation, and the ability to retain, and slowly discharge storm water over a large area of the city's east side through gray and green infrastructure, creates the possibility to develop a truly sustainable and resilient set of neighborhoods. Large-scale integrated planning efforts could conceivably link multiple institutions and private and public players to re-shape the long term outcomes for these neighborhoods.

Large organizations and institutions have great reach and scope in Cleveland. However, building capacity on the ground for implementation is difficult—especially in a coordinated effort. The implementation of the Opportunity Corridor is a “top down” planning strategy between the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT), the governor, and GCP. Other stakeholders, including the community development corporations (CDC's), the sewer district, and transportation advocates have traditionally not built partnerships across intergovernmental and inter-institutional boundaries. Likewise, the regulatory framework in Cleveland often privileges economic development opportunities over long term planning principles. Frequent zoning variances along developments like the Health Tech Corridor, near universal tax abatement, the suspension of storm water tax collection fees, and a lack of form based codes set the development standard in Cleveland at a low level.

The quick time frame established by the governor complicates planning efforts and implementation. The Greater Cleveland Partnership pulled the project out of dormancy when the governor offered an infusion of cash for the project in early 2013. Construction began in early 2015 with no neighborhood consensus or planning along the five neighborhood route. Existing CDC jurisdictions and ward boundaries further complicate a holistic neighborhood vision,

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<sup>7</sup> The United States District Court for the Northern District of Ohio, in *United States of America and State of Ohio vs. Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District* (1:10CV2895-DCN [2011]), found February 9, 2015.

allowing for larger actors to act quickly. Opposition emerged from elsewhere in the region, on the grounds that there is already excess roadway capacity in the city.<sup>8</sup> Local response centered more on who would be awarded the contracts for the construction of Opportunity Corridor and whether nearby residents would have employment opportunities as a result of the project.

Responding to these issues, the CUDC inserted itself as a neutral actor in the process. Acting in an advocacy role, the CUDC undertook a pro bono project with the hope of spurring dialogue about the Corridor's future as an entirety—not simply as collection of neighborhood plans. Ultimately, the CUDC created an advocacy document entitled, "Advancing Opportunities: Cleveland's Opportunity Corridor," including a general assessment of the proposed Opportunity Corridor project and a forward-looking vision for maximizing the benefits of this large regional investment.<sup>9</sup> The document outlines a range of design strategies for improving the project's return on investment, including better links to surrounding neighborhoods, multi-modal connectivity, green infrastructure benefits, and overall identity. A green overlay zoning district, design guidelines, provisions for public spaces and parks, an enhanced multi-use path, low impact and sustainable construction methods, integrated storm water infrastructure, and an economic strategy catering to the existing neighborhoods were core principles of the proposed strategy.

The CUDC report and a scale physical model of the Corridor's potential development served as community engagement tools at public meetings.<sup>10,11</sup> Presentations at the Cleveland Public Library asked participants to "Hack the Corridor" through scenario planning in small groups—educating the public as well as asking for their input on how to imagine a future alternative Corridor. The CUDC's advocacy on the corridor also incorporated a postcard campaign asking participants to send their visions for the Corridor. Dozens of participants mailed their visions to the Mayor, Governor, and Director of ODOT. In addition, the CUDC presented at public meetings held by ODOT for the plan, advocating its alternative vision, and met with small advocacy focus groups, city officials, and ODOT representatives to build consensus for a more comprehensive and robust planning strategy. Through conversations and these presentations, the CUDC was invited to participate in an advisory role in the Neighborhood Development Subcommittee, convened by GCP to determine the best possible planning course for the Corridor, given the constraints of a short time frame and the scale of the project.

## CONCLUSION

The CUDC's advocacy role influenced the Opportunity Corridor project in several ways in respect to current planning efforts. The City Planning Department is now working with the sewer district to maximize strategic green infrastructure along development sites. The City's Office of

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<sup>8</sup> Schmitt, Angie. "Clevelanders for Transportation Equity." Opportunity Corridor. January 1, 2013. Accessed February 16, 2015. <http://opportunitycorridor.com/2013/01/01/welcome-to-clevelanders-for-transportation-equity/>.

<sup>9</sup> "Advancing Opportunities: Cleveland's Opportunity Corridor." Research: Opportunity Corridor. March 1, 2014. Accessed February 12, 2015. [http://www.cudc.kent.edu/projects\\_research/research/opportunity\\_corridor.html](http://www.cudc.kent.edu/projects_research/research/opportunity_corridor.html).

<sup>10</sup> "Cleveland Opportunity Corridor Brownfields Area Wide Plan." Cleveland Opportunity Corridor Brownfields Area Wide Plan. March 1, 2013. Accessed February 12, 2015. [http://planning.city.cleveland.oh.us/assets/2013-03-25OpportunityCorridorBrownfields\\_ReportDRAFT.pdf](http://planning.city.cleveland.oh.us/assets/2013-03-25OpportunityCorridorBrownfields_ReportDRAFT.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> "Opportunity Corridor: High-Level Use Analysis & Economic Impact Analysis." September 30, 2011. Accessed February 12, 2015. [http://media.cleveland.com/plain\\_dealer\\_metro/other/Allegro\\_Opportunity.pdf](http://media.cleveland.com/plain_dealer_metro/other/Allegro_Opportunity.pdf).

Sustainability is exploring alternative development options within the Corridor area. The City recently introduced an Urban Form Overlay district, which will likely lead towards form based zoning for the area.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the City's Economic Development Department is targeting priority sites along the Corridor for redevelopment in relation to existing light rail public transit. Difficulty in the Opportunity Corridor project lies in the complexity of multiple urban systems, constituencies, and timelines for various projects surrounding the Corridor. At the heart of the CUDC's investigation lies the question of how to coordinate multiple agendas through multiple civic actors such that a more comprehensive project can be realized. The public engagement methodologies built support for a vision plan at the grassroots level, while strategic partnerships with city actors helped lead to newfound organizational committees for the project, and coordination among key decision makers from across the region. By asking what overlapping agendas between organizations might be considered to enter the realm of political and economic feasibility in the short time frame, the agenda steered from discussing roadway politics and the detractions of excess roadway infrastructure to discussing a more integrated planning approach with multiple benefits for the surrounding communities.

*About the author: Jeffrey Kruth is a Senior Urban Designer at the Kent State University Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, where he contributes to the design, research, and teaching aspects of the practice. His work engages infrastructure, political economy, and cultural landscapes in the urban environment. He holds a BA in Geography & Urban Planning and a Master of Architecture degree from Miami University.*

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<sup>12</sup> Form based codes and zoning are regulations adopted by government entities that establish development standards based on a building's form and relationship to the public realm, as opposed to conventional zoning regulation.